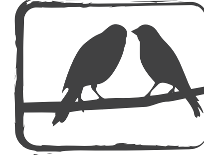

Beyond Heroes and Villains

Persisting with Autonomy on a Plantation Frontier

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Abstract Oil palm plantations often produce figurations of heroism and villainy attributed to human and nonhuman actors. Yet these categories may mask the subtleties of local experiences. Indigenous Batek people in Malaysia highly value the autonomy of both plants and people, but with forests disappearing, many who turn to labor on plantations find themselves struggling for autonomy. At the same time, they do not extend autonomous personhood to the oil palms with which they labor. This article explores the degrees of personhood attributed to botanical persons and the entangled human and botanical autonomies thus produced. It demonstrates the ambivalences of multispecies relationships in plantation frontier contexts and argues that by attending more closely to Batek theories and enactments of autonomy, categories of heroism and villainy are destabilized. This might offer alternative modalities for grasping the ambivalent nature of life on the edges of a plantation.

Keywords plantation, autonomy, Malaysia, Batek, refusal

"Make sure you slot your flowers into the thatch when you take them out of your hair," I was warned by Naʔ Tklɔ̃k after a day collecting flowers with Batek companions in 2015.[1] To not have done so could have risked symptoms including trying to eat fire, a swelling head, and caterpillars coming out of my eyes. Disrespectful acts toward flowers can also offend the fruit season, making her so shy that fruits fail to emerge. People thus live well with plants through avoiding impinging on their bodily autonomy. This is a dynamics of relational personhood in which Batek say that botanical and human persons each have "their own path." This is an ethical stance in which the autonomy of the *different* human and nonhuman bodies of the forest prevails. Allowing each to "live on their own" emerges as an act of "restrained care."[2]

1. Participant observation research and interviews (in Batek) took place over seventeen months between 2014 and 2015, over three months between 2016 and 2018, over three months in 2022, and one month in 2023. Names are pseudonyms; the names of Batek villages are omitted.

2. This is discussed in more detail in Rudge, *Sensing Others*. "Restrained care" is Sophie Chao's term used to speak about Marind care for sago (*In the Shadow of the Palms*). It resonates with Batek forms of care for forest plants.

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Batek people number around fifteen hundred across the Malaysian states of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang, where this research took place. The people with whom I spent time speak often of Batek identity as rooted in forest food-collecting practices and a high degree of residential mobility. Yet, over the past century, their forest has been destroyed right up to the borders of a national park, whose boundaries continue to protect a small part of what once were Batek ancestral homelands. Batek used to move frequently between forest dwellings, along ancient pathways and forging new ones.[3] This was—and to some extent still is—a source of their autonomy, their ability to engage with outsiders on their own terms, and a source of pride in forest knowledge.[4] "We know how to live without outside things," I was often told.

Today in Pahang, Batek tend to live in larger settlements where the forest borders plantations, such as the village where this ethnography took place. From there, they move to the forest for short periods at a time, often to collect flowers and fruits. This allows people to be close to the outside resources needed to survive, but it also, people say, affords them greater protection from threats they now find within the forest: poachers, tourists, and forest guards. Though hunting and gathering remain much-loved activities, they—along with the mobility they require—have become untenable as sole forms of subsistence due to curtailments on movement, partly compounded by Batek people's increasing participation in plantation labor over the past decade.

Many find that this situation reduces their autonomy, their ability to have "their own paths." "We have no place to run away to now" is a common refrain. What remains of their forest is and was a place of autonomy, freedom, and safety. The plantation is a place where neither humans nor plants have the same ability to make their own paths. Unlike the forest plants described in the opening, oil palms are not considered to possess personhood: they are not properly sentient. Though plantation life is spoken about frequently, and although people are highly knowledgeable about oil palms, they themselves don't form much of daily conversation, unlike the fruit trees of the forest whose every change is discussed in depth, and whose histories form an essential part of Batek origin stories.[5]

These stories, alongside stories from the more recent past, create a vision of a forest past formulated in a stark contrast to the plantation present. Naʔ Klpləp, a Batek mother of twelve in her late fifties who has herself moved in and out of plantation labor over the past decade and is renowned for her forest expertise, reminisced how "the old Batek from before" would have dug for tubers instead of buying rice. Back then, they didn't have metal blades; they dug with sharpened sticks. "It was hard," she said, but they "knew how to live *on their own* in the forest." They were always moving from

3. Lye, *Changing Pathways*.

4. On Batek and autonomy, see Endicott, "Cooperative Autonomy."

5. This is a contrast to the intense speculation about the inner lives of oil palms described among Marind people in West Papua by Chao (*In the Shadow of the Palms*).

