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Making the ‘man-eater’: Tiger conservation as necropolitics

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ABSTRACT

In this article I analyze the practice and politics of classifying a tiger as a ‘man-eater’ in South India to explore what doing so reveals more broadly about the relations between animal life and the kinds of human life marked as expendable by the state. I draw on Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics in order to analyze how the Indian State attempts to manage human-wildlife relations in a contested plantation landscape of high priority for wildlife conservation. While there is a large literature theorizing wildlife and biodiversity conservation as the practice of biopolitics, I argue conservation, as both a typology of space and set of ideologically malleable practices, remains under-theorized as a form of necropolitics, the politics mediating death. I examine how the Indian State goes about reclassifying tigers from a strictly protected endangered species to killable—the process of making the ‘man-eater’—in relation to how the state both values and devalues human and non-human life as a process rooted in colonial histories of accumulation by dispossession. This article responds to calls across political ecology and political geography to better theorize the role of non-human animals as essential subjects of inquiry in political contestations. It does so through exploring the spatial contours of deadly encounter between plantation workers and tigers in the plantation-conservation necropolis.

1. Introduction

One afternoon in Gudalur, a small town in Tamil Nadu, India near the borders of Kerala and Karnataka, I received a text message and photograph from a former Tamil Nadu Forest Department staff member. In the photograph, there was a man. He was splayed at an angle, his head turned sideways. But where his torso ought to have been there was nothing, just blood-stained grass.¹ The accompanying message said, “Found this morning. Man-Eater.” The man was a tea plantation worker from Jharkhand, one of the poorest states in India.² The tiger that was thought to have done the killing was shot dead eight days later, and two police officers would be sent to the hospital with their own wounds from bullets they caught in crossfire. It was never conclusively proven the police killed the right tiger, however.

The moment of deadly encounter between species is a prism through which questions of significant debate for advancing political animal geography as a field of research become focused (Hobson, 2007; Srinivasan, 2016). In this article, I chart the politics and procedures through which a tiger is made killable by the Indian State to advance thinking relationally about how the state values the lives of certain

humans against those of certain animals, and the racialised violence embedded in these calculations in a landscape with the world's single largest population of wild tigers (Jhala, Qureshi, & Gopal, 2015). My aim is take seriously the bidirectional nature and flows of power embedded in the hyphen connecting human with animal in ‘human-animal relations’. This leads me to ask: what can the procedures, practices, and politics surrounding the killing of a tiger and attempts to classify it as a ‘man-eater’³ reveal about the relationships between animal life and the kinds of human life marked as expendable by the state? I approach this question through examining the making of the ‘man-eater’ in relation to Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003). Necropolitics contributes to understanding the deathly side of what is a more theoretically advanced understanding of biodiversity and wildlife conservation as biopolitics, and does so with vitally important attention to the racializing practices found at the heart of the capitalist colonial project (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014; Fletcher, 2010; Mbembe, 2003).

Necropolitics advances grappling with the position of animals as political subjects enmeshed in more-than-human contestations by directly engaging with the geographies of “who must die” when species meet (Collard, 2012; Mbembe, 2003, p. 11; Philo, 2017). Animal

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¹ I later learned this photograph was taken after the man's body parts were found scattered throughout the area and brought back together.

² Poverty here is in reference to several gross economic indicators, including the Reserve Bank of India and Census of India statistics on the percentage of population below the poverty line, as well as household asset indicators (2011–2012).

³ The term ‘man-eater’ is employed here because it is the most common descriptor for a carnivore that eats humans (male, female, or otherwise) within the context of the study region. This term is not meant to suggest that only men are subject to tiger or leopard attacks.

geography has a longstanding commitment to questions of non-human politics—most persistently through engaging with forms of animal ethics and the politics of animal commodification (Collard, 2014; Emel & Wolch, 1998; McKnight, Wolch, & Emel, 1998; Shukin, 2009; Wolch & Emel, 1995). There is a robust literature on the killability of animals, especially as pertains to domestic livestock, slaughterhouses, and zoos (Animal Studies Group, 2006; Chrulw, 2011; Chrulw, 2017; Cudworth, 2015; Gillespie, 2018; Shukin, 2009; Wadiwel, 2002; 2015). Especially pertinent to this article, Chris Wilbert (2006) offers a valuable contribution for thinking about man-eaters in relation to their colonial imaginary as monstrous beings with agential capacities. But as Buller (2014) reviews, more recent attention in animal geography has focused on animal geographies' ontological politics, revealing “inter-species contact or symbiogenesis based upon a more convivial, less fixedly human and more risky approach to boundaries, to political actors, and to political outcomes that inherently challenges what it means to ‘belong’ or to pertain” (314). This shift towards animal ontological politics and ‘convivial’ human-animal relations has raised criticisms by scholars, especially drawing on critical race theory, feminist studies, and postcolonial studies, concerned with the ways the ‘ontological turn’ overlooks the very *human* politics of difference underpinning human-animal relations and the histories of whom or what ‘counts’ as human or animal (Emel, 1995; Jackson, 2013, 2015; Kim, 2015, 2017; Olson, 2018; Sundberg, 2014). I am therefore concerned quite simply about what happens when human-animal encounter isn't convivial, but deadly, where the geographic conditions that prefigure the moment of encounter crystalize difference enacted through race, caste, and class in producing *less-than-human geographies* (Laurie & Shaw, 2018; Philo, 2017). Less-than-human geographies signal a turn towards giving more attention to ‘direct’ acts of violent, visceral harm and the geopolitical environments that foreground them, rather than, as is more common in human geography to date, forms of structural, slow violence produced through social inequalities in the ‘letting die’ of surplus populations (Philo, 2017; Tyner, 2013, 2015). While the killability of tigers is essential to my discussion of making the man-eater and will be discussed later in the article, my primary concern here lies with the death of humans resulting from these more-than-human entanglements.

In bringing animals to the center of this discussion of violent more-than-human politics, the interdisciplinary field of political ecology, being broadly concerned with issues of justice in the co-production of environments and access to natural resources, has increasingly come to engage with more-than-human geography and post-humanist theory on the one hand, and the politics of animals on the other (Collard, 2014; Margulies & Bersaglio, 2018; Robbins, 2011; Sundberg, 2011, 2014; Turner, 2015). The theoretical and methodological tools and practices of political ecology are familiar to political geography, with both fields offering unique vantage points from which to analyze and examine politics of the environment at different scales of inquiry (Benjaminsen, Buhaug, McConnell, Sharp, & Steinberg, 2017; Bigger & Neimark, 2017; Dalby, 2000; Emel, Huber, & Makene, 2011; Robbins, 2003, 2008; Turner, 2015; Whitehead, 2008). Critical analyses of this kind demand research operating not only ‘from below’ or ‘from above’, but with critical attention to politics as the expression of discontent where power (from above) and resistance (from below) meet in space. I therefore situate my engagement with necropolitics through post-humanist political ecology as a research practice for interrogating the relations between animals and elements of the Indian State as a political animal geography of wildlife conservation. My aim here is to grapple with the subject of the animal and the subject of the state apparatuses operating literally on the ground in Gudalur, as well as from a distance, in co-producing the problem of the man-eater as it encountered its human prey in a deeply politicized post-colonial landscape.

In what follows, I describe and advance my argument for understanding the incident of the man-eater in Gudalur as an act of necropolitics, followed by an overview of the political economy of this landscape to situate my analysis within the appropriate colonial and

postcolonial historical context of Gudalur's land tenure politics. I then move to a discussion of the rules and bureaucratic procedures of making a man-eater in India in order to bring forward how the practices and procedures of classifying a tiger as a man-eater can be understood as the bureaucratization of violent politics within the necropolitical space of the plantation. I end with a discussion of what this incident demonstrates in stitching together the life of a single tiger with how the state legal, repressive, and bureaucratic apparatuses attempt to manage the process of making the man-eater. This discussion clarifies how the underlying political economy of the postcolonial plantation landscape is central both to the death of the tiger's victim but also the tiger itself.

