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Fieldwork Undone: Knowing Cambodia's Land Grab Through Affective Encounters

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Abstract

Our field research on land conflict in Cambodia was thwarted on multiple fronts. In this paper, we reflect on how our field work was undone and show how this led us to advocate for alternative methodologies for understanding violence in places where long-term ethnography may not be possible. Our assemblage of methods revealed land grabs as more than an object; we instead came to see it as a 'networked object' that is tied into, and made up of, wider webs of power unmoored from the moment of displacement, whose effects travel through bodies and across space. We shifted towards embracing the potency of affective encounters as moments that force us to look, interpret, and think differently. We argue that attention to the feeling and embodiment of everyday encounters can lead to a different understanding of the violence of land conflict; a violence that works through bodies, across space, forecloses futures, and implicates the researcher within this system.

Keywords

Land grabs; feminist methods; affect; emotional geographies; encounter; Cambodia

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Introduction

> I[1] drove along a rough dirt road into a small village in Cambodia's northeast with my team of eight researchers. We parked our motorbikes near the community hall and organised ourselves into pairs to conduct a household survey. The sun was just coming up, and people walked about readying their baskets for harvest and preparing breakfast over small fires. I recognised some people from my visit the previous week when I had met the village chief. But this time the village chief—whom I had made aware of my research permission from higher-level authorities—was nowhere to be seen. We spread out around the village and began conducting our survey interviews, asking people how the influx of land concessions for rubber plantations in the area had changed people's livelihoods. Just ten minutes later, two men drove into the village on a motorbike and pulled up in front of each house in turn, shouting to villagers: "If you talk with them, we will tell the village chief!". People looked at us fearfully and gave hurried apologies as they retreated inside their houses. I called off the survey in that village and we decided to travel straight to our next field site, a village in the neighbouring district.
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> But on our way to the second site we were intercepted by a high-ranking police officer. He asked us to accompany him for a brief chat in his office. I could feel myself shaking as I followed my colleagues slowly toward the police station; I knew researchers who had been threatened with deportation, fined and detained by the police. At the station, the police officer told us he was happy for us to conduct research on land concessions, but he couldn't "guarantee our safety". He then spread a map of the district on his desk, took a pen from a drawer and circled areas where he said he could provide protection. All the circled areas were places where there were no land concessions. He stood up from his desk and stabbed his pen at the village we had hoped to visit. "That area", he said, standing over me and speaking in a low, slow voice, "that area is very dangerous. I don't know what could happen to you if you go there".

Our research in Cambodia—a country known for violent evictions and plantation-fuelled dispossession —was continually shaped by experiences such as the story above. We were not banned from conducting research that day. We could have continued our research in the first village, but the village emptied as people retreated into their houses. We could have negotiated with the police officer, but

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[1] Throughout the article, we offset our field stories to make clearer distinctions when we shift to first person narratives. We present these stories in the first person 'I' for ease, although they come from both authors' experiences.

exactly what line we were transgressing (or could transgress), and what the implications may be, was not clear to any of us. To take heed of the police officer's threat would mean giving up on the possibility of collecting any usable data on land conflict that we felt important for social justice goals; but if we pushed on, we could be expelled from the field, as we saw with the detention of researchers we knew. The stakes are much higher for rural Cambodians who live in areas of land conflict. If they cross the shifting line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, they can be separated from their home and livelihood, denied state development benefits, threatened, abused, and even forced to disappear, as we both experienced when key informant activists fled our research sites in fear of state repression.

Through these experiences, we began to understand how a profound uncertainty is part of everyday violence in land conflict areas in Cambodia. Contrary to a notion of research contexts as 'open' or 'closed', where closure refers to processes of disciplinary power and authoritarian uses of space (Koch 2013), it was precisely the fluidity between moments of closure and possibility that made researching land conflict in Cambodia so difficult. Our research projects were continually disrupted because we—and our research participants—were under surveillance by a network of actors whose position vis-a-vis the land grab was impossible to know. In the face of powerful actors obstructing our research, we struggled to deploy research designs rooted in epistemologies that privileged long-term engagement in sites of land conflict.