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place to place. Their food wasn't rice, sardines, noodles, they didn't drink sugar, but they had tubers, they had meat, they had fruits, they had flowers. It was good, if hard. But they were afraid, they were so afraid of *gɔp*. "Whenever we heard them, we would run away," she laughed, remembering her own childhood.[6] *Gɔp*, in Batek, means "stranger," implying both a homogeneous non-Batek Other and referring specifically to Malays. Naʔ Klpləp continued, "I wonder, now, are *gɔp* messing with us? They take our children to boarding school, they make us work on the plantation, stay in one place, make a village. We have never done this before. Batek in the olden days, they would have run away. Us, we have no place to hide, no place to run away to. Now, we just stay in one place."

By attending to concerns about autonomy and mobility, living alone versus staying in one place, this article disrupts the moral binaries of hero and villain often found in narratives about Indigenous peoples, forests, oil palm plantations, and their perceived places within the Anthropocene. Through examining how Batek theorize and enact autonomy, both in relation to plants and to people, it becomes possible to grasp the shifting, ambivalent, dynamic nature of their engagement with oil palms, as people and plants are all newly forced to "stay in one place." The homogenizing, dispossessory, exploitative tendencies of plantations have been well discussed, often in discourses on the "Plantationocene."[7] Yet as Sophie Chao argues, drawing on a longer history of scholarship on Caribbean and American plantations, "there is more to the plantation than extraction and extinction."[8] This article's focus on autonomy is both in line with Batek theories of what it is to live a good life under the conditions of dispossession and uncertainty produced on a plantation frontier, and at the same time is inspired by and extends debates on resistance in contexts of plantation marginalization.[9]

When narratives about oil palm plantations appear in popular narratives, simplistic moral categories of heroism and villainy often surface. In international discourses, the oil palm has become an "iconic image," framed as a toxic substance and a symbol of destruction by Global North campaigners.[10] Indigenous peoples often appear as either helpless victims or heroic forest guardians.[11] When these narratives come from Indigenous peoples themselves and are used in discourses on rights, they can be central and navigated with great subtlety, yet when recycled by others on the global stage they can

6. See Lye, "Before a Step Too Far," on the importance of running away.

7. Davis et al., "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, . . . Plantationocene?"; McKittrick, "Plantation Futures"; Wynter, "Novel and History"; Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene"; Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt, "Patchy Anthropocene"; Chao, "(Un)Worlding the 'Plantationocene'"; Chao, "Plantation"; León Araya, "Monocrops"; Chao et al., "Plantationocene."

8. Chao, "Plantation," 362.

9. Carney, "Subsistence in the Plantationocene"; Wynter, "Novel and History"; Jegathesan, "Black Feminist Plots"; Watkins, *Palm Oil Diaspora*; Stoler, "Plantation Politics"; Chao, "Multispecies Mourning."

10. Chua et al., "Only the Orangutans," 4; Rudge and Ehrenstein, "Dreams of Purity"; Fair, "Feeding Extinction."

11. As described by Brosius, "Endangered Forest, Endangered People"; Chao, "Tree of Many Lives"; Tsing, "Becoming a Tribal Elder."

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reproduce essentialized narratives of the "noble savage"—the utopian antithesis and antidote to modernity.[12] This is not how Indigeneity is experienced by Batek—not least due to the complex contours of Indigeneity in Southeast Asia.[13] Batek have little interest in the label Orang Asli (in Malay, "Original People"), usually only using this term to refer to themselves jokingly, but they do see themselves as the original inhabitants of, and carers for, their forest. The central way Batek articulate the social landscape is with a distinction between forest and town (*həp* and *dəŋ*), and Batek and *gɔp*, but these boundaries are not fixed but porous, contextual, and idiosyncratic, constantly in process.[14] This article, therefore, does not attend to a framing of Indigenous forests versus non-Indigenous plantations, but focuses on Batek people's vernacular formulations of both forest and plantation. Indeed, both forest and plantation are complexly embroiled in Batek people's search to live a dignified, meaningful, *Batek* life amid the "cruddy" and "corrosive" conditions of plantation life, where they witness autonomous forest liveliness being converted into an inert, insentient resource.[15]

The oil palm was able to proliferate in colonial Malaysian plantations by drawing on existing structures for unfree labor and land grabbing.[16] Learning proper care for agricultural plants through plantation labor was framed as a way for colonized subjects to improve themselves, from "lazy natives" to laboring subjects of modernity, at that time through rubber cultivation.[17] This was far from the autonomous or "restrained care" for the botanical entities of their forest that Batek practice, and at that time, Batek, in contrast to Malay, Indian, or Chinese workers were imagined by colonial forces not as improvable laborers but as wild people, silently inhabiting the forests as the ultimate Others to (colonial) modernity (despite their documented participation in trade). They were thus deemed irrelevant to plantation expansion.[18] After independence, discourses on bringing the Peninsula's Indigenous peoples into the fold of the new nation began to be focused on how they might be resettled, converted, and made into settled state subjects—from invisible Others to invisibilized citizens.[19] In the contemporary afterlives of such narratives, where oil palm has taken rubber's position, the oil palm is a development

12. Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot"; Scott, "Conscripts of Modernity"; Schreer, this issue. See also Li, "Articulating Indigenous Identity'"; and Idrus, "Competing for the 'Indigenous' Slot."