2. Conservation necropolitics

The work of Michel Foucault has been heavily influential in political ecology for illuminating how the modern state reproduces the conditions for compliance over subjects through capillary forms of discursive power, what Foucault described as governmentality, the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Fletcher, 2010; Foucault, 1991, p. 48; Legg, 2005; Rutherford, 2007). Studies of contestation and conflict in and through the environment drawing on the logics of governmentality are more numerous than those drawing on Foucault's related work on biopolitics, how the state wields power over the population (as opposed to the individual) by ‘making live’ and ‘letting die’ (as opposed to sovereign power asserted as ‘take life or let live’) (Foucault, 1991; 2003: 239–264; 2007). Foucault's concerns here were with the everyday making of sovereign subjects and the increasingly intimate ways beginning in the mid-18th Century in Europe through which sovereign powers sought to “penetrate society, exact compliance, and invoke commitment” (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 5). Biopolitics is therefore about the production and maintenance of the state's population, and how in order to do so, the state at the level of the population asserts an “individualizing and totalizing form of power” (Foucault, 1982: 782).

Biopolitical theory has more recently informed the development of a better understanding of regulating non-human life in the context of biodiversity conservation (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014; Fredriksen, 2016; Srinivasan, 2014). Extending biopolitics into spaces of nature conservation has in turn expanded the purview of whom or what be might considered as biopolitical subjects (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014; Lorimer & Driessen, 2013; Srinivasan, 2014). Recent interventions have focused explicitly on ‘more-than-human’ biopolitics (Cavanagh, 2014), drawing Foucault into close readings with animal and more-than-human geographies to consider the regulation of animal life at the level of the singular animal, the population, and entire ecosystems (Biermann, 2016; Hodgetts, 2017). But how do we consider the more-than-human entanglements of lives whose encounter is often a mortal one? Here biopolitics falls short of helping theorize how and why regimes of governmentality maintain the geographical conditions for encounter between human and non-human populations that are not mutually supportive or reliant, but ambivalent or antagonistic (Cavanagh, 2014; Ginn, 2014; Hodgetts, 2017). For this reason I am interested in the under-theorized role of the active making of death that occurs alongside biopolitics as distinct from the processes of ‘letting die.’

Necropolitics speaks to the inadequacies of biopolitics to address the violent and racialised forms of difference produced in colonial and postcolonial geographies (Mbembe, 2003). While biopolitics focuses on the *bios*—life—how the sovereign subject must be conserved for the state to go on, these practices of ‘making live’ are always in dialectical relation with death, but also what is made killable—or in the words of Mbembe, the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics)” (2005: 39). This is not to say death does not figure in biopolitics, or that death has been ignored in critical studies of human-animal relations (Emel & Neo, 2010; Gillespie & Collard, 2015; Lopez & Gillespie, 2015; Shukin, 2009). Rather, the concept of necropolitics addresses the inadequacies of biopolitics' engagement with the

active political processes of death as necessary for the maintenance of other kinds of life under particular political regimes.

I am drawn to necropolitics for its geographic nature in understanding the power of killability (cf Singh & Dave, 2015) in relation to economic spaces of productivity, and how this helps advance a more nuanced understanding of the work of death in studies of political ecology, what Cavanagh and Himmelfarb (2015) have called *necropolitical ecology*. Cavanagh and Himmelfarb (2015) highlight the inadequacies of strictly Foucaultian accountings of biopolitics that under-theorize issues of race, caste, and class within colonial and post-colonial contexts (Legg, 2007). As they describe, “Foucault (2003: 254–255) is at pains to illuminate the ways in which ‘racism’—understood as a logic that separates the normative elements of a population from ‘the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal)’—constitutes the primary means of inducing a caesura ‘between what must live and what must die’” (Cavanagh & Himmelfarb, 2015, p. 58). Mbembe therefore does much needed work in making biopolitics ‘travel’ to the postcolony, both in a geographical sense, but also in advancing theory more attuned to the dehumanizing practices and technologies at the heart of the colonial processes of territorialization (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995), economic plundering, and production of the colonial subject. When Mbembe writes that in the context of the colony, the colonized were relegated “into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood”, he also is speaking to their spatial relegation from the *bios*, the population made to live through the context of the slave plantation (2003: 24). Mbembe describes how the plantation developed as a spatialized zone of exception for lives cast as less than human within the colonial state. Necropolitics shows how politics can be understood as “the work of death” (16)—not just the making of the *bios*-subject and its securitization—but in enabling a certain population to thrive, whom the state targets, through what processes, under what conditions, and the spatial conditions necessary for acceptable extermination by sovereign power.

In bringing necropolitics to considerations of political animal geography, it is important to acknowledge the historical postcolonial terrain this argument advances on. Much like Agamben's concept of bare life (1998), Mbembe developed the theory of necropolitics to respond to what he saw as the new and disturbing ways in which colonial states developed zones of exception enabling horrific atrocities and acts of violence. Bare life, as described by Agamben, is the expression of humans removed from the privileged sphere of politics and the state, or *bios*, reduced to the *zoe*, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” (Agamben, 1998, p. 1). Being reduced to bare life strips humans of value, rendering humans as animal bodies, killable without a crime being committed, an act of violence occurring beyond the law. As Laura Hudson (2011) explains, “Because humanness is made a political, conceptual category rather than a biological fact, certain humans can be defined as no longer fully human or deserving of ‘human rights’” (1664). Mbembe infuses Agamben's theory of bare life with an acute analysis of the particular ways in which slavery, capitalism, and colonialism work to actively animalize humans through geographies of death (Hudson, 2011).

I take up necropolitics in order to infuse an analysis of making the man-eater with the political economy of land tenure contestations born out of violent colonial and post-colonial histories. I do this in order to show what kinds of *human life* are deemed acceptable to exposure to death through their relation to animal life. In this way, this isn't a story about the killability of tigers *per se*, but tigers as state subjects bestowed with certain rights and protections in relation to other human subjects with differentiating access to inclusion or exclusion from what McIntyre and Nast (2011) have called the *biopolis* or *necropolis*. These are the spaces in which sovereign powers work to reproduce life on the one hand and spaces of “negation or socially dead” on the other (2011: 1467). Like biopolitics and necropolitics, their existences are entwined, both necessary to ensure their mutual reproduction (McIntyre & Nast,

2011).⁴ Necropolitics and by extension the necropolis, which expands on the spatial characteristics of necropolitics Mbembe set out, becomes a way to name and historicize deathly encounter in the spaces of surplus populations' excess. In this light, necropolitics is a means for theorizing the position of non-human animals as state subjects but whose own vulnerability and exposure to death are entangled in reproducing *less-than-human* geographies. *Less-than-human* geographies signals “what diminishes the human ... not what renders it lively, but what cuts away at that life, to the point of, including and maybe beyond death” (Philo: 2017: 258). This is different from examining the kinds political violence of unjust social conditions enabling the death of ‘surplus populations’ through structural violence (Tyner, 2013, 2015). Instead, a shift towards what activates certain geographies as ‘less-than-human’ is a turn towards examining acts of visceral, ‘direct’ violence head on, in order to make sense of the political conditions that foreground these acts.

