Decolonizing Elephants

Animal Capital at the End of Empire in Myanmar

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Abstract: The growing call to decolonize Animal Studies, and Environmental Humanities more broadly, is overdue and welcome. The imperative to decolonize enables scholars in the field to better recognize the underlying hierarchies, biases, and occlusions in our research, encouraging us to find creative ways of reconceptualizing our work anew. By looking at what happened to Burmese elephants during the collapse of British imperialism in Myanmar, in this article I argue that historical struggles for decolonization can help to ground and hone what it means to decolonize our studies.

Keywords: *decolonization, elephants, Myanmar, Burma, timber, British imperialism*

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Pu Htay was killed just months before Myanmar became independent. He was a large, tusked Asian elephant who had thrown his rider and bolted through the streets of Kyungon, a village located in the arid centre of the colony. More is known about his death than his life, but we can imagine its course. Likely, he was taken from a Burmese forest during the interwar years. Most working elephants came from the verdant mountainous borderlands where Myanmar met Thailand, a fractious imperial frontier.[1] Chances are, he was corralled by specially trained captive elephants and their riders and caught in a *kheddah*: a wooden enclosure used by elephant capturing firms to hold wild elephants like him. This brutal capture may have left its scars on his body. Injuries were common in the struggle to escape. In captivity, he would have then undergone a violent regimen of training to prepare him for his immanent employment: a life of hauling teak logs.[2]

In 1947, this training failed. Pu Htay lived during a tumultuous time. Over the last five years, British rule had collapsed, Japanese forces had come and gone, the British government had returned, and Burmese nationalists had risen to prominence. Antifascist paramilitary organisations effectively governed much of the country. We cannot know for sure what triggered Pu Htay's flight. Perhaps he was spooked by a gunshot or an explosion, startling sounds that would have been all too frequent. Perhaps he was making a conscious break for liberation. Whatever the cause, Pu Htay damaged property and crops during his brief spell of freedom. He was shot dead by members of *Pyi Thu Yabaw*, which translates as Citizens' Army. *Pyi Thu Yabaw* was a group of nationalist fighters loyal to the firebrand anticolonial leader General Aung San. They were in Kyungon to keep order. A shadow authority, forged in the heat of total war and anticolonial fervour, they operated in the ailing husk of the colonial state.[3]

1 Jonathan Saha, "Global Capital, Local Animal"; Eric Tagliacozzo, "Ambiguous Commodities, Unstable Frontiers"; Marie de Rugy, "Looting and Commissioning Indigenous Maps".

2 Saha, "Colonizing Elephants"; Saha, "Do Elephants Have Souls?"; Ferrier, *Care and Management of Elephants*; Evans, *Elephants and Their Diseases*.

3 London Metropolitan Archives, hereafter, LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, Letter 10.

Pu Htay's violent death was recorded in the archives of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. The Corporation, which had long enjoyed a dominant position in the timber trade, was now confronting an uncertain future. Its agents were monitoring the political situation carefully and were anxious over the security of its assets, not least of which were its working elephants. The letter detailing the killing of Pu Htay was simply titled "Shooting of Elephant". Its title resonated with another, more famous elephant killing in the colony written about just over a decade earlier. In his candid essay "Shooting an Elephant", written about his time as an imperial police officer in the Burmese port town of Mawlamyine, George Orwell recalled killing an elephant that had rampaged through the streets causing destruction in a fit of musth. The intention of "Shooting an Elephant" was to outline the psychological impact of being a tyrant. Orwell did not want to kill the animal but felt forced to do it by the audience of Burmese folk in front of whom he could not become a laughingstock.[4] It is an ambivalent essay. Its putative anti-imperial sentiment sits awkwardly alongside racist caricatures. Orwell's sympathy for the elephant, however, is palpable. In contrast to his callous disregard for the Indian labourer killed in the chaos, the elephant herself was rendered in affecting, if anthropomorphic, prose as having a "grandmotherly air". Still, she had to die. Orwell had to kill the elephant in order to uphold imperial authority.[5] Pu Htay's killing, in contrast, signalled the passing of this authority to a new power. It was decolonization, manifested as bullets in the body of a captive elephant.

Crudely, perhaps, and *in extremis* certainly, these two lethal shootings get to the heart of the problem of decolonization for elephants in Myanmar. What changed for elephants was that now, a different group of humans was empowered to control and kill them. Still, I argue that there is more to Burmese elephants' experiences of decolonization than the continuation of human supremacist ideologies and practices. Looking closely at what happens to elephants at the end of empire can clarify the intellectual and political stakes of bringing

4 Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant".

5 Larkin, *Finding Orwell in Burma*; Tyner, "Landscape and the Mask of Self".

animals into a discussion of decolonization. Crucially, the continued subsumption of Burmese elephants to the labour processes of the timber extraction indicates the importance of aligning decolonization with decommodification.

Animals and Decolonization

Decolonization is a term that has been used in at least two distinct ways. In its most established usage, it names the historical processes through which the colonies of modern empires formally gained their independence as self-governing nation-states. In recent years, the term has also come to name a disparate range of scholarly and political critiques of modernity.[6] While in tension, these two uses are not entirely divorced from one another. The more empirical study of decolonization as historical processes has expanded its ambit, stretching the time period to encompass ongoing indigenous people's struggles for self-determination in settler colonies that are no longer formally part of any overseas empire.[7] For key thinkers in Decolonial Studies, the target of their critique is also expansively historical: a world-system based on European imperialism born in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries.[8] In addition to this chronological overlap, they also share a common absence: both of these areas of study have yet to bring nonhuman animals into the centre of their concerns. While Animal Studies scholars, and fellow travellers, have grappled with the implications of decolonial praxis for their work, animals have remained peripheral to decolonization, in both senses of the term.[9]

The most commonplace use of the term "decolonization" is as a descriptive label for the formal dissolution of (mostly) overseas empires.[10] In this scholarship, decolonization identifies a disputatious field of study in which historians have debated the primary drivers for the end of empires. Apologists for empire saw decolonization as

6 Behm et al., "Decolonizing History".

7 Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization".

8 Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality"; Asher, "Making the Subaltern Speak".