13. Chua and Idrus, "Unpacking Indigeneity"; Parreñas, "From Decolonial Indigenous Knowledges."

14. Rudge, *Sensing Others*.

15. Povinelli, "Child in the Broom Closet," 521. On forest liveliness, see Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*; on the creation of resource frontiers, see Tsing, "Natural Resources."

16. Lees, "Planting Empire"; Ramasamy, "Labour Control"; Robins, *Oil Palm*, 143.

17. Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*; Krupa, *Feast of Flowers*, 109; Rudge, "Cultivating Care."

18. Endicott, "Economy of the Batek"; Lye, "Wild and the Tame."

19. Andaya, "Orang Asli and the Melayu," 44; Idrus, "From Wards to Citizens." Recently, the Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA), facing a labor shortage due to the COVID-19 pandemic, stated they were "even reaching out to Department of Orang Asli Development, the Drug Prevention Association of Malaysia, as well as the Prisons Department in search of locals" (Chu, "Malaysia's Palm Producers").

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hero and international campaigners against palm oil, the villains.[20] For the national park, the wildlife department, and some local NGOs, Batek are villains who must be educated out of hunting and forest collection. The conjoined figures of the oil palm, the plantation, and the national park emerge as heroes of supposed improvement: of Indigenous peoples into workers, land into productive resource, and forest reserve as pristine playground.[21]

None of these narratives of heroism and villainy reflect the complex experiences of navigating life on a plantation/conservation frontier, not least because Batek remain some of the most "left behind" of all Orang Asli, many surviving on pay that classifies them below "hardcore poor."[22] Importantly for this discussion, none of these narratives match up with the complexities and diversity of Batek people's desires and experiences. Many undertake plantation labor, welcoming the income that it brings, and yet narratives including them in heroic projects of development are as ill-fitting as those that would portray them as heroes resisting oil palm or as villainous thieves of endangered species. In this context, questions that Audra Simpson poses of ethnography have an important resonance: "How do we know these people? How do we imagine them as insignificant; or as significant; or significant in particular ways; or simply 'different'? What motivates these modes of knowledge construction?"[23] These are questions with high stakes for an anthropologist based in the Global North such as myself, witnessing a story of seeming paradoxes that do not sit easily with dominant framings. The particularities of these stories are where their significance lies: they are stories of how Batek people both persist and are being erased, of how they live with beauty and dignity in a place of grinding destruction, of how they see themselves as both Batek and as laborers, of how they imagine their presents by facing both the past and the future, of how they want state help and of how they often choose to refuse it; in short, they are stories of how Batek "refuse to stop being themselves," despite immeasurable pressures to do so.[24]

The many diverse and shifting narratives of heroism and villainy that circulate in and about this place indicate what David Scott might term a "problem space," an "ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political) hangs."[25] These stakes make clear the need for further examination of the forms of domination in which the categories of heroism and villainy are embedded, and for attention to the kinds of witnessing that they are masking, in order to better narrate stories of what Batek call *ns-gɔs ʔipah*, "our way of living." This begins with inquiring into Batek theories. I first foreground Batek people's formulations of autonomy as a valued ethical and political strategy and examine how these mesh

20. MPOC, "Concerns Remain on EU Deforestation" (accessed March 28, 2023).
21. As described in Schreer, this issue, where palm oil workers are framed as "national heroes."
22. Idrus, "Left Behind."
23. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 67.
24. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 2; Lea, *Wild Policy*.
25. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 4; Moore, "Anthropocene Anthropology," 28.

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with people's recent experiences of plantation labor. Second, rather than asking how people have become inevitable subjects of oil palm's global proliferation and/or agentive resisters of it, I ask: what is the oil palm to Batek people? This is an important question; as Chao's Marind interlocutors say, it is a tree of "many lives."[26] I therefore unpack how different forms of care produce different degrees of vitality and interrogate the entangled autonomies they produce. Third, I explore how foregrounding orientations toward autonomy extend previous anthropological articulations of resistance and refusal amid what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the "suffering and dying, enduring and expiring, that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime."[27] This leads to a destabilization of heroism and villainy. Instead, subtle and patchy forms of relationality, creativity, and persistence come to light in ways that may offer grounded modalities for understanding Anthropocene problem spaces such as the plantation/conservation frontier.