It is necessary here to differentiate between negative interactions between species which emerge in landscapes humans and large animals co-inhabit, and those that are expressly necropolitical in nature. Doing so also helps to set a broader agenda for engaging with conservation as necropolitics. There is a large literature on human-wildlife interactions in India and what is commonly referred to in the conservation literature as ‘human-wildlife conflict’—a framework broadly understood as characterizing instances of negative interactions between species in which wildlife damage, destroy, injure, or kill people, people's livestock, or other personal property people care for or rely on (Madden, 2004; Peterson, Birkhead, Leong, Peterson, & Peterson, 2010; Redpath, Bhatia, & Young, 2015). There is nothing expressly necropolitical about negative interactions between humans and wildlife when taken at face value, such as crop raiding by elephants or livestock predation by tigers or leopards. There are instances in which these kinds of negative interactions might be characterized through the lens of structural violence (Tyner, 2013; 2015), as persistent social inequalities can produce the conditions in which certain communities are more vulnerable to the impacts of negative encounters with wildlife than others (Ogra, 2008; Massé, 2016; Margulies & Karanth, 2018; Rai, Benjaminsen, Krishnan, & Madegowda, 2018). But here an important distinction must be drawn between incidents of negative interaction between humans and wildlife and accounts like that of the man-eating tiger in Gudalur as an expression of conservation necropolitics. Without diminishing the significant material, bodily, and emotional impacts that incidents of human-wildlife conflict can produce (Barua, Bhagwat, & Jadhav, 2013; Jadhav & Barua, 2012), to be understood as necropolitical acts I argue there should be evidence of calculation in (re)producing deathly spaces, where certain people are more systematically assured of exposure to greater risk of bodily harm and death compared to populations the state actively attempts to secure and maintain.

In the empirical case of the Gudalur man-eater, this distinction will be made clear through a historical accounting of plantation workers in relation to the plantation necropolis, a spatial zone of exception that confirms the status of laborers as expendable lives when calculated against the state's biopolitical efforts to secure, maintain, and increase the state's population of tigers and other wildlife within the same landscape. As I will show, the tea plantation geography in Gudalur,

⁴ A point on language—for there appears to be confusion in the literature over the different meanings between necropolitics and thanatopolitics— and in fact the terms are often used interchangeably in the geographical literature (Tyner, 2015). I invoke necropolitics as I understand Mbembe did, in the context of how sovereign powers control the capacity to kill as a response to surplus population, and the geographical contours of space that enable this. This is different, for instance, than how Stuart Murray employs thanatopolitics to understand mobilising death as a political act of resistance against biopower—in his example, how suicide bombers engage death as politics (Murray 2006). My reading then is of thanatopolitics as a form of resistance to biopolitics through death, rather than necropolitics, which I read as another form of disciplining power over a sovereign population (Mbembe, 2003).

situated alongside a protected area landscape with one of the highest densities of elephants and tigers in the world, reproduces conditions through which particularly marginalized workers are ensured of heightened risk of encounter with dangerous animals. This takes place both through workers' geographic proximity to the conservation biopolis, as well as temporally, with worker movement in and out of the plantation landscape occurring at periods of time in which animal presence is also frequent. Framing these encounters as instances of 'human-wildlife conflict' serves to de-politicize the social and geographical conditions of necropolitical encounter by instead focusing on individual incidents of animal attack as unfortunate but ultimately 'natural' events.

3. Method

This work draws on 10 months of research conducted in 2015–2016 while living in the town of Gudalur in the Nilgiris District in western Tamil Nadu State. Gudalur is also the name of the taluk, or minor administrative district, where the tiger was killed on the Wood Briar Estate near the village of Devarshola near the border of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. During this time I interviewed over 100 Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu Forest Department staff working in this geographic region across three protected areas, in addition to conducting interviews with conservation and *adivasi* rights activists and NGO staff, wildlife biologists, and local political groups. This represents an active choice in 'studying up' (Nader, 1969, 2011), to more explicitly take notice of the individuals embedded within institutions of power often poised as monolithic actors in and of themselves. I make this choice to focus my research efforts within institutions of state power explicit here in order to clarify which voices are presented as more active and present than others in my analysis. This research is further informed by close readings of secondary materials including historical gazetteers and colonial-era travel writings, policy briefings and reports of state-level forest departments, central government materials of the Indian Forest Service, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), as well newspaper reports surrounding the events of man-eating tigers in the Gudalur region in 2015 and 2016.

In what follows I chart the history of Gudalur as a postcolonial landscape. I do this to contextualize the production of spaces in which certain people are actively made more vulnerable in exposure to deathly encounters with animals than others.⁵ This sets the terms for a reading of the Gudalur tea plantation landscape as a conservation necropolis.

4. Producing the plantation

Concerted efforts to 'open up' the Gudalur region for colonial extractivist activities began at the turn of the 19th Century. The British did not attempt to disrupt the traditional feudal landholding system of the *janmis*, nobility who held absolute and hereditary claim by birth to lands which they leased to tenant farmers and later British planters, after the fall of the Pychee Raja in Wayanad in 1805.⁶ Instead, as Menon, Hinnewinkel, and Guillerme (2013: 453) explain, "areas under the control of *janmis* could be better characterized as zones of accommodation, zones in which the British chose to recognise local *janmis* as a conduit through which to eventually raise revenue." Under British colonial rule, land was largely classified as productive agricultural land, reserved forest [e.g. for timber management], or 'wastelands'—a category comprising of 'unimproved' lands suitable for cultivation or economically 'unproductive' forests (Gidwani, 2008; Gidwani & Reddy,

2011). Today, these 'wastelands' would be characterized as tropical evergreen, moist deciduous, and semi-deciduous forests and grasslands (Prabhakar, 1994; Prabhakar & Gadgil, 1998). In order to 'improve' these lands beginning in the late 19th Century, the principal aim of forest management was the increased production of teak and other hardwoods. Areas without valuable hardwoods (or after their wholesale extraction) were transformed into coffee, rubber, cinchona, and tea plantations, with tea eventually becoming the predominant cash crop in the region for both large plantation holders and smaller scale farmers (Thurston, 1913, pp. 17, 113; Prabhakar, 1994; Menon et al., 2013).

The production of the plantation landscape in the Gudalur region is a history of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 1996; McIntyre & Nast, 2011), which foregrounds the region's eventual position as a site of intense land tenure conflict (Raman, 2009).⁷ These lands were already inhabited by a variety of different peoples prior to colonization, including a large number of what are now referred to as *adivasi* communities, indigenous or first peoples (notably the Kattunaikan and Kurumba tribes, but also Paniya).⁸ Unsurprisingly, it was many of the 'wastelands' described above that were the lands being worked and lived in by many *adivasi* communities (Burton, 1851; Thurston, 1909). Following the armed resistance of the Pychee Raja against the British occupiers, *adivasi* communities were forcibly evicted from their lands, or forced into bonded or indentured labor on commodity and agricultural plantations (Menon et al., 2013; Raj, 2013; Raman, 2009; Thurston, 1909; 1913: 17).⁹ Through a series of legislative acts including the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and later 1927, the British Crown vested all 'wastelands' [forest] and uncultivated lands to the Crown (Hegde & Enters, 2000; Krishnan, 2009). These were important acts for ensuring that 'wastelands' became productive as economic 'forests' (e.g. timber plantations). With the passage of India's Forest (Conservation) Act (1981) and then Wildlife Protection Act (1972), many of these forests, often adjacent to tea plantation landscapes, were converted into protected areas for conservation, including what is now Mudumalai National Park in Tamil Nadu (Hegde & Enters, 2000; Krishnan, 2009).