9 Hovorka, "Animal Geographies I"; Belcourt, "Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects".

10 Collins, "Decolonization".

the realisation of the imperial mission, evidence of colonizers' beneficent intentions: a "transfer of power".[11] Some imperial historians blamed decolonization on the weakening of political power within the imperial metropole. According to this view, which remains a popular frame for understanding European empires of the mid-twentieth century, harsh political and economic realities made overseas empires undesirable.[12] A variant on this theme has further argued that ascendant American global power displaced formal empires.[13] Challenging these explanatory narratives was the portrayal of decolonization as a process driven not from the metropole but by the growing strength of anticolonial nationalist forces in the colonies themselves. Here, decolonization is seen as a compromised, pragmatic process whereby declining imperial powers and the emergent US superpower sought to hand state authority over to nationalist politicians who, in spite of their differences, they could credibly negotiate with to build a bulwark against the spread of communism.[14] In places where imperial authorities confronted anti-colonialists that they and their North Atlantic ally found too unpalatable to negotiate with, empire's end came through bloody and often protracted warfare.[15] Thus, there was no contradiction for historians to call decolonization an exercise in imperialism.[16]

Animals have taken up little space in these discussions. Looking across animal history, this gap is marked. Studies of animals under colonialism tend to stop with the end of formal empire, tracing the longer postcolonial history in a cursory fashion in a conclusion or postscript.[17] This is more of an observation than a criticism; my own work has the same lacuna. The absence of work on the history of animals through and after formal decolonization might suggest

11 Tinker, "Transfer of Power".

12 Hinds, "Sterling and Decolonization"; Tomlinson, "Indo–British Relations"; Tomlinson, "'The Weapons of the Weakened'".

13 Louis and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Decolonization".

14 Darwin, "British Decolonization since 1945"; Hack, '"Iron Claws on Malaya"'.

15 Thomas, *Crises of Empire*.

16 Louis and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Decolonization".

17 Barnard, *Imperial Creatures*; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*; Samanta, *Meat, Mercy, Morality*; Aderinto, *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa*.

their limited import in the concerns of this field—although recent research suggests important continuities.[18] At the very least, it is a chronology that requires greater interrogation. Ethnographic research on Hindu nationalism and cow protection already reveals something of the layered nature of postcolonial legacies for human-animal relationships in India.[19] The terms of the enquiry might also need to be turned on their head. Rather than bringing animals into the study of decolonization, we might ask what decolonization meant for animals.[20]

The second common usage of decolonization is as a term that captures the intellectual work and political praxis opposed to colonialism and its legacies. To decolonize, in this meaning, is to excavate and exorcize colonial practices, epistemologies, and subjectivities. In the field of South Asian history, antecedents of this approach took the form of Subaltern Studies: recuperative histories of peoples excluded by linear imperialist, nationalist, and orthodox Marxist narratives of empires that were accused of being hopelessly rooted in Eurocentric concepts.[21] From the criticisms and contradictions of Subaltern Studies, more deconstructive modes of scholarship have blossomed, inspired by Critical Theory and Poststructuralism.[22] These approaches critiqued the intellectual moorings of academic work itself.[23] A central concern in much of this work has been to denaturalise social forms and identities that were, it is argued, forged in the crucible of colonialism.[24] The formal end of empire here is not the central concern, indeed, the importance of such moments is implicitly questioned.

Subaltern Studies should not be equated with Decolonial Studies. Indeed, Latin America's Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD)

18 Suri, "Between Simians and Cell Lines"; Deb Roy, "Decolonize Mosquitoes".

19 Adcock, "Sacred Cows and Secular History"; Adcock, '"Preserving and Improving the Breeds"'; Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*.

20 Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow".

21 Guha, "Some Aspects of Historiography".

22 Spivak, "Subaltern Studies"; O'Hanlon and Washbrook, "After Orientalism"; Prakash, "Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?"

23 Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History".

24 Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

research group have viewed Subaltern Studies as a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism.[25] Criticism of the Subaltern Studies notwithstanding, the two fields have overlaps and shared concerns. For Decolonial scholars, "coloniality"—the form of power that sustains colonial epistemologies and racialized social relations—begins earlier than is recognised in the South Asian context.[26] As such, they see the intellectual beginnings of colonialism not in Enlightenment thought, but in the early modern conquest of the Americas. In this argument, the waves of imperial expansion and decolonization that followed 1492 have not displaced coloniality, they have merely produced variant forms of its expression. Following from this, decolonial thinkers seek a critique of coloniality though recourse to modes of knowledge production that have not been incorporated into colonial thought.[27] In this, there is a greater degree of alignment between the later works of Subaltern Studies, concerned as these scholars were with "postcoloniality", and Decolonial Studies. Indicative of this is the extent to which some recent scholarship has begun to use "decolonial" and "Subaltern" almost as synonyms.[28] The former, however, has lent itself much more powerfully to radical demands for political change, especially in movements led by students challenging historically embedded power structures in the academy, particularly racism.[29] This demand that institutions decolonize is rooted in the deeper soil of critiques of colonialism and its intellectual legacies.

Animals have largely been peripheral to these decolonial and postcolonial schools of thought. The original volumes of Subaltern Studies contain no essays in which creatures other than humans play a central role. More recently, though, its intellectual frameworks have been adopted by scholars who work on animals. Rohan Deb Roy has argued for extending the ambit of subalternity to nonhuman

25 Quintero, Figueira, and Elizalde, "A Brief History of Decolonial Studies".

26 Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality".

27 Mignolo, "Coloniality of Power and Subalternity"; Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience".

28 Asher, "Making the Subaltern Speak"; Kumaravadivelu, "The Decolonial Option"; Dube, "Mirrors of Modernity".

29 Shilliam, "Behind the Rhodes Statue".

animals, noting the similar processes of erasure at work under imperialism for both human and animal subjects.[30] There has also been an attempt to revive the Subaltern Studies project in a recent volume containing a handful of short interventions that centre animals.[31] Decolonial Studies has also been criticised for its exclusion of animal perspectives and experiences. Michael Glover has recently argued that Decolonial Studies has failed under its own terms by not engaging with animals. Using his work on South African cattle, he argues that there is an implicit complicity with coloniality that has led to cattle's sensory and experiential capacities being ignored in decolonial scholarship.[32] The pathbreaking *Centring Animals in Latin American History*, published by Duke University Press in 2013, is indicative of the great potential an animal focus could have for those aligned to the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality group,[33] although there appears to have been little engagement with this research as of yet. All this suggests that animals remain liminal in efforts to decolonize. They provide an opportunity for a fuller realisation of the goals of decolonization, yet they also indicate a lingering anthropocentrism.