Planted, Buried: Autonomy as a Political Strategy

Autonomy is a political strategy as well as a value. Batek in Pahang have long been boundary dwellers, making the most of beneficial scenarios from outside the forest such as trade, while fleeing into the interior of the forest when their autonomy is threatened.[28] This has been important throughout their history, in which they have participated in trade and labor as well as being subject to prejudice, coercion, and slavery.[29] The borders of the national park that protects what is left of Batek peoples' forests were drawn by the British colonial administration.[30] Batek were tolerated to remain as they were thought to be "wild people" and hence invisible. Today, they are dealt with as an environmental and social problem, resulting in restrictions on people's movement and activities within the park.[31] The plantations that border the park are run by a global agribusiness. Migrant workers, usually Bangladeshis, live in barracks on the plantation, undertaking fruit bunch cutting, pesticide spraying, and planting. Batek workers remain living on the plantation's edge, where they lived long before the plantation came. They are employed to pick up the palm kernels that fall to the ground after the other workers have cut down the fruit bunches. More recently (since around 2021), men have also been employed as fruit cutters and sprayers; the rest remains women's work.

Though their lives are materially very different, in a repetition of the ambivalence that permitted them to remain in the national park in the 1930s Batek continue to find

26. Chao, "Tree of Many Lives."

27. Povinelli, "Child in the Broom Closet," 521. See also Stoler, "Plantation Politics," on the ambiguities of plantation protest.

28. Lye, "Wild and the Tame"; Andaya, "Orang Asli and the Melayu," 43–44; Noor, "Deconstructive History of Pahang."

29. Endicott, "Effects of Slave Raiding."

30. Lye, "Wild and the Tame"; Lye, "Forest People"; Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation*.

31. Subramaniam and Endicott, "Orang Asli Land"; Idrus, "From Wards to Citizens."

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some autonomy in moving between forest and plantation. They make use of what they need from outside the forest, whether this is through tourism, labor, or trade, while the forest remains home, a place of safety and nourishment. People talk often of the forest as a place to hide, referring back to the Japanese war, the Emergency, or even just times they encountered "bad *gɔp*."

A desire to retain mobility has long manifested in a refusal to cultivate. Kirk Endicott witnessed in 1970s Kelantan how government initiatives aimed at persuading Batek to settle down and become farmers failed, as Batek felt this made them visible and vulnerable to coercion.[32] Batek people in Pahang today plant, harvest, and trade rubber on a small scale as tenants and sometimes grow small gardens of cassava and bananas.[33] But these gardens are largely treated with indifference, and they often get trampled by elephants. People readily move away and leave the gardens; rubber permits a high degree of absence from the groves, and its trade is dependent on the price being right. Residential mobility has therefore facilitated economic diversification and has been central to how people have envisioned their autonomy. As Taʔ Kŋkuŋ, an older Batek man who still chooses to live largely in the forest, put it to me, movement through the forest stops *gɔp* from being able to "pull at you."

Cultivation is also ethically distinct from forest gathering, demarcated along an axis of autonomy. When digging for wild tubers, I asked Naʔ Klpləp whether she could describe them using the Malay term *tanaman*, "crops/plants" (there is no generic term for plants in Batek). This comes from the root *tanam*, "plant, bury," meaning *tanaman* also has the meaning of "buried object."[34] Naʔ Klpləp laughed and explained that they are not "crops/plants" because they live "on their own" under the ground.

Oil palms, by contrast, are buried, though it is rarely Batek who do the planting. Naʔ ʔAlep (Naʔ Klpləp's daughter), and her husband, ʔEy ʔAlep, both in their mid-thirties, work on the plantation at least six days a week. Naʔ ʔAlep used to work picking up the fallen fruits. For a while she managed to persuade her manager that she should be allowed to clear overgrown paths, meaning she was paid more. But after a few months, management decided that women shouldn't be doing this heavier work. Now her main role is to spread the rat poison around the plantation. But she takes every opportunity to learn what she can about plantation processes. Over the decade I've known her, new words have entered her vocabulary, like "polybag," "modern," and *kilang*, "factory." She knows, too, about the kernels that indicate desirable oils and about how many feet apart they should be planted, even though this kind of work is never given to Batek women. Though she comes home exhausted, coughing, and aching, she and her husband are ambitious, often asking for more and better work and better pay. Just as she knows how to pay attention to the forest and to her speech and actions around autonomous forest

32. Endicott, "Economy of the Batek."

33. As nonforest plants, rubber and cassava do not possess personhood or sentience.

34. In English, too, the term *plant* comes from the Latin *plantare*, "to fix in place."

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plants so as to please the fruit season, so too she pays attention to every detail of the palms and their habits. She was never taught this by her supervisors: “I listen in, I study, I remember.” But unlike forest plants, with whom she interacts with tenderness, care, and love, oil palms are a means to an end. “I like it when you see lots of kernels on the ground, because it means soon your work will be over,” she told me.