Today Gudalur taluk comprises 12 revenue villages (~749 km²), and slightly less than half of this land is classified as *janmam* lands, as opposed to government *ryotwari* revenue lands (Krishnan, 2009). The tea plantation landscape of this region had three primary waves of expansion in the Nilgiris, with three concomitant influxes of workers. The first influx of labor occurred in the late 19th Century with the initial expansion of tea, which occurred with the conversion of coffee plantations into tea after a series of devastating coffee blights. Tea picking is a daily activity, and the switch from coffee to tea resulted in a shortage of laborers to work in the more intensive production and harvesting of tea compared to coffee (Raj, 2013; Raman, 2009). The second influx came during the Grow More Food campaign beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, with the third and largest influx of plantation workers arriving following the 1964 Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Menon et al., 2013). At this time Tamil repatriates were brought to the region from Sri Lanka to work on the newly formed government-owned Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation (TANTEA) developed for the purposes of Tamil repatriate resettlement (Menon et al., 2013). These plantations were largely carved out of State Reserve Forest. In time, additional Tamil repatriates came to also work on privately held *janmam* plantations. As the number of migrant workers on tea estates came to settle in

⁷ Ravi Raman (2009) provides the most comprehensive and insightful investigation of tea plantation labor and how it is historically situated within the world economy.

⁸ Adivasi translates as "first people" or "original inhabitant" in Hindi, and refers to the "Scheduled Tribes" of India as designated in the government census.

⁹ In the *janmi* period these landscapes were already sites of *adivasi* exploitation, in which *adivasis* in particular were kept as bonded labourers or outright slaves (*adscripti globae*), whose tenure to the land were transferred to colonial lessees.

⁵ For a close reading of the biopolitical stakes of vulnerability and exposure in contemporary issues of global environmental change, see Cavanagh, 2014.

⁶ Pychee Raja led an armed resistance against the British occupation after the fall of the Mysore Kingdom following the killing of Tipu Sultan by British armed forces in 1799.

Table 1

List of tea plantations in Gudalur taluk, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, India. Area planted and grant area shown are official records presented in hectares rounded to the nearest whole number. Percent in cultivation is the area planted divided by grant area as a percentage. Data sorted by tea area planted. Data is from 2015 and obtained from International Tea Database (www.teadatabase.com) and used with permission. TANTEA is the acronym of the government owned Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation.

Name	Company	Area Planted	Grant Area	Percent in Cultivation
Wentworth Tea Estate	Harrisons Malayalam Ltd	611	1361	45
Rockwood Tea Estate	Hindustan Unilever Limited	433	877	49
Cherangode Tea Division	TANTEA	394	394	100
Davershola Tea Estate	Thiashola Plantations Private Limited	357	1491	24
Marapalam Tea Division	TANTEA	350	510	69
Kolappalli Tea Division	TANTEA	344	416	83
Cherambadi Tea Division	TANTEA	342	390	88
Nelligalam Tea Division	TANTEA	334	335	100
Attikunna Tea Estate	M/S Parry Agro Industries Ltd.	328	913	36
Devala Tea Division	TANTEA	324	444	73
Mayfield Tea Estate	Harrisons Malayalam Ltd	308	807	38
Strathern Tea Estate	Parry Agro Industries Ltd.	305	632	48
New Hope Tea Estate	Manjushree Plantations Ltd.	299	3461	9
Seaforth Tea Estate	Mahavir Plantations Ltd.	275	1034	27
Caroline Tea Estate	Parry Agro Industries Ltd.	260	563	46
Terrace Tea Estate	United Plantations Ltd.,	239	239	100
Glenvars Tea Estate	Manjushree Plantations Ltd.	238	3045	8
Devon Tea Estate	Hindustan Unilever Limited	209	757	28
Quinshola Tea Estate	TANTEA	206	213	96
Sussex Group Tea Estate	Woodbriar Estate Ltd.	197	533	37
Woodbriar Tea Estate	Woodbriar Estate Ltd.	162	343	47
Rousdon Mullai Tea Estate	Rousdonmullai Tea Estates Pvt. Ltd.	122	359	34
Royal Valley Tea Estate	Sampath Tea Industries (P) Ltd.	111	186	60
Periashola Tea Estate	Panchura Estate Limited	107	246	43
Barwood Tea Estate	Barwood Estate	85	85	100
Silver Cloud Tea Estate	Silver Cloud Tea Estates (P) Ltd.	72	104	69
Bitherkadu Tea Estate	Woodbriar Estate Ltd.	55	85	64
Udayagiri Tea Estate	Sri K. Gopalakrishnan	47	48	98
Kurunberbetta Tea Estate	Shri K.P. Madhavan Nair	45	45	100
Kusumam Tea Estate	Kusumam Tea Plantations	39	39	100
Visalakshi Tea Estate	Visalakshi Estate.	38	61	63
Glenrock Tea Estate	Glenrock Estates Pvt. Ltd.	32	187	17
Nadukani Tea Estate	Nadukani Plantations Ltd.	32	130	25
Kalleri Tea Estate	Thai Plantations Ltd.	31	43	73
Bernside Tea Estate	Smt. E.R. Wapshare & Co.	24	24	100
Nelliyalam Tea Estate	TANTEA	23	23	100
Panchura Tea Estate	Panchura Estate Limited	22	201	11
Kumarappa Plantations Tea Estate	Shri A. Kumarappan,	21	98	21
Surrey Tea Estate	Shri S.V. Pappu Chettiar	20	20	100
Parkglan Tea Estate	Parkglan Estate	20	20	100
C.T.A. Tea Estate	C.T. Alvikutty & K. Pathuma Ltd.	10	10	100
Sudarsana Tea Estate	Sudarsana Estate Private Ltd.	10	10	100
Solai Malai Tea Estate	Shri S.S.P. Subramaniam Chettiar	10	12	79
Mani Tea Estate	Shri S.S.P. Subramaniam Chettiar	10	10	100
Gavipara/Nalini Tea Estate	Elixir Plantations Pvt. Ltd.	10	10	100
Shri Meenakshi Tea Estate	Shri K.M. Kashi M.A	5	21	24

the Gudalur region, *adivasi* dispossession of land continued. The proletarianization of *adivasis* in the 20th Century continued through rampant land alienation with influxes of settlers from the Kerala coast, again during the Grow More Food campaign (Steuer, 2011). During this time many *adivasis* came to work as agricultural wage laborers either for settlers (primarily from Kerala), or in some cases as plantation labourers (Raj, 2013; Raman, 2009). Table 1 is a summary of Gudalur's tea estates, including the government-owned TANTEA estates, holdings of publicly-traded corporate holdings (Hindustan Unilever), as well as smaller, private estates. Given illegal expansion of tea cultivation in the region on plantation lands, which will be discussed further below, the actual area under tea cultivation is likely much greater than the percentages presented in Table 1.

4.1. 'Progressive' politics and landscapes of ambiguity

The middle of the 20th Century saw a series of progressive labor and land reform acts passed in Kerala and Tamil Nadu with the intention of improving labor conditions for plantation workers and to settle land

rights in the region through the abolishment of the *janmam* system. The Tamil Nadu Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act of 1969 (henceforth *Janmam* Act) was intended as a progressive act of legislation to secure *patta* or land titles for tenants on *janmam* lands with expired leases. In its original intent, the government agreed to compensate the *janmis* and turn title of land over to legitimate tenants. With the exception of two estates that purchased *janmi* rights prior to the 1969 Act, all other tea estates in the Gudalur region came under what the Act identified as 'Section-17' lands. According to the Act, estate tenants would obtain title for cultivated lands on their estates, while the State Revenue and Forest Departments would take control over uncultivated lands. The aim of the act was therefore to transfer ownership of lands under productive cultivation by estates to the estate owners themselves, while transferring all other land ownership back to the state (Krishnan, 2009). With the exception of one estate, the majority of land within estates fell under the categories of 'uncultivated' or 'forested' lands,¹⁰ which would mean that estates

¹⁰ A significant parallel debate to the contestation over the Janmam Act

would lose significant land holdings should the Act be implemented (Krishnan, 2009). All *janmam* leases in Gudalur have since expired, but despite 50 years since the passage of the *Janmam* Act the matter of its implementation has been held up in India's higher courts (including the Supreme Court), as estate owners and present-day *janmis* have filed writ petitions questioning the various statutes of the Act and its legality. In lieu of the Act's implementation, what has ensued instead is a half-century of litigation and contestation in the courts over who holds legal claim over formerly leased *janmam* lands.