Animals have been marginal to decolonization, whether defined as the subject of empirical study or as a theoretical approach. In the remaining sections of this essay, I delve into a study of what happened to Burmese elephants at the end of empire to sharpen how we might reframe the ongoing project of decoloniality. In other words, I go back to the study of formal decolonization with an animal historical focus to inform decolonial thought. What emerges is the continuing importance of elephants in the accumulation of capital, an imperative that persisted even when the ownership of the means of production underwent a shift from British-financed timber firms to the country's first social democratic nationalist government. Understanding how elephants became a peculiar form of capital through British imperialism, and how this informed the place of elephants

30 Deb Roy, "Nonhuman Empires".

31 Banerjee and Wouters, *Subaltern Studies 2.0*.

32 Glover, "That Other Me".

33 Few and Tortorici, *Centering Animals in Latin American History*.

in anti-colonial projects for greater economic democracy, reveals a central aspect of coloniality in Myanmar: the commodification of animal life.[34] The project of decolonializing animals is, thus, a project that must aim at decommodifying animals.

Colonizing and Commodifying Elephants

The experience of British colonialism was transformative for Burmese elephants. The two major export industries that exploded during the late-nineteenth century and through the early decades of the twentieth century—rice and teak—both had profound and lasting consequences for these forest dwelling giants. The second half of the nineteenth century was witness to a rice boom across the deltaic regions to the south of Myanmar. What was a mangrove forested, sparsely populated (at least by humans) rural region under the Konbaung Dynasty, became an agricultural powerhouse of rice production, not just for Myanmar but for Asia as a whole. International sales of rice grown in the Myanmar delta benefited from the disruptions to trans-Atlantic trade during the American Civil War, finding large markets in Europe and India. By the 1930s, Myanmar was the world's largest exporter of rice.[35] This dramatic expansion of wet rice paddy fields effectively decimated elephant habitats across huge swathes of the country, increasingly confining wild populations to forested upland regions.[36] Here, they were enlisted into the timber industry in growing numbers.[37]

During the late-nineteenth century the timber industry, and particularly the export of teak—a hardwood that was in great demand across the British Empire for the manufacture of commodities from luxury furniture to railway sleepers—underwent two significant shifts. The first of these was the rapid expansion of the industry measured both in terms of its share of the global market and by the area of Myanmar's forest used for the cultivation and harvesting of teak.

34 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

35 Adas, *The Burma Delta*; Schendel, "Origins of the Burma Rice Boom"; Coclanis, "World Rice Market"; Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*.

36 Saha, "Accumulations and Cascades".

37 Saha, "Colonizing Elephants".

The second was the concentration of the industry in the hands of a small number of British financed and managed timber firms.[38] Both of these shifts were dependent upon the capture and conscription of large numbers of Asian elephants. Most of these elephants were enlisted from the borders of the colony.[39] British firms focused much of their recruitment in the ethnic Karen majority areas to the east of the colony where it bordered Thailand, through a patchwork of indigenous systems of governance.

Elephants enabled the exploitation of harder to reach teak forests. No mechanical technologies could compete with the dexterity and strength of these powerful, intelligent creatures in navigating the challenging terrain of the Burmese forests. The competitive edge that elephants provided to a timber trader meant that British firms, who were able to raise the substantial amounts of capital necessary to purchase large herds of working elephants, gained an unassailable advantage over smaller Burmese outfits. By 1914 the largest and most dominant firm, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, held 1,718 captive elephants, and they purchased over 500 more during the interwar years.[40] Prior to 1942, when the Japanese imperial army forced the British into a retreat, an estimated 7,000 elephants were working across the industry, the majority being employed by just five British firms.[41]

Essential as they were, elephants represented an unusual form of capital to timber firms. They were valued for their capacities as living beings. They were vital to these firm's extractive forestry operations due to their strength, dexterity, stamina and, crucially, their ability to work with humans. In this sense, the elephants' value came in part from their interspecies relationships; the fact that they could be brought into human affairs. The elephants' value can thus be

38 Bryant, *Political Ecology of Forestry*.

39 Saha, "Global Capital, Local Animal".

40 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/002, Correspondence and notes, "Detailed Stock of Elephants, November 30th 1914"; LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Correspondence and notes between branches relating to the disposal, hiring and purchase of elephants, "Unrecovered Elephants, 18th May 1948".

41 Williams, *Elephant Bill*; U Toke Gale, *Burmese Timber Elephant*.

thought of in a similar way to how Donna Haraway has characterised the value of pets. In her conception of companion animals as forms of capital, an animal's ability to form relationships with humans is what generates their use value. Haraway names this "lively capital" because it is the animal's animate, sensate, sentient nature that was being commoditized.[42] However, this only explains part of the value of the elephants in the Burmese timber industry. Elephants were not desirable because they were able to forge relationships with humans, but rather because through these intersubjective abilities they could be put to work in a specific labour process. In this sense, then, their value was mostly as means of production. It was not their intrinsic value as living beings that was directly valued (except insofar as it made possible the exploitation of their labour power), but that they could be worked as means of production to generate surplus value for the timber firms.

Marx famously described means of production as "dead labour". This meant two things. Firstly, it meant that the means of production—conveyor belts, hammers and alike—were themselves commodities bought and consumed by capitalists having previously been made through (per Marx, human) labour. Means of production were "dead" because they represented spent labour. Secondly, they were "dead" because they could not produce surplus value without the application of human labour. Workers were required to use these purchased commodities to make new commodities at profit. Workers used the capitalist's tools and equipment in the labour process, and they also serviced and maintained these items. Means of production were, effectively, inert for Marx. The value of them in producing new commodities was only realised through the input of human labour.[43]

Elephants fit awkwardly into this conception. They were not the products of human labour, they were mostly bred freely in the wild. They were not inert, but active, conscious creatures. Nevertheless, for the *labour process* of timber extraction, Marx's insights still hold.

42 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 45–68; Collard and Dempsey, "Life for Sale?"; Barua, "Lively Commodities".