But just as fluidity allows for closure, we came to realise that fluidity also allows for the political possibilities inherent in moments of openness. We met regularly in the capital city to swap stories, commiserate over our failures, and strategize how to push on with our projects. These reflections led us to approach fieldwork differently. We saw opportunities to understand the land grab at a distance from the land concession itself when the risks to ourselves and our research participants appeared too great. We learned to go beyond seeing land as a bounded and researchable object, and instead began to engage with land grabs as a 'networked object' (Schoenberger and Beban 2018); that is, an object constituted through a shifting constellation of people and things, as rich literatures on actor networks, assemblage and materiality have explored (Bakker and Bridge 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Latour 2005). Land grabs are networked objects in the sense that they are tied into, and made up of, wider webs of power where international capital articulates with people and processes already embedded in the landscape. Affects "pulse through" networks and constitute their power (Müller and Schurr 2015, 219). As we acknowledged our building sense of fear and the fear we recognised in research participants, we came to understand fear as an effect of land violence that haunted people beyond the site of land grabbing.

We encapsulate the shift in our research approach using Nancy Hiemstra's (2017) metaphor of the 'periscope'. A periscope is a tool constructed through a careful arrangement of mirrors and prisms that allows the viewer to see things beyond the viewer's direct line of sight. Hiemstra uses this metaphor to conceptualise

how research topics that may be obstructed from view, or out of range of more traditional approaches, can be made visible through the creative deployment of a variety of methodologies. "Periscoping", Hiemstra writes, "combines a feminist perspective on the everyday with the recognition that no space, even those intentionally obscured, can be fully contained" (2017, 329). It is this orientation towards overcoming intentional obscurity and the lack of containment that we find useful for understanding land grabs as a networked object. As a network, the land grab is never fully closed, nor is it the same over time. Amid obstructions to our research we found ways to approach the land grab through methodologies that did not depend on constant access to potentially violent field sites. Doing so allowed us to understand how violence worked across space and time. Our use of Hiemstra's periscope extends its reach: periscoping not only reveals cloistered objects through their leakages, it is generative of new epistemologies that allows us to understand the object itself differently—in this case, to gain new insights into the everyday violence of land grabs.

We explore in later sections of this paper one mirror of our periscope, which we term 'affective encounters'. Affects, the "impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think" (Deleuze 2000, 161), are notable as a set of *encountered* signs, contingent across time (Griffiths 2016, 8). For us, attention to affect — understood here as the experience of feeling that cannot be fully represented in words or reflective thought (Anderson, 2012; Lawson, 2007) — reveals the banal violence in areas of land conflict. We found that attending to encounters helped us to overcome barriers to *in situ* knowledge production by offering another pathway: the people who carry embodied experiences, emotions and effects of the land grab with them beyond the site of the grab itself. Encounters are inter-subjective phenomena that produce affects through interactions with others across chance meetings, sensory exchanges, or unexpected confrontations (Faier and Rofel 2014, 1). As we turned to affect, we became more attuned to the ways that uncertainty and fear worked through us and our research interlocutors in different moments and places. This approach recognises that all knowledge is partial and situated (Haraway 1998; Harding 1986; Moss 1993; Rose 1997), and that emotions profoundly shape field experiences and research outputs. Feminist researchers have increasingly acknowledged how the emotionality of ethnographic research shapes their research practice, pushing back against old ideas that writing about emotional experiences undermines scientific credibility (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Caretta and Jokinen 2016; Ross 2015; Smith 2016). For us, incorporating the affective nature of encounters involved opening ourselves to new kinds of knowledge; a knowledge that centred emotional and bodily reactions to the field.

In what follows, we first note the silences within land grab studies on the challenges of researching violent and conflictual processes. We then consider what produces 'closures' in the research environment and how these manifest in Cambodia. We unpack the ways our research was undone and examine what this

'undoing' revealed to us about alternative approaches to fieldwork as we assembled our periscope. Using our periscope, we explore the methodological and epistemological implications of knowing differently by working through encounters. Ultimately, we found that in spaces of conflict, attention to the feeling and embodiment of everyday encounters can lead to a different understanding of the violence of land conflict; a violence that works through bodies, across space, forecloses futures, and implicates the researcher within this system.