Within this legal ambiguity, tea plantation landscapes have flourished as zones of exception. As Krishnan (2009) explains, in the most comprehensive study of the *Janmam* Act to date, “With a legally tenuous status, leased landscapes have also emerged as realms of ambivalent control. Both the state and planters were unable to, or abstained from, exercising power in any conclusive manner given the legal ambiguity” (Krishnan, 2009, p. 291). In practice, this ambiguity has led to tea estates expanding cultivation in order to reduce the amount of land they might lose should the Act be implemented (Krishnan, 2009). More dramatically, Section-17 lands have been occupied by migrant and tenant farmers, many of whom are workers on plantation estates employed as casual, temporary workers so that estates are not required to provide the services, benefits, and protections full-time plantation laborers are provided by law under the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 (Besky, 2008). Estates have also been accused by the government of encouraging workers and tenant farmers to occupy uncultivated tracts of estates to plant with tea and other commodity crops (especially during booms in tea, black pepper and ginger markets), thus ensuring that additional lands could not be surveyed as ‘forest’ under the Section-17 stipulations.

What has resulted in the Gudalur region, particularly in O'Valley and Devarshola (where the man-eating incident in 2016 occurred), is a dramatic decline in forest cover over the past several decades and an increase in the expansion of the built environment in line with the region's growing population of unsettled occupants, who now wish to claim land title under the *Janmam* Act as the lands' legitimate tenants (often through securing false titles). As of a 2002 government survey, over 50 percent of undeveloped ‘forest’ land on estates had disappeared since the 1969 Act was notified and surveyed in 1974, with a corresponding increase in developed areas of plantations from 19,700 acres to 25,757 acres, with another 10,928 acres in additional cultivation by occupying famers (cited from Krishnan, 2009, p. 291). In the process, villages and dispersed settlements have sprung up as sizeable towns without formal land rights.

These issues remain contested despite Supreme Court orders for the Forest and Revenue Departments to implement the *Janmam* Act. The state government faces the dilemma of what to do about ‘encroacher’ occupants on Section-17 land that is supposed to be vested back to the state, as it was previously surveyed as ‘forest’, but is now under cultivation or even developed as settlements. The most recent orders from the Court, given in a judgement in March 2018, also dictates that estates should compensate the Tamil Nadu government for destruction of forest since the 1969 Act was first notified and lands were surveyed. But whom should be considered rightful landowners, given the dramatic increase in population since the *Janmam* Act was notified, especially in the context of the histories of this landscape as originally appropriated from *adivasi* communities during pre-colonial and colonial periods,

remains a matter of heated debate.

The production of tea estates as landscapes of exception in Gudalur shapes them as sites of vulnerability and exposure for workers, including exposure to animal encounter. Located at approximately 11°30' N, Gudalur's average sunrise and sunset times range between roughly 6–6:30 a.m. and 6–6:30 p.m., respectively, depending on the season. In accordance with the Plantation Labour Act, estate owners are legally permitted to require laborers to work anytime between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. Dangerous encounters with wild animals by humans in South Indian plantation landscapes tend to occur in the early morning or evening, when human visibility is lower and laborers are either headed to or from the fields for work (Kumar, Mudappa, & Raman, 2010). As the Mudumalai Tiger Conservation Plan indicates based on camera trap data, these are the times when both leopards and tigers are most actively hunting (Singh, 2014, p. 76). While the Plantation Labour Act was meant to ensure the well-being and safety of plantation workers, guaranteeing them housing, health care, rations and schooling for children (Besky, 2008, p. 2), many tea plantations on *janmam* lands remain vulnerable spaces for laborers because plantation labor laws are inconsistently followed or applied. While the progressive land and labor acts of the mid-20th Century appear well-intentioned in improving worker safety and settling *janmam* lands with formal land titles, in Gudalur, they have had led to the scenario of solidifying these landscapes as precarious spaces for some of India's most marginalized peoples who work on lands they do not own. As ‘necropolitans’ residing and working within the plantation landscape, laborers are predisposed to the hazards of confinement within a spatio-temporal environment of heightened exposure to interspecies encounter along the boundaries of a high-priority tiger conservation area (McIntyre & Nast, 2011). Plantation laborers are poorly paid, often housed in abysmal and precarious housing, and unprotected by inconsistently enforced labor laws that employers contest. The laboring population is predominately composed of Sri Lankan Tamil repatriates, *adivasis*, Dalits (‘untouchables’), and lower-caste migrants from other parts of India. Echoing McIntyre and Nast (2011: 19): “Race becomes a marker not just of irregularly offered employment, but a marker that one deserves the misery to which one is consigned.”

But it is not just animal temporalities that predispose plantation laborers to heightened risk of dangerous animal encounter. Just alongside this plantation landscape is one of the most important wildlife conservation complexes in South India, made up a series of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and reserve forest. As half of a “dialectical spatial unity” conjoined to the biopolis (McIntyre & Nast, 2011: 1472), the tea plantation landscape serves as a space of economic productivity, but does so alongside this space of non-human biopolitical reproduction and securitization. In what follows, I describe how the plantation necropolis is sutured to the conservation biopolis through the animals that weave through them, on the one hand disrupting the administrative and bureaucratic practices of spatial purification, territorialization, and separation at the heart of postcolonial statecraft, but on the other reinforcing the interwoven relations between race, class, and efforts to conserve and protect animals (Kim, 2015; 2017).

5. Procedures of killing

Found at the tri-border junction of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka are a set of protected areas, two of which are notified as Tiger Reserves (Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu, Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka), the strictest notification of conservation space in India. Tiger Reserves, unlike National Parks or wildlife sanctuaries without this additional notification, not only fall under the jurisdiction of individual states and the Central Government Indian Forest Service, but must also develop approved management plans in accordance with the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). The NTCA oversees all tiger conservation programs in India. In 2013, the NTCA developed a “Standard Operating Procedure to deal with

(footnote continued)

relates to the very definition of forest in India, which again traces its history back to Gudalur, when the Nilambur Kovilangam, TN Godavarman, filed a case in the Supreme Court after witnessing the rampant deforestation taking place in Gudalur as a result of land ‘encroachment’ when he drove through the Gudalur area in the 1990s. See Menon et al., 2013 for a detailed discussion of the implications of the Godavarman Judgement for defining forest in Gudalur and its relations to the *Janmam* (1969) Act.

emergency arising due to straying of tigers in human dominated landscapes” (No.15–37/2012-NTCA, 2013). The document contains lengthy procedures and protocols for “for dealing with incidents of tiger straying in human dominated landscapes” (2). The purpose is “to ensure that straying tigers are handled in the most appropriate manner to avoid casualty/injury to human beings, tiger, cattle and property” (2). What follows is an itemized 22 bullet-point standard operating procedure (SOP) for how to handle a stray tiger (or leopard—the SOP is inconsistent in discussing only tigers or tigers and leopards) in a human-dominated landscape.

The 22 action steps of the SOP include the constitution of a committee for “technical guidance and monitoring” of the strayed cat, establishing “identity of the tiger by comparing camera trap photographs with India’s national camera trap repository,” and carrying out “detailed research” in order “to assess the reasons for the frequent tiger emergencies in the area.” Several of the guidance steps refer to issues of maintaining law and order: “In all instances of wild carnivores like tiger/leopard straying into a human dominated landscape, the district authorities need to ensure law and order by imposing section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.” This act dates to the British Raj and was first used to disrupt and quell protests during the Indian Independence movement; it prohibits any assembly of five or more people in an area where it has been imposed and cannot exceed two months. The maximum punishment is three years imprisonment for failing to comply.