43 Marx, *Capital*, 1:425, 528.

Humans were needed to capture and train elephants to bringing them into the labour process. Humans were also needed to direct and control the working elephants in the labour process. Elephants were not generating surplus value through their own volition, but through human compulsion. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, bringing together the insights of Haraway and Marx—both of which help us to see the structural specifics of working elephants' commodification—elephants can be thought of as "undead capital": that is, as both lively commodities and dead labour.[44]

Elephants in Late-Colonial Myanmar

As Nicole Shukin has argued in her foundational book *Animal Capital*, the seeming naturalness of animals can serve to hide the processes through which they are rendered into capital. The commodity fetish is even more powerful when the commodity in question has a life of its own.[45] In Myanmar, processes of making elephants into undead capital have remained stable across the twentieth century. The lives of these working elephants were commonly described as "semi-captive", mostly due to the practice of releasing them at night to wander the forest, albeit hobbled by fetters and made audible by bells attached around their necks. The reliance on elephants also placed constraints on the industry. Elephants required decent accessible fodder and sources of fresh water to wash and drink. The regime for training them was violent, yet moderated by the need to preserve the physical and psychological integrity of any individual elephant. The aim was to build resilient relationships of trust between the elephant driver, in Burmese the *oozie*, and the elephant. We might consider the process of training as the forging of an intersubjective connection between subordinated Burmese (mostly Karen) wage labourers and captive, but not fully domesticated, elephants.[46] For elephants, as highly social creatures, this was a traumatic process. Capture abruptly severed elephants' pre-existing kinship ties, and their lives were forcibly reconstituted to fit the rhythms

44 Saha, "Colonizing Elephants"; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

45 Shukin, *Animal Capital*.

46 Saha, "Do Elephants Have Souls?"

and demands of the timber industry. This meant working in close proximity to humans, alongside previously unknown conspecifics, and during the hottest parts of the day.

In spite of the tendency of white European accounts to romanticize the relationship between the *oozie* and an elephant, this coerced reorientation into timber work could result in the vicious infliction of pain and fear to hold these powerful, sensitive animals in subjugation. The case of Ngwe Maung, an adult male elephant owned by Steel Brothers, a prominent timber firm operating in the colony during the 1930s, is exemplary here. After gaining a reputation for attacking his *oozies*, he was confined within a wooden stockade, burned with paraffin torches and starved in a three-day ordeal to "tame" him.[47] While Ngwe Maung's case maybe on the extreme end of the spectrum of everyday violence in forest camps, it was not exceptional. Individual elephants responded to their conditions in their own ways, and the writings of those working closely with them recognized their distinct personalities.[48] Their responses ranged from compliance to outright resistance, but there is no hiding the hardships that elephants had to endure to extract teak from Burmese forests.

The lack of full subordination of colonized workers, who engaged in wildcat strike action during the 1920s,[49] coupled with the elephants' modes of resistance to the authority of British capital, represented in the mostly white management of the dominant timber firms, was manifest in a perpetual problem that confronted the industry—the theft and smuggling of elephants. Throughout imperial rule, the shifting borders of British Burma were sites of overlapping and unclear jurisdictions, where firms struggled to enforce their claims to possession over elephants. While this struggle was continuous, it was most

47 British Library, London, European Manuscripts, hereafter EUR, D1223/1: *P.A.W. Account of Career with Steel Brothers, Burma 1929-42*, "The Story of Ngwe Maung, Bhamo 1933".

48 Scott and Mitton, *The Life Story of an Elephant*; Williams, *Elephant Bill*.

49 LMA, CLC/B/207/MS40228/001 Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd: Correspondence Relating to Law and Order, Labour Relations, and Civil Unrest in Burma, 10 March 1926; IOR, MSS EUR/D1223/14: Phillip A. W. Howe, "Drafts/copies of Burma Short Stories Based om[sic] Stories Told whilst in Burma. Based on True Incidents in Steel Brothers". Forest Dept. 1918 to 1928.

pronounced at the establishment of British rule, between the 1880s and the 1910s, and, as we shall see, during the period of decolonization in the 1940s.[50] Indeed, the mobility and subversive logistics of elephant movement remain beyond state control in Myanmar today.[51]

This, then, was the baseline from which we might appraise the scope and extent of decolonization for elephants. To recap, the colonial period was marked by extensive habitat lost through deforestation, both to make way for rice cultivation and through commercial forestry. It was also pivotal in the growth of captive elephant populations; they became essential capital in the teak industry. Given the number of elephants working in timber extraction by the 1940s, it is very likely that it was during the colonial period that the total population of elephants shifted in balance towards the majority being captive at the expense of the wild populations. This shift was then entrenched by the reinforcement and reproduction of the elephant workforce through regular capture from wild herds, as captive born calves never met the shortfalls and were ultimately found to be an unprofitable way of replenishing the labour requirements. The rigorous labour regime also had the effect of undermining fertility.[52] At the same time, colonial authority over elephants was incomplete, not only in their day-to-day management, where individual elephants were frequently unruly and restive, but also in their movement over formal borders of the state.

In many ways, cracks in this status quo were already appearing during the 1930s. Labour strikes at the timber firms' sawmills and docks brought frequent stoppages. The Hsaya San peasant rebellion that engulfed the colony between 1930 and 1932 exposed the timber firms to the limitations of the protection provided by the colonial state, revealing their need to form their own elephant-backed, armed levies through their connections with Karen communities.[53]

50 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

51 Shell, "Elephant Convoys beyond the State"; Shell, "The Enigma of the Asian Elephant"; Shell, "Elephant Riders of the Hukawng Valley".

52 Mumby et al., "Elephants Born in the High Stress Season"; Lahdenperä et al., "Capture from the Wild".

53 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

The growth of anti-colonial nationalism pushed the firms into recruiting more Burmese staff into the higher echelons of their management structures, as well as into cultivating ties with nationalist politicians, but this was a piecemeal and ineffectual strategy for staving off nationalist ire at their favourable position. These minor fissures in the edifice of the imperial order were exposed and became open fractures during the Second World War.[54]

The ignominious collapse of British authority in Southeast Asia during the War has been well documented. The human tragedy of the forced displacement of, particularly, Indian, Anglo-Indian and white communities, barely ahead of the advancing Japanese forces—supplemented by the newly formed nationalist armies, the Burma National Army, and the Indian National Army—is infamous for the callous racial logic behind the prioritisation of the retreat and relief efforts.[55] The heroics of working elephants in carrying refugees over the punishing, mountainous terrain to the relative safety of British India is justly well-known and has been immortalized in a range of media, including a recent award-winning children's book.[56] But the fate of the working elephants that remained in Myanmar is less well documented. Even in the years that followed the British reoccupation in 1944, it was not clear precisely what had happened to them. Save for the few elephants engaged in the arduous retreat to India and those conscripted by the British Army, the large timber firms left their essential animals in the care of their *oozies* until they returned. The rewards that may have been hastily promised to these workers for this task, one not without considerable personal danger, later became the subject of dispute, as we shall see below.