Researching the land grab as a partially closed network

Land grab scholarship is at its core about conflict. Property—as a social relation whereby some actors exclude others—is always, in some way, conflictual. Derek Hall (2013, 1592) reminds us that, "taken at face value, 'land grab' straightforwardly (and dramatically) conveys the idea of land being seized by force". Central to land grab studies are processes of dispossession and enclosure, oftentimes tied to acute cases of violent dispossession. In the aftermath of the 2007/08 food, fuel, and finance crises and the associated rise in large scale land acquisitions, scholarly work drew on Marxist political economy traditions to emphasise accumulation by dispossession on a large scale (Hall 2013). This was not the silent violence of capital's expansion and scholars highlighted the active role of state and private sector actors to dispossess people and nature, and the ways in which people and nature fought back (c.f. Borras *et al*. 2011; White *et al*. 2012; Wolford *et al*. 2013; Scoones *et al*. 2013; Keene *et al*. 2015; Schoenberger *et al*. 2017).

Despite grabbing and force lying at its core, the field of land grab studies has given scant attention to the methodological challenges involved in studying them as places and processes inherently shot-through with violence (c.f. Scoones *et al*. 2013). The so-called 'first wave' of land grab research emphasised counting hectares, mapping concessions, and identifying actors and processes driving investments (Borras *et al*. 2011, 211). Efforts to determine what was happening, and where, were partly driven by the urgency felt among NGOs, activists, and development institutions to illuminate this phenomenon in order to take political action. In 2013, agrarian studies scholars called for a second phase of land grab research that "abandons the aim of deriving total numbers of hectares in favour of more specific, grounded and transparent methods" (Scoones *et al*. 2013, 475). Chief in this agenda setting was the need for more ethnographic and historical analyses that can "uncover on-the-ground realities" and case studies that are both "more numerous and more rigorous" (ibid., 495). These are the very things we found near impossible to pursue. What this agenda-setting did not do, then, was to trouble the idea that some of these 'facts' cannot be knowable to researchers or to the people they interview and collaborate with. This omission is all the more pronounced given the tendency for land grabs to occur in disorganised, fragile places with histories of conflict (Borras and Franco, 2011; Cotula *et al*. 2009; Wolford *et al*. 2013, 191; Schoenberger *et al*. 2017, 708-11). The work done in Cambodia (and likely in other places with histories of conflict) to make contentious territory physically inaccessible to researchers, to

prevent researchers from speaking with authorities, to obfuscate who, exactly, are behind deals, and to deflect efforts to gather statistics or quantify the exchanges of hectares and compensation—all this continues to be unaccounted for in the discourse of how to study and know the land grab.

Grounding the network in Cambodia

In a special issue of *Area* (2013, 45.4) Natalie Koch (2013, 390) and collaborators use the term, 'closed contexts', for places that could be referred to as 'illiberal', 'authoritarian', 'non-democratic', or 'coercive', in order to focus on the nature of closure and coercion and to embrace the variety of scales and places at which these practices unfold. They note that "the literature on field methods in geography is almost completely silent" on the unique methodological problems in spaces of closure (391), and yet the research process in closed contexts is fraught by a "culture of fear" (394); a culture that is co-constructed by scholars who are silent on the matter.

We treat Cambodia as a context that is neither fully 'closed' nor 'open', but fluid—where access is uncertain, openings are at times fleeting, and much is obstructed. In this way, we find common cause with Belcher and Martin (2013) who emphasise the "dubiously pervasive 'pockets' of despotism in many 'liberal' and 'democratic' places" (Koch 2013, 392) as key to nuancing discussions and going beyond regime typologies. Attending to closure and openness helps to examine individual practices of governing the self and others "without lapsing into assumption that such practices are everywhere the same in a given country, region or village" (Koch 2013, 392), nor that they are the same over time. Our characterisation of 'the field' is specific to the period we were in it, from 2010 to 2015, and thus we set aside the 2017 shifts towards outright authoritarian rule for discussion at the end of this paper.