There is a parallel between forms of engaging with plants and how people understand them. Being imported and planted begets a reduction to an insentient status, the status of mere object. Yet oil palm is an object that causes some concern. Batek people never consume the kernels that they encounter when they labor on the plantation. They are not brought back to be cooked or processed. Some say that eating oil palm will make the whole village die. Others say they cannot as managers will be angry at them for stealing. Others say they simply find it disgusting.

The plantation also prompts dilemmas of autonomy that complicate the division between autonomous botanical persons and planted objects. On our way back from digging for tubers in the forest, Naʔ Klpləp showed me how among the rubber and bananas were now young seedlings of beloved fruit trees that usually grow in the forest. Next to her chili plant were *dnwɔŋ* seedlings, a type of ginger whose fragrant yellow wetness is smeared over the face for beauty and health. She explained how Batek people are now burying/planting (she used the Batek pronunciation, *tanem*, of the Malay word *tanam*) these plants, which they would not have done before. Her daughter later explained that these are plants that should live on their own “but we are worried that one day there will be no forest. So though they aren’t ‘plants,’ we must now ‘plant’ them. If we don’t, then we will be filled with regret.” The oil palm, on the other hand, is truly a *tanaman*—it has been buried, planted, it cannot live alone.[35] Yet there are also ambiguities; some say that it sometimes *can* live on its own: “Sometimes if a squirrel takes a kernel and accidentally buries it, it grows,” Naʔ ʔAlep pointed out. Just as forest plants can be buried, so too can oil palms “live on their own” when they move in ways not dictated by the plantation.

These narratives on oil palms and forest plants reveal just some of the complexities of concurrently navigating between plantation and forest worlds. Having each experienced vast changes of different kinds—Naʔ Klpləp, the razing of the forests as a child, and Naʔ ʔAlep and her husband, of becoming more formalized laborers—their strategies for how to live a dignified and meaningful life are not the same. But what they share are rejections of the easy narratives of heroism and villainy that circulate around them and their place in forums to which they themselves have little access. Conflicting autonomies circulate as part of this negotiation. To retain Batek autonomy (their ability to access the plants that they need and love), botanical autonomy (living alone) is both enacted (through gathering) and brought into question (through planting). Searching for

35. The Marind believe that oil palms prefer to be alone and cannot coexist with others (Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*, 147).

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financial autonomy involves becoming ever more embroiled with plantation labor, and yet people find meaning through autonomous learning and listening that cannot be controlled. Perhaps a tentative denial of the oil palm's ability to live alone is a way that people attempt to assert yet another kind of autonomy from the plantation infrastructure. Importantly, no one theorizes these activities in terms of heroic resistance, and though grudges against supervisors are common and forest loss is felt unbearably deeply, it is rare for the plantation itself, or the oil palm, to emerge as a specific villain as people try to get by with and alongside it.

Refusal or Acquiescence? Small Acts of Negotiation

How, then, to theorize these forms of autonomy that Batek attempt to assert to live well amid chronic dispossession? Returning for fieldwork for the first time in four years, after COVID-19 disrupted travel from the UK, I was informed by Batek interlocutors that the bosses had "thrown out" the Bangladeshi migrant workers (likely due to COVID), in favor of Batek people, who were now employed on contract rather than ad hoc. Old people and children were no longer permitted to work on the plantation. Some stated that this was good; the bosses were finally recognizing that Batek were "good workers," meaning they would work all day with no rest, as Batek put it. But many were ambivalent. They were old or young but still needed to work, or they didn't want to be tied by a contract. "What if we want to leave to go to the forest? If I could just go and work one day at a time, I'd do it," one young man told me. "But they want to lock me to six months? I don't want to." Even now that migrant laborers have returned to the plantation, these contracts remain in place. Those who accept work often feel cornered. Bosses come to fetch them by car each morning to take them to places in the plantation unreachable by foot. There they are vulnerable, women especially. They cannot get back without the car. After incidences of rape and sexual harassment, I was told that the plantation installed more guards and instructed Batek workers to call them for help. This advice considered neither that many do not have phones nor that there is rarely a phone signal. This vast, monotonous, and impenetrable landscape hides dangers while simultaneously rendering Batek more vulnerable. Amid the palms, living alone becomes harder for Batek people, who find themselves, like the palms they labour with, planted, fixed, and dependent on the often-coercive care of others.