Of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation's 1,972 working elephants before the retreat, around 900 remained in the care of their oozies. A further 200 had been identified in the regions of Thailand that bordered British Burma with the Corporation hoping that they

54 Bayly, *Rangoon (Yangon) 1939–49*; Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 219–92.

55 Slim, *Defeat into Victory*; Tinker, "A Forgotten Long March"; Bayly, *Forgotten Armies*.

56 Williams, *Elephant Bill*; Grill, *Bandoola*.

could be recovered.[57] There were two likely outcomes for the remaining 800 elephants. Some would have perished in the brutal fighting between two collapsing empires. Certainly, the Japanese military sought to mobilize elephant power for themselves, although it would appear that they did so with little success.[58] Other elephants, with more luck, would have been able to use the opportunity of chaos in the realm of human affairs to liberate themselves and return to the forests, although the traumas of captivity may have made this a difficult transition.

The impact of the loss of elephants was devastating to the rate of timber extraction in the industry. By 1946, two years after reoccupation, it was half of what it had been prior to the onset of hostilities in the colony.[59] This was in spite of the Waight Plan, put in place by the returning British Government to "rehabilitate" the timber industry. This arrangement was indicative of the hubristic belief held by some in colonial officialdom that a semblance of the old order could be reconstructed post-War. The plan saw the state take on responsibility for providing capital to the firms, as well as shouldering the risk of unprofitable sales, while extending the leases to Myanmar's forests that the five largest British timber firms had enjoyed before Japanese rule.[60] The inability of the firms to recover their working herds meant that this plan had limited success in rebuilding productive capacity. Nevertheless, there were two innovations in the Waight Plan that were later to provide the basis for the partial nationalization of the industry. The first was the establishment of a state-managed Timber Board which worked closely with the commercial firms and was a major investor and stakeholder in the industry. The second was the formalization of the close relationship between the big five firms into a consortium.

57 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Correspondence and notes between branches relating to the disposal, hiring and purchase of elephants, "Extraction and Elephant Power, 4th September 1946."

58 Tamayama and Nunneley, *Japanese Soldier of the Burma Campaign*, 192.

59 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Correspondence and notes between branches relating to the disposal, hiring and purchase of elephants, "Extraction and Elephant Power, 4th September 1946".

60 Bryant, *Political Ecology of Forestry*, 155.

The Plan was envisioned as an "ad hoc" interim one which would hold until the colonial government could resume working with firms on the basis of long-term leases. However, it very quickly became apparent that this was not a transitory arrangement enabling British recolonization but a step towards decolonization. The Waight Plan was pilloried in the Burmese nationalist press as a resumption of the exploitative, extractive imperialism that drained wealth from the country into the pockets of British capitalists.[61] The newly formed Consortium lobbied Westminster and Whitehall to renew their lapsing longer-term leases to enable them to better fight the nationalization of the industry which their intelligence on Burmese politics informed them was imminent. As independence went from being a political likelihood to a rapidly approaching inevitability, their correspondence with London became more clamorous and desperate.[62] However, there was little that colonial authorities could do. On the ground, decolonization was already well underway.

Liberating Myanmar, Nationalizing Elephants

Colonial plans for rehabilitating the timber industry along pre-War lines failed to factor in the situation on the ground. The countryside was under British rule in name only. The nationalist forces, who had turned on the Japanese and supported the British reoccupation in 1944, were effectively a shadow bureaucracy at a local level in many parts of the country. In other parts, territory was in the control of the communist fighters who in 1946 had broken away from the largest and most popular nationalist political force, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), headed by the charismatic General Aung San (the rest of the Communist Party of Burma split with the AFPFL a year later, dissatisfied with the negotiations with the British government).[63] Political power was not in the process of managed

61 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd: File Labelled "Burmah: General Situation" or "Burmah: General", containing correspondence and other papers relating to business, economic and political affairs in Burma, 23 June 1947.

62 See the bundle of correspondence in India Office Records, British Library, hereafter IOR: M/4/977, "Timber: Rehabilitation of the Burma Timber Industry (Repudiation of Waight Agreement)".

63 Taylor, *Marxism and Resistance in Burma*; Lintner, *Communist Party of Burma*, 7–17.

transfer, but was being seized from the colonial state from below ahead of formal agreements.[64] In combination with the everyday problems that the timber firms faced re-establishing their labour processes in this context, the recovery of working elephants from Thailand was a drawn out and diplomatically fraught endeavour. The borders were restive and Thai authorities seemingly uncooperative. At the same time, new legislation was being passed which restricted and regulated movement between Myanmar and Thailand; including laws seeking to control the trade in wildlife.[65] Concurrent to these changes, Karen nationalists launched a rebellion that brought timber operations to a standstill in some parts of Myanmar, forcing the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation to abandon some forests in Pyinmana in central Myanmar with their elephants in 1947.[66]

One productive way of framing the transformations of this period is to consider them a part of the counter-hegemonic project of anti-colonial nationalists. That is, as part of an attempt to build a state that both inherited the coercive power of the imperial predecessor but that also redressed the injustices of the colonial order.[67] This means conceiving of the threats posed to the Consortium of British timber firms by communist rebels, the AFPFL—both in high politics and through their militias on the ground—and even their own workers, as attempts to use elephants to realize greater economic democracy in Myanmar.

British timber firms were unprepared to react to the strength of popular opinion against them. Their strategies of countering negative coverage of the Waight Plan in the press, accelerating the "Burmanization" of their management, and lobbying colonial authorities were insufficient to protect their interests, as they missed the centrality of economic democracy to their opponents' grievances. Even getting the elephants that they had been able to recover following the reoccupation back to work proved difficult due to a breakdown in labour relations at some of their key forest camps. Karen foresters

64 Tinker, "Burma's Struggle for Independence".

65 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Correspondence and notes between branches relating to the disposal, hiring and purchase of elephants, Letter 11.

66 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 21.

67 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 1–34; Roosa, "Passive Revolution".

were reluctant to take up contracts with them, and the problem of labour supply that preceded the War became marked again by 1947.[68] More concerningly, at least for the firms' managers, strikes also broke out among forest workers during 1947.