What follows are a series of protocols on how to tranquilize a tiger, in the event trapping the animal is unsuccessful. It is to be determined by the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWW) of the state whether or not the animal should be relocated to the wild or placed permanently in a zoo. Next are more guidelines on reducing the possibility of causing panic or a mob, including establishing a forest department media liaison and more noteworthy, “in case monitoring using camera traps (Phase-IV) is on-going in the area, the minimum tiger numbers based on individual tiger captures, should not be given undue publicity without due cross checking with the National Tiger Conservation Authority” (5). This is to minimize the possibility of over-extrapolating about the number of tigers in an area without a firm grasp of their real population size (as camera traps may capture images of the same tiger many times). But as interviews revealed, this is also to reduce public anxieties about the number of tigers that might have already inhabited the landscape but were simply hitherto undetected.

It is in Annex II that the protocols for the “Declaration of Big Cats as ‘Man-Eaters’” are described (Annexure II: 17). The first bullet point of the annex begins: “Both tiger as well as leopard are known to cause habituated loss of human life (man-eaters). Such confirmed ‘man-eaters’ should be eliminated as per the statutory provisions provided in section 11 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.” It then reiterates the parallel statutes of the WPA that the CWW has the sole authority to declare a tiger or leopard a man-eater, and that he or she must also do so in writing and explain the reasons for the declaration. Various protocols are then put forth with how to handle a man-eater, including the assembly of a committee, camera trapping, and positive identification of the animal prior to any consideration of declaring a man-eater. An important point reiterated several times in the protocols is how essential it is for it to be clear that the animal is indeed a ‘habituated’ man-eater and not an animal that has killed a person or persons due to ‘chance encounter’:

As most of our forests outside protected areas are right burdened, the probability of chance encounters is very high ... The declaration of an aberrant tiger/leopard as a man-eater requires considerable examination based on field evidences. At times, the human beings killed due to chance of encounters may also be eaten by the animal (especially an encumbered tigress in low prey base area). However, such happenings are not sufficient for classifying a tiger/leopard as a ‘man-eater’, which can best be established *only after confirming the habituation of the aberrant animal for deliberate stalking of human*

beings, while avoiding its natural prey. (Annexure II: 18, my emphasis).

What follows are the protocols necessary for going about killing the animal as an absolute last-resort, including the requirement for a written statement from the CWW explaining the justification for declaring the animal as a man-eater and the appropriate bore size of weapons which should be used for its destruction.

I outline the complex bureaucratic procedures Indian state forest departments are mandated to follow in order to consider how bureaucratic visions of space, nature, and landscape also figure into understanding the production of man-eaters and related enactments of deathly spaces. In turning to necropolitics and the necropolis in the context of postcolonial tea landscapes as zones of exception (and in moments of human-animal encounter, zones of exceptional death), I wish to draw out how the quotidian bureaucratic processes that exist on paper must be understood as occurring within ambiguous spaces through which state power is unevenly exerted.

6. The man-eater that wasn't

A week after the incident of the Gudalur man-eater I met with a high-ranking Forest Department officer from Tamil Nadu who worked to capture the tiger. In addition to the incident itself, we also discussed the question of responsibility, and the complex relationships forged between deadly animals, marginalized communities, and the state apparatuses tasked with conserving species. Shot through these conversations were the contours of state territoriality, conservation as biopolitics (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014), and the friction produced when animals transgress administrative boundaries intended to signify the limits of their geographic acceptability. Speaking of another man-eater from the previous year and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department’s attempts to quietly push the tiger West across the Kerala border, the officer said:

I know it isn't ideal, but once an animal crosses that border, it really isn't our issue anymore ... Of course that isn't how these things really should be dealt with, but we have jurisdictions animals don't understand. If a tiger kills a man in Kerala and then kills a woman in Tamil Nadu, whose tiger is it? These animals are smarter than anything, we can't just keep them in one place ... We are putting borders up they do not respect. They do not see Kerala, or Karnataka, or Tamil Nadu. They see forest, and they have just as much right to exist here as we do.

And yet, the ways in which the Indian Forest Service and state forest departments attempt to govern wild animals in India would suggest the contrary, that they very much *do* believe animals understand administrative boundaries. There are deep contradictions between how the state attempts to govern animal populations as biopolitical subjects through spatial separation and enclosure, and how individual state actors understand individual animals to navigate space, as evidenced above.

Tigers are territorial animals, and in territorializing space, individual tigers, especially males, compete with one another in contests over their respective domains. An increasing population of tigers will therefore require an increasing amount of space in which to live, and a prey base to support their sustained reproduction (Wikramanayake et al., 1998). Debates about the total population size and density of tigers in India and within the region are a matter of intense, even at times vitriolic debate between wildlife ecologists and tiger biologists (Gopalaswamy, Delampady, Karanth, Kumar, & Macdonald, 2015; Harihar, Chanchani, Pariwakam, Noon, & Goodrich, 2017; Karanth, 2011; Qureshi, Gopal, & Jhala, 2018). In the context of Mudumalai National Park and the broader Mudumalai-Bandipur-Wayanad-Nargahole landscape, tiger numbers have been steadily rising for at least the past decade (Table 2). As of the 2014 India Tiger Census, this landscape was determined to have 570 tigers—more than any other single

Table 2

Estimated number of tigers per state and Western Ghats landscape (total) between 2006 and 2014. Numbers acquired from the National Tiger Conservation Authority. 2014 total is slightly higher than combined totals for three states presented because 2014 census included the state of Goa. Percentage change in tiger populations between census years listed in parentheses for comparison.

	2006	2010	2014
Karnataka	290	300 (3.5)	406 (35.3)
Kerala	46	71 (54.4)	136 (91.6)
Tamil Nadu	76	163 (114.5)	229 (40.5)
Western Ghats (Total)	402	534 (32.8)	776 (45.3)

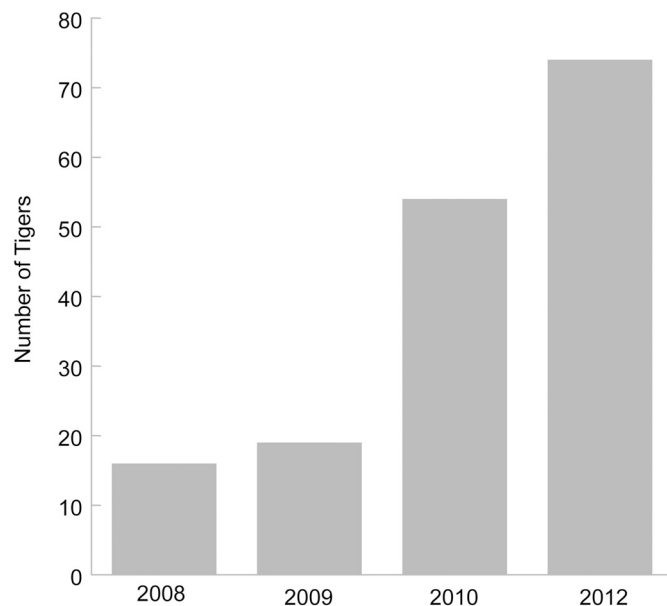


Fig. 1. Number of reported tigers residing within Mudumalai National Park by year. Data obtained from the Tiger Conservation Plan for Mudumalai Tiger Reserve prepared for the National Tiger Conservation Authority (Singh, 2014).

landscape in the world (Jhala et al., 2015, p. 14). As of 2014, Mudumalai National Park was assessed to have 74 tigers, or a tiger density of 20.4/100 km², “at par with the some of the best Tiger Reserves in India and far exceeds those in rest (sic) of Asia” (Singh, 2014, pp. 236–237; Fig. 1). According to Mudumalai’s current Tiger Conservation Plan, this density matches the park’s estimated carrying capacity, or even exceeds it, based on prey density calculations (Singh, 2014, p. 134). So while the Mudumalai Tiger Conservation Plan acknowledges that the “carrying capacity of tiger in the core [the extent of the National Park] is saturated,” there is no indication in the management plan that efforts in the future will shift to maintaining a population of this size. On the contrary, the plan suggests means by which non-native species might be removed from the former timber plantation turned protected area to continue supporting a growing tiger population without limits (2014: 135). To that end, the second of three primary management goals for the park is “increasing the range and abundance of tigers, co-predators and prey *outside* Mudumalai Tiger Reserve by enhancing source-sink connectivity and development of dispersal corridors” (Singh, 2014, p. 124, my emphasis). And yet the management plan, inclusive of Mudumalai’s buffer zone management plan, is opaque regarding where exactly these tigers might live or roam, or what the consequences of this growing population will mean for long-term wildlife management beyond the park’s borders.