In Cambodia, the current predatory neopatrimonial state continues to rely on state practices of previous eras—characterised by mass displacement, genocide, and civil war—as it feeds off resource rents from timber, land and sand (Global Witness 2010; Le Billon 2002; Milne 2015; Un and So 2011). Under the Khmer Rouge regime that took power in 1975, all private property was abolished, and property rights remain murky and contested four decades later (Dwyer 2015). In 1980s Cambodia, as a new post-Khmer Rouge state formed under Vietnamese occupation, the ruling party established tight surveillance at the village level that prevented resistance and channelled resources through shifting, informal networks, which provide the basis for ongoing control (Milne 2015, 42). Since the United Nations-supported shift to an electoral democracy in the 1990s, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have intensified their grip on power through building politico-business networks, in which state officials and business elite are given access to lucrative contracts and land concessions in exchange for loyalty—what scholars have termed a 'neo-patrimonial' or 'shadow state' system (Le Billon 2002; Le Billon and Springer 2007; Un and So 2011). Maintaining informal flows of resources

outside state coffers is imperative, with local village and commune-level chiefs often playing active roles in resource grabbing in connection with higher-level officials and business elite. The fluid "ways in which governmental technologies of openness and closure are strategically woven together" (Koch 2013, 393) under the current electoral authoritarian regime continually reshape the research environment. In 2016, for example, Cambodian officials forcibly deported a Spanish doctoral student who was conducting ethnographic research on urban land grabs in Phnom Penh. The student later wrote a newspaper Op-Ed recalling the way that officials' acts of closure built up over time:

> The police had been very suspicious about me for a while. They took photos of me, they called me by my name, they checked my Facebook, they prevented me from walking freely during Black Monday protests. They even interrogated human rights defenders in detention about me. I decided to keep going (Bujosa Segado, 2016).

The student said police suspicion built up until police detained and beat her. But a senior immigration official denied the allegations, "If we had really kicked her, she would be dead—please, look at her body" (Sek and Wright 2016). Further underscoring how manifestations of closure are difficult to predict, the official said he wanted to confiscate the student's photos because, "We were worried she might be a sorcerer and then take photos to do black magic on our stomachs… Everyone knows the Spanish practice magic" (*ibid.*). Whether this bizarre allegation was an attempt to displace focus on officials' roles in land deals, or whether there was actual concern about black magic, this case had the effect of further increasing uncertainty over how state officials may discipline researchers and with what rationale. This example is also representative of the blurry line between what may be acceptable research practice and what may be cast as illegal. At various moments, embassies in Cambodia[2] advise foreign nationals not to attend protests or public rallies, but researchers like us regularly use their own judgment and attend as onlookers. Since protests are often central to stories of land politics, we have observed such protests, almost always going with another person, and always hyper-aware of the context and mood. This line has shifted considerably. In 2013, rallies and marches were a common sight in the streets of Phnom Penh; now they are risky and partially outlawed.

Within Cambodia's political economy, research on land is particularly fraught as land is central to political and economic control. Land grabs typically take the form of 'Economic Land Concessions' (ELCs), granted by competing ministries to private companies for agri-industrial farming of rubber, sugar, cassava, and fast-growing tree plantations, among others. ELCs now cover vast expanses of territory

[2] We note here that neither of us are citizens of a country with an Embassy in Cambodia.

and are concentrated in upland areas where the conceded land also offers opportunities for logging (Diepart and Sem, 2016; Diepart and Schoenberger 2017). If we understand closure as a "*temporal* act of oppression" (Koch 2013, 392 emphasis in original), the land grab itself is an act of closure of possible futures (Li 2015). Drawing on David Harvey's (2000, 183) notion of closure, we can see plantations as an example of a particular use of space that forecloses others. Land grabs thus close or foreclose futures and "alternative imaginings of subjectivity and political arrangements" (Koch 2013, 392). Concessions are granted on land that rural families live on, or use for farming, grazing livestock, or collecting forest products. Thus, ELCs are often sites of long-running conflicts between the smallholders living there and the powerful networks of political-business-military elite who grant the land, cut the forest, and invest in agribusiness. Smallholders are harassed and intimidated, sometimes reaching crescendo with violent evictions and burning and razing homes, and often result in a slow displacement of households and communities (Connell and Grimsditch 2017).