Workers in elephant camps were not prone to striking. When they did strike, notably in the 1920s, this was in the form of isolated wildcat action rather than through an informal union structure.[69] In the summer of 1947, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation faced a near total stoppage of their forest operations on the Shweli river in the Shan States, to the northeast of the country near China. While managers sought to play down the depth of feeling behind the action, blaming it on the recent dismissal of two foresters known for their political activism and the news coming out of Yangon reporting the assassination of Aung San, a document listing the demands of the strikers emphasized pay. More specifically, they demanded to be paid for the years spent looking after elephants between 1942 and 1945.[70] An investigation of the records showed that although this was something that may have been verbally promised to their workers by some fleeing white British supervisors, it was never a formal agreement—a somewhat spurious rationale for declining to provide backpay given the chaotic and rushed nature of the retreat.[71] The Corporation were sufficiently concerned at the unrest as to sanction the withdrawal of its white supervisory staff.[72] The strike was only broken after the murder of one of the leaders.[73] Ultimately, the Consortium as a whole did agree to offer rewards to workers who had looked after elephants during Japanese rule, although the amounts fell well short of the strikers' demands.[74]

68 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 3 and LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 17.

69 LMA, CLC/B/207/MS40228/001, 10 March 1926; IOR, MSS EUR/D1223/14: Phillip A. W. Howe, "'Drafts/copies of Burma Short Stories Based om[sic] Stories Told whilst in Burma. Based on True Incidents in Steel Brothers". Forest Dept. 1918 to 1928.

70 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 24.

71 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 19.

72 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 24.

73 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, "Burmah: General Situation" or "Burmah: General", containing correspondence and other papers relating to business, economic and political affairs in Burma, "Madaya, 17th August 1947".

74 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 18; LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 23.

The growing power of labour in Myanmar in the final months of British rule was compounded, in the eyes of the Consortium, by the disruption caused by communist rebellions. In the spring of 1947, dozens of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation's elephants were seized by rebels in central Myanmar, along with hundreds of small arms.[75] In one instance in March, forest camps found themselves ambushed by uniformed troops whose leader identified the group as communists working outside of AFPLF rule. The Corporation's records described the rebels as "polite".[76] The concerted fighting was not directed at the timber firm and its agents. Instead, the rebels were engaged in encounters with the military, the police, and militias loyal to Aung San. We might, instead see the raids on the Corporation's operations as framing the timber firms as holding assets—including elephants—that were fair game for expropriation in the fight to realize a social revolution in Myanmar.[77] This might be why the leader of this particular raid was apparently apologetic about the disruption: the timber firms were no longer viewed as powerful obstacles to decolonization. The writing was on the wall for the Consortium, and that was legible to communist rebels from the vantage point of Myanmar's mountainous forests, even if the firms were slow to read it themselves. It is against the threat of communist insurrection, and their seizure of elephant power, that the policies of the AFPFL towards nationalization should be understood.

The speeches of Aung San and U Nu, Aung San's successor following his untimely murder, made it clear that some form of nationalization was coming.[78] In 1948, over a six-month period, the Consortium's operations were appropriated by the newly established independent regime. The desire of smaller Burmese timber firms to inherit the favourable leases enjoyed by the Consortium was, however, not realized. The newly established State Timber Board became owner of the firms' fixed capital (including their elephants),

75 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd: File labelled "Burmah: General Situation" or "Burmah: General", containing correspondence and other papers relating to business, economic and political affairs in Burma, Letters 4–8.

76 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, Letter 3.

77 For more on the intellectual currents of Burmese Communism, see: Aung and Campbell, "The Myanmar Radical Tradition".

78 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40226/002, Letters 9, 13, 15.

as well as their stock-in-trade and forest rights, compensating the firms for these losses with a considerable tonnage of teak logs. The partial nationalization of the timber industry meant the state-ownership of the vast majority of working elephants. The establishment of a state-supported co-operative for elephant capturing firms in the 1950s served to reinforce and replenish the State Timber Board's elephant power, although the continued downturn in teak production meant that the co-operative was largely a failure.[79]

Thus, working elephants went from private capital to being a national asset, yet they still remained tethered to the production of export commodities. One important exception to this near-state monopoly in working elephants was the Karen homeland of Kawthoolei. Here, autonomy won in the early years of the civil war that broke out at independence enabled Karen nationalists to exploit their timber through the mobilization of local elephants.[80] Logging became central to the political ecology and economics of post-colonial warfare in Myanmar, and elephants were also conscripted into the logistics of these endemic struggles.[81] But, whether now owned by the State Timber Board or by Karen nationalists, their material conditions remained, for the most part, the same: semi-captive and bound to the labour process of teak extraction.

At the same time as the Consortium found itself struggling to kickstart operations in the generous leases they had over forests in Myanmar, it was embroiled in protracted difficulties in its attempts to reclaim working elephants that had been smuggled into Thailand during the War.[82] The situation mirrored that of the 1880s through to the 1910s when the colonial state attempted to establish its authority against rebels and over Shan rulers in the north east. Then, as again at the end of empire, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation lobbied the colonial government to intercede on their behalf

79 Maung, "Elephant Catching Co-Operative Society".

80 Bryant, "Kawthoolei and Teak".

81 Shell, "Elephant Convoys beyond the State"; Shell, "Elephant Riders of the Hukawng Valley".

82 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Correspondence between branches and notes relating to purchase, export and army hiring of elephants, Letters 18 and 26.

in order to recover elephants that had been stolen and taken over the border, while simultaneously attempting their own initiatives for recovery.[83] The difference in the late 1940s was that neither the colonial state nor the firms themselves had the material strength to wield meaningful authority in the borders. The firms were able to send their agents to identify elephants that may have originally been in their herds, something that they were able to do through identifying brand marks on elephants' bodies and through their descriptive rolls that detailed the physical specificities of individual elephants.[84] However, regardless of the strength of the evidence that they could muster, it was apparent that they could not forcibly recover these elephants, even when they felt that the law was on their side.[85] The firms opted to buy back their lost elephants at competitive rates,[86] although even this appears to have had limited success as the Consortium were still lobbying for intervention from Westminster to pressure the Thai government to take a firmer hand on the situation.[87] It is worth noting that some firms were playing both sides of the case when it came to the illicit movement of elephants across the border with Thailand. In the years immediately prior to the War, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation used the patchwork of jurisdictions in place in the Federated Shan States where British rule was mediated through local rulers to move elephants from Thailand without falling foul of Game Laws.[88] In the early 1950s, they were again trying to find innovative ways of circumventing legislation in Burma and Thailand restricting the movement of elephants (as well as their attendant human workers) in order to realize an ill-fated scheme to transfer some trained Burmese elephants to North Borneo to commence elephant capturing operations in that colony.[89]

83 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 158–62.