James C. Scott, through his study of Malay peasants' "prosaic but constant" resistance to "those who [sought] to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them," cemented the idea that peasant values can remain uncaptured by dominant forces.[36] Foot dragging, theft, and other minor acts all become hidden forms of resistance, demonstrating the agency of the peasantry.[37] Yet critics of this position argued that this created a false figure of agentive resistance (a hero?) able to resist hegemonic effects while

36. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xvi.
37. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

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simultaneously standing outside them.[38] For Lila Abu-Lughod, this represented a "tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated."[39] Where does that leave those who find they cannot resist, or who live amid forms of power that are far from ineffective?

Further, Timothy Mitchell argued, Scott's formulation relied on a false dichotomy between the ideological, on the one hand, and material conditions, on the other, that unhelpfully presents power as a lawlike structure (a villain?) superimposed over naturally agentive inner lives. This itself has "worked itself into the very vocabulary with which we speak of power," meaning that those who seemingly fail to "resist" are seen as lacking agency and can only be seen as inauthentic, failing to live up to visions of the heroic "subaltern."[40] Might it instead be that everyday forms of defiance, persistence, or "survivance" take place in ways that are situational reactions to instances of power that may be both material and ideological, that are always particular, and in which people may both resist and support, or both harden and yield to, processes of coercion at the same time?[41] As many Batek people told me, "we are afraid to be angry." Finding ways to get by, to live with and against material domination, is felt to be the only option.

Yet, if the plantation has become the way things are in a prosaic sense, it does not mean that Batek have become its perfect subjects. In this sense they refuse (to the extent they are able) aspects of plantation life. Many who live next to the plantation still refuse to work there, citing that it is boring and hot and the pay too low. Many sign contracts, but when the car comes to pick them up refuse to come out of their houses. When the estate shop opened, Batek refused to take their wages in truck to pay there and instead pay in cash to avoid further cycles of debt and coercion. There are continual attempts to get workers and their families to move from the settlement at the edge of the forest to boardinghouses closer to the headquarters. This, Batek are told, would help them—they'd be closer to work; they wouldn't have to wake up at 4 a.m.; they wouldn't have to wait for the car to pick them up or use their own motorbikes; their children wouldn't have to spend so long getting to school. But in response to this, Batek often say forcefully "we *yeʔ*," "refuse/reject/don't want." Naʔ Badək once told me that even if her husband one day said he wanted to move there, she'd take her children and run, run, run into the forest where *gɔp* could not find her. She'd eat tubers and fruits, she'd live far from *gɔp*.

Carole McGranahan argues that refusal is definitively not resistance, though the two concepts can overlap. Refusal can be social as well as political; hence it is "generative and

38. Prasse-Freeman, "Resistance/Refusal"; Ortner, "Resistance"; Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power."

39. Abu-Lughod, "Romance of Resistance," 41.

40. Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," 573, 564.

41. Vizenor, *Survivance*; Abu-Lughod, "Romance of Resistance." I thank the reviewer for the vocabulary of yielding and hardening.

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strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing and away from another," in such a way that it "refuse[s] affiliations, identities, and relationships in ways that are not about domination or class struggle, but instead about staking claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships."[42] For Simpson, Mohawk refusals to recognize the state manifest themselves in actions such as refusing to use Canadian passports: "They refuse to consent to the apparatuses of the state," and hence refuse "to stop politically being Iroquois."[43] While Mohawk refusals, as articulated by Simpson, are grounded in concepts of sovereignty, this is not language Batek people use. In a context of Indigeneity where the colonial history is distinct, Batek cannot, and do not, refuse the existence of the state, yet there are aspects of Simpson's theory of refusal that resonate here. While Batek acts may not be hidden forms of "resistance" (in Scott's terms), they are an assertion of autonomy and reassertions of the forms of sociality that refusal makes possible. Thus Batek remain a "problem" by simply refusing to stop being Batek, and by refusing to bend their wills and their lives fully to plantation life.[44]

For some, the plantation continues to be a resource, as it was when it was forest. The patches of scrub sometimes left next to rivers are places where useful leaves can still be found. Sometimes, sharing the proceeds gained through plantation labor mitigates its individualizing effects. People may fish in rivers that their parents and grandparents remember as being surrounded by rainforest rather than polluted and surrounded by scrub. Many continue to hunt and gather, digging for tubers and caring for fruits, even when it involves walking miles in the hot plantation under the staring eyes of non-Batek workers before entering the cool of the forest. While this is a refusal that—very viscerally—cannot be complete, it is a way that people persist, incontrovertibly, to be Batek, on their own terms.