The resulting concession system is built on multiple levels of government colluding with plantation investors and operates in conjunction with loggers and the illicit timber economy (Milne, 2015). Land deals therefore often have the quality of illicit trade, even if in the bounds of the law, since they are concentrated in areas where property rights are unclear (Springer 2012; 2013; Dwyer 2015). The 'land grab network' connects finance firms to state actors and military cartels, and an enormous amount of work goes into maintaining obfuscation and secrecy over who exactly is involved in the network and how. Importantly, even the legal system, the courts, and government authorities of all kinds—the very actors that people should be able to turn to seek redress—are not outside the system but integrated into it. One farmer described his local chief as "two-faced" because the chief "supports the company, but he also tries to talk with the people here" (farmer, 50s, 18.12.14). Another farmer said angrily, "the people who are supposed to help us to solve the problems, they are the ones perpetrating this because it benefits them" (man, 40s, 20.8.14). This uncertainty over where people stand foments distrust and suspicion among people who live in land grab areas. Entering land conflict areas meant repackaging our research to emphasise non-contentious aspects (for more detail see Schoenberger and Beban 2017). But we found that even when we framed our scholarship through less politicised concerns such as livelihood studies or value chains—all seemingly innocuous subjects—these topics became imbued with danger and fear because even 'innocuous' topics are implicated in land grab networks.

We began researching land grabs in 2010, after several years conducting academic and NGO research and working with development agencies in Cambodia. Our research projects sought to understand the socio-political implications of a pre-election land tenure reform that rolled out private land titles for people living in areas with ELCs. We worked on independent projects for our PhD dissertations, conducting ethnographic research for around two years in different parts of the country where land conflicts were prevalent. We also collaborated with think-tanks,

NGO networks, and research institutions to pursue collaborative research in parallel with our dissertation projects. Our methodological toolkits included participant observation of agrarian labour and community meetings; conducting participatory group meetings; interviewing landholders, labourers, government authorities, NGO and community network representatives, and company managers; and multi-sited surveys in communities situated within or near plantations. Our combined research experiences cover eleven of Cambodia's twenty-five provinces, spanning the ecologically diverse coastal areas, central plains, and highlands -- all areas where ELCs are prevalent. Although we didn't know each other when we began fieldwork, we became fast friends and we met frequently to commiserate over the fieldwork closures we experienced and to develop new approaches to fieldwork. This paper developed over our frequent discussions from 2014-18. We turn now to the way the pervasive atmosphere of distrust, uncertainty and suspicion in land conflict areas shaped our research.

How our fieldwork came undone

We sought to mitigate potential harm to ourselves and our research participants by carefully negotiating research partnerships and field access and by deploying a range of methods. Both of us chose field sites located within ELCs, with active social movements, and where a land titling campaign had taken place the preceding year. We also chose places that were not connected to well-known tycoons or investors from the military, to minimise the likelihood of disruptions to in-depth research. Both of our proposals were reviewed by our universities' ethics boards and approved. We assumed that our efforts to build relationships, negotiate permission to access the field, and our site selection would allow us to undertake grounded fieldwork on land and property relations with some degree of routine and predictability. We also assumed that any closures of the research space would be clear dictates (such as instructions to leave research sites or the revocation of visas) that would be unambiguous in their implications. But we found that our efforts to conduct research in land conflict areas were constantly thwarted. This sometimes meant that we were caught off-guard months into data collection. There was a disjuncture between what we had prepared for via institutionalised ethical frameworks focused on generalised online risk surveys, and the everyday practice of negotiated ethics and good practice in the field that is "always contextual, relational, embodied, and politicized" (Sultana 2007: 383). Our ongoing support in judging and negotiating the field came primarily from each other, from fellow researchers, and from our supervisory committees.