84 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 18.

85 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006 Correspondence and notes between branches relating to the disposal, hiring and purchase of elephants, Letters 5 and 6.

86 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 23.

87 IOR: M/4/977, "Timber: Rehabilitation of the Burma Timber Industry (Repudiation of Waight Agreement)".

88 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/005, Letter 13.

89 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Letters 9–13.

While nearly all of their elephants had been transferred to the post-colonial Burmese state, the Corporation retained ownership of a small number of them. The plan to move these elephants to Borneo emerged initially in 1949, and they obtained a licence for elephant capturing in the British colony the following year—at around the same time that the Thai government banned the trade in wildlife due to concerns about the depletion of the country's biodiversity.[90] The scheme entailed some tricky diplomatic manoeuvring, as the now independent Burmese AFPFL government was seeking legal redress from the Thai regime for the elephants smuggled over the border during the War, elephants that they now considered their own. The Corporation rapidly backtracked on its historical claims to these animals, so as not to become embroiled in this case for fear that it would unravel their tentative permissions to transfer their own elephants through Thailand and overseas to Borneo.[91] It also necessitated the Corporation seeking an exception to the newly passed ban on the wildlife trade. While the archive is silent on the success of these appeals to the Thai government, by September 1951, ten elephants arrived in Borneo.[92] However, the scheme turned out to be an unmitigated failure. As early as December 1952, two elephants had died. A year later, only six remained, and the Corporation, having given up its plan to capture elephants, was now struggling to sell them. They contemplated having to shoot them if they could not find buyers.[93] The fate of these elephants is not recorded in the documents I have consulted, but it was likely an unhappy end. The Corporation's audacious plan to transplant its activities to a location where British colonial power was still ascendent ended in catastrophe for the last Burmese elephants to live under an imperial regime.

90 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Letter 11.

91 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Letter 15.

92 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Letter 18.

93 LMA: CLC/B/207/MS40473/006, Letters 20–26.

Conclusion: "Rewilding" as Decommodification and Decolonization

Burmese elephants were entangled with imperialism through their commodification in ways that have led to post-colonial regimes continuing their subordination to timber extraction. Yet to describe the situation of elephants in independent Myanmar as "entangled" feels inadequate. The term is altogether too banal, even implicitly benign. Eva Giraud has addressed the blunting effect of scholarly appeals to "entanglement" on political analysis. For Giraud, ending social critique with the conclusion that actors were entangled risks eliding questions about exclusions and responsibility. Yes, the human world is always more-than-human, anthropocentric narratives are inherently incomplete, nonhuman species are active, sentient actors, and all agency is the effect of webs of relations connecting diverse organisms. Still, this acknowledgement of interspecies entanglement is itself often insufficient. As Giraud points out, entangled relations are often hierarchical. And, even with all this entanglement, there are exclusions.[94] For Burmese elephants, their supposed "entanglement" with British imperialism might be better parsed in Giraud's terms of exclusions and responsibility.

Excluded from the direct relations of entanglement in the labour process were wild elephants (although, the use of "wild" here is advisory and unpacked below). The concerns and needs of free-living Asian elephants were not, and still are not, included in most assessments of elephants within the timber industry.[95] Yet, the reproduction of this "undead capital" is structurally reliant on an unsustainable rate of capture from free populations and has been since the colonial period.[96] The responsibility for this exclusion during British rule lay with the imperial capitalist. As we have seen, it

94 Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*

95 Evans, *Elephants and Their Diseases*; Ferrier, *Care and Management of Elephants*; U Toke Gale, *Burmese Timber Elephant*; Campos-Arceiz et al., "Working with Mahouts"; Mumby et al., "Elephants Born in the High Stress Season"; Mumby et al., "Climatic Variation"; Mumby, "Mahout Perspectives on Asian Elephants"; Crawley et al., "Investigating Changes"; Crawley et al., "Taming Age Mortality".

96 Jackson et al., "Long-Term Trends"; Lahdenperä et al., "Capture from the Wild".

was their finance that set in train the exponential demand for elephants as commodities, even while the bulk of the capturing was outsourced to Burmese firms. While this demand levelled off after independence, the nationalist government still required the maintenance of a significant elephant workforce to continue to produce hardwoods for export.

This nationalization of elephants was part of the post-colonial project to realise greater economic democracy. As with many other formerly colonized nations, the realization of this political goal caused the Burmese state to become dependent upon the exportation of just a handful of commodities; a dependency forged in colonial-era exploitation of the country's resources. Subsequent authoritarian regimes' experiments with autarkic isolationism only served to heap further misery and hardship on an impoverished population.[97] Even then, elephants were still needed in their thousands for teak extraction.[98] After a brief hiatus during the quasi-democratic decade between 2010 and 2020, when controls on deforestation threatened working elephants with redundancy,[99] elephant workers are needed once again. The illegal teak trade remains a source of much needed income for the military junta as they wage their modern colonial wars against liberated zones.[100]

Elephants were not so much entangled with empire as they were knotted into coloniality. Their dire position today is a direct consequence of the demands of imperial capital in the early twentieth century. It is a position fixed and reinforced over time by their status as commodities to be consumed as means of production for timber extraction. Admittedly, this is not a uniform situation for all elephants, and it does not mean complete subordination to the demands of capital. Jacob Shell's work on human-elephant subversive logistics

97 Brown, "Tracing Burma's Economic Failure".

98 Maung, "Elephant Catching".

99 Thein and Jianhua, "Elephant Conservation".

100 "US Companies Imported Nearly 1,600 Tonnes of Myanmar Teak, Circumventing Sanctions", *Justice for Myanmar* 11 January 2022, https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/us-companies-imported-nearly-1-600-tonnes-of-myanmar-teak-circumventing-sanctions.

in Kachin state in the borderworlds of northwest Myanmar reveals an intersubjective set of relations within which he sees the possibility for a more-than-human anarchist future.[101] But this vision is, by definition, marginal to the dominant form of elephant exploitation in Myanmar. Similarly, Shell's emphasis on the working elephants' successful defence of their sovereignty over mating misses the concern that their inability to reproduce in captivity has resulted in the continued depletion of the wild populations; though, his argument remains a necessary corrective to anthropocentric imperial narratives.[102] What Shell's focus on specific modes of entanglement between humans and elephants in Myanmar suggests is that aspects of elephants' "wildness" persist throughout both British and Bamar colonialism and commodification.