One trip to the forest in 2018 with the sisters Naʔ Srimjam and Naʔ Badək was spent walking through the plantation to get to a spot in the forest where flowers grew. Entering the cool noise of the forest after the hot, silent plantation, we walked slowly and purposefully, while alert for scents that may emanate from fragrant flower trees close by. Shouts of excitement went up whenever any of us smelled flowers, before spotting their bright colors way up in the canopy. As we gathered bundles of them, inhaling their scent, they exclaimed that they felt longing for the old times, the old people, the old ways, but also the more recent times even just a few years ago when they had lived elsewhere, closer to the forest and farther from the plantation. Back in the settlement, as we sat there on the ground on sacks that the next day would be used for kernel collection, weaving the flowers into headbands to be worn as crowns, the talk turned to plans. Plans were made to give flowers to Naʔ ʔAlep, who had not yet returned from her day's labor. And plans for the coming days were made: perhaps we could go further into the

42. McGranahan, "Theorizing Refusal," 320.

43. Simpson, "Consent's Revenge," 328; Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 8.

44. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 9.

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forest, to that stream with the clear water? To that place where fruits were close to ripening? Pandanus for weaving mats on which to pour our fruits? To where they'd been when they were children? Maybe there'd be wild tubers, fish. Who has fishhooks? It is in these patchy moments that Batek people's own autonomy is articulated, where people live well, enacting what they see as good and beautiful. The plantation becomes a background hum, even if just for a moment. People ignore that their movement has become constrained, carving out autonomy in a context of extreme precarity.

Just as the plantation is neither quite hero nor villain to Batek, these refusals are when Batek cease to become oil palm's perfect victims. It is these moments that I am often encouraged to share, to teach people that "this is what Batek do," this is "our way of living." This persistence is facilitated by the fact that (at least some of) their forest remains (at least sometimes) accessible to them. By the fact that Batek refuse to live on the estate itself, but remain next to it. By how they retain their community, what they call "our way of living." By how though they have been dispossessed of much of their forest, they are not far from home. They are not quite unfree, although their freedom is curtailed.[45] They have historically been invisible to the plantation complex, and while this meant that their claims to land were never noticed and their forests thus destroyed, it also afforded the political work of maintaining their ongoing autonomy, of saying *ʔipah yeʔ*, "we (exclusive) refuse/don't want/reject." And as they face a new kind of invisibilization, one which seeks to render them indistinguishable from other laboring subjects, refusal is one part of people's strategy for continuing to exist, to survive, to be Batek.

Faced with a lack of representation, fear of speaking out, and a distaste for speaking on behalf of others, people seek diverse strategies for getting by among oil palms. Some have taken up plantation labor gladly. Others work on the plantation because they deem it necessary to survive; "the forest is finished," according to some, and the plantation is one of the only ways to get cash. Others see it as just something to do for now, while they are there; perhaps they will go back to the forest or move to another settlement farther from the plantation "one day." "If there was other work, I'd do it," many men told me. It may be boring, hot, and sometimes dangerous, but this, people must tolerate. Others avoid the work altogether, perhaps because they have found other cash for now. Still more have inhabited each of these different positions (and others) at different times. But in all cases, the existence of the plantation is a given. The framing is not how to defeat it but how to negotiate living well, autonomously, with and despite it—when to refuse, when to acquiesce.

Beyond Hero and Villain

Plantations are racializing assemblages that exist according to logics of exclusion, mastery, control, and optimization, in which some bodies are rendered productive and others

45. Li, "Price of Un/Freedom."

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disposable.[46] These logics are as clear in Malaysia as they are elsewhere, though their contours are distinct. Tania Li, in her book with Pujo Semedi, has defined the plantation as a "machine that assembles land, labor, and capital in huge quantities . . . it takes life under control: space, time, flora, fauna, water, chemicals, people."[47] The challenge I have tried to tackle is to tell the stories of those who dwell in these landscapes without missing the on-the-ground realities of how people manage to survive, to get by, and to live well, all the while without denying the violence of everyday life amid forest loss. Attending to the ambivalences of how Batek people respond to oil palms as uncertain kinds of plants has been one way in which this article has attempted to do this, highlighting how Batek forms of care for plants and people inhere in autonomy not quite removed by the plantation. Despite the significant dispossessory tactics of the plantation, Batek are adept at navigating—through both refusal and acquiescence—the gaps in its ability to take "life under control."[48]

How people navigate these gaps perhaps shows this plantation as less a machine than a "giant," as in Semedi's formulation in the same book: "It is greedy and careless, destroying everything around. It is alien, strange, and unpredictable. . . . You cannot tame it or make it go away. You have to live with it."[49] This reflects Batek strategies for retaining autonomy from coercion, violence, or predation in the time before the plantation arrived—but it also demonstrates the complexities of domination and responses to it. In Batek stories, people constantly outwit and escape from terrifying ghosts, monsters, and strangers who exist in and sometimes intrude upon their forest.[50] One of these is a giant called *hmrɨk*. You know when *hmrɨk* has been close if, when you dig for tubers, there are very few: *hmrɨk* has got there before you. These feared figures like *hmrɨk* are never, however, vanquished, and nor do people attempt this. To avoid luring *hmrɨk* close to you, you should try never to burn your rice; the smell is seductive to them. And if you hear *hmrɨk*, you run away. People have enacted this negotiation (running away, noticing signs, and in turn avoiding notice) for generations in relation to such forest giants. And now these skills become necessary for maintaining autonomy in the face of coercion and violence from another giant: the plantation. However, although fleeing is still a strategy today, both from figures of fear like *hmrɨk* who continue to exist within the forest and from coercive actors within the neighboring plantation, it has become harder as the plantation expands and the forest shrinks. Other kinds of refusals now take precedence: continuing to hunt and gather, skipping work, refusing to eat oil palm,

46. Chao, "Plantation."

47. Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*, vii.