The Tiger Conservation Plan for Mudumalai articulates the perspective that tigers “prefer undisturbed areas of the reserve that connects adjoining contiguous habitat” and that they are “intolerant” of the disturbed habitat outside of the reserve (Singh, 2014, p. 70). And yet at

the same time, the plan makes no mention of an idealized tiger population for the region—the implication of the plan’s objectives is that more tigers signifies a better tiger reserve and better tiger conservation management outcomes. Written into the plan is the inherent contradiction of state practices of conservation territorialization: the political spatial enclosure of animals seeking to preserve ‘involute space’ for ‘wildlife’ and ‘wild animals’ without taking into account their movement, impermanence, and dynamism (Ingold, 2005). This is not to suggest that tiger populations should not be enabled to live and reproduce as biopolitical subjects as a consequence of capital-intensive commodity agriculture dominating once-forested landscapes where tigers previously roamed in greater numbers. Rather, I argue that the state has chosen to deliberately intervene into the lifeworlds of tigers and goes to great lengths to assure their flourishing. The state’s conservation apparatuses must therefore acknowledge their responsibilities to citizens who live in close relation to the conservation biopolis, drawn into the plantation necropolis through a history of colonial dispossession. In reading across the long history of whose lives are secured and those whose are not in conserving tigers, these mortal interspecies calculations are imprinted with the racialised logics of Gudalur’s colonial history that reduce certain human lives to an impoverished existence in the maintenance of the plantation—codified through the necropolitics of tiger conservation.

Govindarajan (2015: 34) notes in her own accounting of a man-eating leopard in Central India that “human-wildlife conflict is shaped by the unruly nature of human and nonhuman animals inhabiting geographies that overlap and intersect and are themselves unruly.” But to ignore the explicitly political context underpinning encounters between big cats and other large mammals with certain kinds of people in telling the story of the Gudalur man-eater would be to pay insufficient attention to the role of the state in mediating these encounters and the inherent contradictions that exist between state bureaucratic conservation practices and the biogeographies of the animals they seek to govern as biopolitical subjects. Increasing incidents of human-wildlife conflict and public attention to them, both by political parties and the media, had reached a fever pitch by the time I was conducting fieldwork in and around Gudalur in 2016. Over the course of just a few months, widespread strikes were held in Gudalur District in protest of what various political parties felt was the ineptitude of the Forest Department to deal with mounting incidents of violent interactions between people and wild animals. It was an election year in Tamil Nadu and the primary topic of political parties on both the right and left were regarding ‘human-wildlife conflict.’ During the riots that broke out just a year prior following the deaths of two individuals, an *adivasi* man in the neighbouring district of Wayanad in Kerala and a female tea plantation worker in Gudalur, forest department officers and conservation NGO employees were beaten up in a riot, and a Forest Department jeep was burned (Fig. 2; Margulies, 2018).

So when the latest killing of the man from Jharkhand occurred in Gudalur, not only local, but state level bureaucrats understood the slow pace of the bureaucratic machinery’s paper-shuffling would be unable to stop an all-out riot. What happened in Gudalur was something quite exceptional when compared to other accountings of man-eating cats in India that remained on the prowl for months at a time in India in the past, slowly adding names to their human body count (Mathur, 2016). Almost immediately following the man’s death, the Field Director of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, in coordination with the Gudalur District Forest Officer, set up an encampment in the tea estate where the tiger was believed to be hiding. For over a week the tea plantation became a veritable battlefield with 150 law enforcement agents including a Special Tiger Protection Force with tiger sniffing dogs from neighboring Karnataka and the Tamil Nadu Reserve Police Force poised against one common enemy—an old and injured, increasingly hungry tiger.

While the Gudalur tiger was eventually killed, it never actually became a man-eater, at least not in the formal sense as described in the prior section. The committee required by the NTCA provisions for



Fig. 2. Tamil Nadu Forest Department jeep burned during protests following a prior incident of a man-eating tiger near Nellakotta, Gudalur in 2015. Photograph by the author.

declaring a man-eater was formed, but it never formally declared the tiger a man-eater because of insufficient evidence it was a ‘habituated’ killer. Unless the tiger continued to eat people, the committee argued they were unable to declare it a man-eater; and yet, given the charged political atmosphere, nor did they feel they could afford to wait for the tiger to kill again. As the NGO representative of the committee reported publicly to the media: “The tiger did in fact eat the human prey. As per the law, if a tiger eats only one human prey, it cannot be declared a man-eater. But at the same time we cannot wait for another kill in order to confirm it as a man-eater because people’s lives are at stake.” Conveyed in this statement is the friction at work in competing modalities of state bureaucratic time (Mathur, 2016). The committee had to wait to declare the tiger a man-eater, but they ‘could not wait’ because people’s lives were at stake, and in this instance, the media, the public, and politicians were watching. And yet to wait is precisely what they were legally compelled to do. The pace of these state apparatuses moving at different speeds against each other produced an entropic release of force—a tiger shot from all angles in ‘self-defense’ by police, who in so doing also shot themselves. Like the tiger the year before, the tiger both had to be and could never be a man-eater.

For the elements of the state bureaucracy on the ground, there was no easy choice. To declare it a man-eater they would have to wait for more people to die, and in so doing, face the threat of public uprising that had been mounting for years in response to the uneven political geographies of vulnerability and insecurity produced through uncertain land tenure claims. On the other, they could hastily declare the tiger a man-eater but later face admonishment by the National Tiger Conservation Authority for failing to follow the mandated protocols, as well as perhaps the international NGOs who offer training, technical assistance, and funding to the Forest Department, and even larger agencies like the World Bank who have invested significant funding in tiger conservation for over a decade (i.e. The Global Tiger Initiative). These institutions expect to see their financial investments awarded with increasing tiger populations, not increasing tiger deaths.

6.1. On the deadly encounter

In the context of human-wildlife encounter in Gudalur, the ‘contact zones’ of encounter between humans and animals are enmeshed in contestations over the constitution and separation of conservation biopolitical space in relation to the necropolitical space of the plantation (Haraway, 2008, p. 216; McIntyre & Nast, 2011). Encounter value helps theorize the commodification of when and where species meet—for instance, how chance encounter with charismatic wildlife generates capital through spectacular accumulation (Barua, 2016b, 2017; Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; Igoe, 2010; Igoe, Neves, &

Brockington, 2010). As Barua writes, “An encounter poses problems; it reconfigures identities, space, political economies” (Barua, 2016a, p. 265). But what of encounters that humans wish to avoid, in which encounter isn’t convivial or ambivalent, but where encounter spells death? It is within this context that the literature in animal and more-than-human geography tends to fall short of the normative political commitments to justice that (at least some) political ecology asserts as essential (Mann, 2009). There are easy slippages that disable animal geographic theory from advancing critically across a terrain of justice and for whom, enacted across various kinds of difference, when animals as individuals are divorced from how the state ascribes value and protections onto them at the level of the population. On the one hand, literature on animals as ‘lively commodities’ advances a better understanding of the role of animals as sentient subjects in the circulation of capital through conservation landscapes, but is generally less attentive to the everyday encounters through which particular wild animals are engaged in acts of destruction and violence (Collard, 2012; Collard & Dempsey, 2013; Barua, 2016b, 2017). The case of the Gudalur man-eater reveals a less-than-human geography of exposure, where the biopolitics of governing conservation space as a zone of accumulation through wildlife reinforces the necropolitics ruling the plantation as a zone of exception, in which marginalized and racialised classes and castes of people are maintained within spaces of unrelenting precarity in the name of profit maximization.