Building on Eva Giraud's question of "what comes after entanglement?", we might ask what Shell's insights into the persistence of elephant "wildness" might auger for a political project aimed at the liberation of captive elephants in Myanmar. Such a political project was not articulated during the anti-colonial struggles at the end of empire. As we have seen, working elephants remained undead capital. Their owners went from imperial capitalist to the post-colonial state. In my view, it was a politics that could not be articulated at the time, since the project of economic democracy depended on elephants' continued subsumption to capitalist relations. The coloniality of this hollow decolonization for elephants reveals the importance of commoditization. The commoditization of elephants not only tethered them to the valorisation of capital, it made their captivity a condition for Burmese nationalists' plans for greater human equality and Karen desires for an independent homeland. Human liberation was implicitly pitted against the liberation of elephants.

Liv Baker and Rebecca Winkler, an animal behaviouralist and an anthropologist respectively, have come to generative conclusions for navigating this apparent political impasse in their article on the rewilding of captive elephants in Thailand. They acknowledge that the

101 Shell, "Elephant Riders of the Hukawng Valley".

102 Shell, "The Enigma of the Asian Elephant".

elephants' legal status as human "property" is a political parameter that any scheme must negotiate. Working with indigenous Karen handlers is, thus, essential to rewilding. Karen *oozie*'s knowledge of their elephants is essential, as is the need to be cognisant of these folk's continued livelihoods. For Baker and Winkler, rewilding in this context means fostering a form of coexistence where captive elephants can realise their potential as agents of conservation by living freer lives.[103] Parallel conclusions were reached in research on barriers to rewilding in Myanmar. Surveys found that agriculturalists were not opposed to rewilding elephants *per se*, yet were unable to commit to it because of the precarity of their livelihoods. Minimising the economic risk of elephant thefts to farmers, these researchers concluded, should form a central concern to rewilding schemes.[104] We are navigating entanglement again, however not directed towards the production of surplus value but towards rewilding.

Being property, though, is more than a legal status. Elephants are not simply owned. In Marxian terms, they are consumed; their labour power is spent on producing commodities (in teak) or providing services (transport and tourism). It takes more than being bought and sold to turn an elephant into a commodity. It requires capture from free herds and often violent regimes of training. Rewilding requires more than community buy-in, it requires decommodification. It is not that Baker and Winkler are unaware of these complexities, only that their own work does not sufficiently grapple with the messy implications of decommodification. Rosemary-Claire Collard has probably gone the furthest in working through what decommodification entails.

Based on Collard's participant observations at a wildlife rehabilitation centre, she contends that to frame the rewilding of animals as a return to a natural state is to misconstrue the nature of the process. Animals that have lived in captivity are changed by commodification. They have had to adapt to the humans they lived with and the conditions in which they were kept. Since this must start from

103 Baker and Winkler, "Asian Elephant Rescue".

104 Sampson et al., "Human–Elephant Conflict".

the capacities inherent to the animal, this is not a process of denaturing as much as it is the production of new dispositions. The implication of this is that rewilding is not a return to some prelapsarian "wild" state. For Collard, wildness is also a disposition that must be produced. It is a state engendered through practices that divest captive animals of their attachments to humans. As she discovered directly in her work at the centre, this could entail "misanthropic" acts that were by necessity disagreeable to the animal.[105] Collard raises difficult questions for elephant rewilding schemes. Can the relationships between Karen mahouts and their elephants survive the latter's increased freedom? Can elephants be released from their captivity and still continue to produce value that would compensate for the loses caused by their conflicts with human groups and the lost livelihoods of those who work with them?

Situating Collard's arguments against those of Baker and Winkler sets some tensions of rewilding elephants in relief. Commodification has entangled elephants into the economic foundations and social reproduction of human society in colonial and post-colonial Myanmar. For Burmese elephants, commodification represents the primary form of the coloniality of power. It shapes and defines their experiences. And here we can also see the limits to decolonization for animals, both as a formal political project and as a wider movement to divest society of colonial legacies. It is too easy to simply state that, in order to decolonize Myanmar fully, elephants must be decommodified. This almost sloganistic aphorism provides no meaningful political purchase. It overlooks the material conflicts between human and elephant needs which, while able to be minimised through mutual accommodations and compromises, cannot be easily eliminated. It is equally insufficient to present this as a knotty problem endlessly mired in equivocation.

This is where Giraud's warnings about entanglement are so helpful. Staying with human-elephant relationships in Myanmar, acknowledging the colonial history that underpins them whilst analysing who is most responsible for the harm inflicted on elephants

105 Collard, "Putting Animals Back Together".

today, an ethical position can be formed. Elephants are being enlisted on both sides of a war initiated by a rapacious military regime guilty of crimes against humanity and the environment; there is little scope for ambivalence. Recently more than a hundred of the military state's elephants were captured by communist rebels in the north of the country, and three years ago, officials responsible for caring for the state's elephants went on strike against the coup.[106] The echoes with the politics at the end of empire are all too clear. Elephants remain entangled in the violent conflicts over Myanmar's political future. This entanglement, though, should not obscure the ethical position that it is only with the defeat of this regime that the decolonization and decommodification of Burmese elephants can begin in earnest.

There is a broader point here that reaches beyond the specifics of Myanmar. Decolonizing animals should not *only* be an intellectual exercise in uncovering how through commodification animals have become knotted in coloniality. It should *also* be a mode of analysis that orientates us ethically in the present, navigating with care the tensions between the needs of marginalized human populations and the liberation of unfree animals they live alongside.

106 "The Gentle Giants in Service of the Revolution", *Frontier Myanmar* 28 September 2022, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-gentle-giants-in-service-of-the-revolution/; "Communist Rebels Take in More than 130 of Myanmar's Treasured Elephants as Fighting Rages On", *ABC News* 6 September 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-06/myanmar-communist-rebels-save-elephants-timber-camps/104322604.

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