48. This aspect of Batek refusal resonates with what Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter have described as the "plot" in relation to the "plantation" (McKittrick, "Plantation Futures"; Wynter, "Novel and History"). It is "developed within the context of a dehumanizing system" (Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*, 26).

49. Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*, vii.

50. Rudge, *Sensing Others*.

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or refusing to theorize imported plants with the same autonomous care as forest plants. Persisting, in short, with living autonomously in the ways still available.

Batek do not accept their relegation to plantation life. This is not heroic—implying a vanquishing—but persistent: “For people who have been seriously harmed, survival is an accomplishment. They may disappear from public discourse but they persist in living, they endure.”[51] For Batek, life flows along lines of autonomy; it is through autonomy, living alone, making one’s own path, that a life worth living is enacted, persisted with, both among humans and their nonhuman companions. As they negotiate with giants—sometimes acquiescing, sometimes refusing, sometimes yielding, sometimes hardening—Batek people work to keep that autonomy. The plantation is not vanquishable, nor do most imagine vanquishing it. It is not a simplistic villain, and there are spaces for gaps, possibilities, openings, and refusals, alongside times when acquiescence is the only available option. Batek negotiations might be compared to what Li and Semedi, drawing on Wynter, argue regarding the idea of the plantation as a “variegated space”: “People and plants are not quite exterminated; land is not quite emptied; labor is not quite isolated; and plantations are welcomed and opposed by different social forces and nonhuman associates that render them fragile on multiple fronts.”[52] Batek navigate this fragile zone with skill.

Such enactments of autonomy do not easily fit with the hero/villain narratives more common in the palm oil story.[53] To tell this story well is therefore a challenge, particularly for an anthropologist (such as myself) grounded, in both my personal and academic life, in common rhetorics from Global North environmental activism and in scholarship on postcolonial and Indigenous theory, which together create the desire to theorize an “otherwise,” or a solution, when witnessing the cruelty of environmental dispossession. David Scott identified this challenge of centering violence without becoming preoccupied with “exposing the negative structure of colonialism’s power and with demonstrating the colonized’s agency in resisting or overcoming these conditions.”[54] These are Romance narratives that may fetishize overcoming, salvation, and redemption, relying on a utopian—heroic—horizon.[55] But in this problem space, Scott’s tragedy may be more applicable: “Tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous . . . a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies and luck.”[56]

Batek values of autonomy, and the ways they find to negotiate this, are thus not reflected in but are masked by romantic hero and villain categories. Instead, as Chao

51. Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*, 10; Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*.

52. Li and Semedi, *Plantation Life*, 22, 23; Wynter, “Novel and History.”

53. Abu-Lughod, “Romance of Resistance,” 47.

54. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 6.

55. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 8.

56. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 13.

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has argued, while "recognising ethnographic specificity and conceptual transposability is no easy task," it remains essential.[57] Autonomy does not work as a neat dialectic like heroism and villainy, with their manifestations in narratives of environmental protection versus capitalist expansion, development versus backwardness, or power and resistance. Autonomy itself stands alone, and it can involve a diverse array of strategies, negotiations, continency, and luck. Heroism and villainy are categories created by the same contexts of power that inflect how anthropologists witness lived worlds. These contexts of power produce erasures reinforced by the narratives used to respond to them, being as much products of modernity as the contexts that they are applied to. They work to preclude the asking of other questions, the making of other arguments, and the enactment of other possibilities.

When categories of heroism and villainy are destabilized, more subtle forms of negotiation come to light in ways that demonstrate both the situatedness and complexity of plantation domination and the range of alternative modalities that might exist for understanding how people envision their lives in contexts of environmental destruction. Here, autonomy emerges as guiding how people persist amid the cruelty and dispossession of everyday life, as the skills in how to respond to giants developed over centuries by Batek and their ancestors.[58] And as people find themselves and the plants that surround them forced anew to "stay in one place," these skills allow people to persist. They are how you live with a giant, rather than overthrow a machine.

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57. Chao, "(Un)Worlding the Plantationocene," 183.
58. Ortner, "Resistance."

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