But what of the animal in the case of the man-eating tiger; how does closer attention to the tiger itself, not as a species but as an individual, inform a more incisive political analysis? Shot through the bureaucratic considerations of the tiger’s killability as outlined above, there is also the time and space of the tiger. Mathur (2014: 151), in describing how a man-eating leopard came to terrorize a small town for months in a remote region of Himalayan India describes how understanding the time of the leopard was central to understanding the terror it instilled in the local community. Similarly, the Gudalur tiger created the conditions for chaos through its own form of time, but it was equally the tiger’s *biogeographic* collision with Gudalur’s political economic history that created the man-eater that wasn’t a man-eater. Despite widespread understanding, even by Forest Department staff, that tigers do not merely ‘stray out’ of protected areas, they also live in and amidst peopled landscapes (Carter, Shrestha, Karki, Pradhan, & Liu, 2012), it was the tiger’s act of ‘transgressing’ this invisible line of demarcation between ‘the wild’ and ‘the human’ that set the procedures for its death in motion. It is believed the tiger had been injured in a territorial fight with a more dominant male tiger. In losing this territorial battle, the tiger may have left Mudumalai and entered into the tea plantation landscape in search of easier prey. Or perhaps the tiger had been living within the tea estate for some time. The history of the tiger’s geography, in this instance, remains uncertain.

The eventual killing of the tiger represented the collision of uncertain land tenure rights and illegal development against the constitution of animal space and the space of the plantation, producing the conditions in which contestations between landless labourers, land occupants, the forest department, India’s higher courts, and tea plantation owners converged. It is therefore impossible to treat the incident of the man-eater of Gudalur as a simplistic issue of human-wildlife conflict—but rather, the man-eater highlights how misleading the framing of ‘human-wildlife conflict’ as a static set of relations appears when viewed through the lens of history. As one local conservation NGO advocate complained of the handling of the man-eater, “It would be of great help to both humans and wildlife, if the government expedites the process of removing encroachments from [the] ecologically sensitive Nilgiri biosphere reserve, at the same speed with which they eliminated a male tiger in Gudalur.” This quote points to the entangled relations of the tiger with the now decades pending court cases over whom has land tenure rights in the contested forests, villages, and plantations landscapes of Gudalur. As Laurie and Shaw (2018: 16) compel: “We must challenge those autopsies that return “natural”

causes of deaths. Social murder hangs across the truncated lives of capitalism. And we are complicit.” In this light, framing the incident of the Gudalur man-eater as an example of ‘human-wildlife conflict’ represents a strategy of anti-politics (Ferguson, 1990), de-politicizing both the state and plantation owners’ culpabilities in maintaining the uneven geographies through which dispossessed and marginalized workers are more systematically made more vulnerable to carnivore attack than property-owning classes in the region.

The story of the Gudalur man-eater highlights how tiger biogeographic space and tiger space as demarcated by the Forest Department and NTCA through the Tiger Reserve contest one another. As the protocol recommending that additional photographic evidence produced of tigers and possible tiger numbers in social landscapes be withheld from the public suggests, there is, on the one hand, the intractable notion in tiger conservation management efforts in India that tigers *should* live in government notified tiger protected areas, *not* elsewhere. And yet on the other, we see in this procedural action the acknowledgement by conservation experts within the bureaucratic apparatus that this is simply false—tigers *do* live outside Tiger Reserves. But in ‘straying out’ the tiger crossed a threshold of uncertainty between biopolitical space and necropolitical space as conservation subject. The tiger also, through its unruliness, offers us an embodied geographic critique of state visions of animal space and the division between that which is human and that which is not. As Youatt (2008) writes, “because nonhumans constitutionally (rather than intentionally) refuse to internalise the meanings of human language, they are able to resist becoming self-regulating subjects to a significant extent, relying instead on their own semiotic interpretations of the environment and acting according” (394). The tiger’s mobility, in this sense, is inscribed with political significances, producing geographic contestations.¹¹ At the same time, as a formally recognized endangered species with strict laws regarding their protection and killability, tigers carry the law of the state in their very being, (re)producing spaces in which differential valorizations of life across the species divide are acted out. In this context, it does not seem an exaggeration when residents of the Gudalur area would exclaim that their lives were worth less than that of the tiger, for in many ways it is hard to see it as otherwise.

7. Conclusion

In this article I have shown how an analysis of the killing of a ‘man-eater’ in India requires engaging with the postcolonial political economy of the plantation landscape, and in doing so, presented biodiversity conservation as necropolitics. An analysis of the man-eating tiger in Gudalur, in its entangled relations with a host of other actors, reveals plantation landscapes as *less-than-human* necropolitical landscapes. Considering the death of the Gudalur man-eater in the context of necropolitics is to interrogate how the state responds when tigers transform from biopolitical subjects to unruly individuals, and how the value of various kinds of species lives are inscribed in space in relation to one another. In arguing for a reading of this plantation-conservation landscape as a necropolitical landscape, I have sought to advance engaging with animals as political subjects (Barua, 2014; Hobson, 2007; Srinivasan, 2016), embroiled in (re)producing unjust political geographies of difference across species divides.

In advancing my argument, I drew on Achille Mbembe’s (2003)

¹¹ While discussing the active capacities of the tiger, it is beyond the scope of this article to interrogate deeper questions about the tiger’s agency and the growing literature on animal sentience within animal studies and animal geographies. However, I agree with Chris Wilbert (2006: 32), who writes about the agency of man-eaters, that it is helpful to think of animal agency as an intra-active process of becoming (following the work of Karan Barad), not internal to the individual subject but an emergent relation between beings, which draws attention to “the promiscuous mixings of our worlds.”

theory of necropolitics for analyzing conservation geographies of deadly human-animal encounter within postcolonial landscapes. I did so in order to clarify the necessity of engaging with conservation landscapes as entwined products of colonial and postcolonial histories of capitalist accumulation by dispossession (Rai et al., 2018). My analysis of the space of deadly encounter between a ‘man-eater’ in Gudalur is therefore situated in a historical reading of the plantation landscape as a zone of spatial exception. In analyzing both the political economic history of this plantation/conservation landscape alongside the procedures and practices of making the man-eater, I advance the value of necropolitical theory for understanding of some of the relations between animals and the state. I did so by considering the production of acceptability of death—both human and non-human alike—within a contested geography of both high conservation and agricultural commodity production value.

The case of the Gudalur man-eater is advanced through engaging with political animal geography as a subdisciplinary field of scholarship seeking to reinvigorate animal geographies with stronger attention to human politics and to expand political geography’s engagement with animals as complex subjects worthy of intellectual engagement. The general lack of attention in political geography to animals as more than natural resources that carry political significations has stunted theorizing the role and relations of animals to state power, despite a re-invigorated body of work bringing the state and its effects ‘back’ into contemporary discussions of the environment (Lunstrum, 2018; Robertson & Wainwright, 2013). There is much to be gained from continuing efforts to read across sub-disciplinary boundaries to develop more theoretically robust scholarship on animal relations with the state.

Declaration of interests

None.

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