In this section, we describe the ways in which our research was 'undone' through constant small acts —threats, rumour, silences, surveillance, unusual questions, hints— that did not fully close the research space, but generated uncertainty in us and our research teams about what was possible, and caused us to self-censor and re-direct our research efforts. Our focus on 'undoing' is part of a growing literature on fieldwork failure, which problematises the masculinist

underpinnings of the discipline and recognises that failure is a central component of geographical research (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Harrowell, Davies and Disney 2017). Here, we use the term 'undone' rather than 'failed' to recognise failure as a dynamic process that can unfold through ongoing, mundane moments of discomfort and uncertainty (Woon 2013) as well as spectacular moments of rescinded access and abandoned field sites (Harrowell, Davies and Disney 2017). Our research unravelled through repeated blocks in the field that began to elicit more intense affective responses.

Fieldwork failures can cause researchers to feel ashamed, uncertain, and deeply fearful; and processes of failure can be dangerous and violent. Some bodies are more precarious than others. While foreign researchers may be forced to abandon field sites and fly home, our Khmer research colleagues risked much greater consequences: Khmer researchers and journalists are routinely threatened, detained, and have been beaten and killed. Research on land grabs is particularly difficult; even the experienced Khmer researchers we worked with (including those from the research areas with deep knowledge of local customs) found that their ability to conduct research in land conflict areas was in flux and the cultural codes they possessed to navigate 'the field' were not working.

Uncertain access

While other post-socialist states in Southeast Asia have formalised procedures for research permission (Turner 2013), in Cambodia there is no clearly outlined procedure for citizens and non-citizens to conduct research. At the time we began research, Cambodia was relatively open to researchers and to freedom of expression (including a lively NGO sector and independent media), an anomaly when compared to some of Cambodia's Southeast Asian neighbours. Government approval for research was not legally required, but officials often expected us to have some form of permission, which we each negotiated differently from various government offices. The lack of formalised procedures allows the researcher some flexibility when organising fieldwork, but it also means that field access must be continually negotiated on the ground. In effect, flexibility concentrates power in the hands of the local officials/police with whom the field worker is dealing. These gatekeepers maintain subtle pressure and surveillance over researchers, contributing to ongoing insecurity for the researcher. For example, one of us used an official request from the funder's embassy to negotiate research permission from a high-ranking provincial official. But instead of writing a letter of permission that could be shown to lower-level authorities, the provincial official insisted the researcher call him when she wanted to access different villages in the area. He would then call the local officials each time. In this way, the provincial government sought to maintain constant power and surveillance over the researcher's access to new field sites.

Power holders closer to the village-level also acted to undo the research. Although village and commune-level officials recognised the authority of those higher up the chain, and often gave our research their blessing, they also reinforced

uncertainty over the broader research process. Hinting at closure was often subtly done through impromptu, provisional practices such as ignoring requests for interviews, intimidating villagers into remaining silent, delaying official procedures, or spreading rumours rather than any coherent state practice (Belcher and Martin 2013, 409). In this way, "merely 'gaining access' misses the performative, embodied and affective ways" that local power holders mediate access to information, people and places (Belcher and Martin 2013, 408). It is through continually encountering state agents that the symbolic boundaries of state power are reproduced. Our carefully planned research designs, surveys, interviews and sites of long-term ethnography unravelled over time as state officials and other power holders enacted small practices of closure, heightening our general uncertainty over what kind of research was possible in this space.

Obscuring ethnography, interviews and observations

The subjectivities of our research participants—including friends who we came to know over months of ethnographic fieldwork—shifted unexpectedly in the fearful environment of the land grab, making the long-term trusting relationships that are so valuable for ethnographic work difficult. Subject positions were not clear cut; while it was more likely that a powerful actor like a commune chief or wealthy businessman would be involved in land deals, we also encountered monks, teachers, and farmers—even one of our hosts—secretly brokering land for concession/logging companies that dispossessed other local people. Even community activists who spent years protesting land grabs were accused of land grabbing. Accusations that an individual may be up to more-than-meets-the-eye could be accurate since a core strategy used by state-affiliated actors to neutralise activists is to 'buy them off' (Beban *et al*. 2017). This occurs through bribes, paying children's tuition fees or other substantial 'gifts', or offering salaried government positions in exchange for the individual ceasing their activism. Rumours constantly swirled, and people's shifting subjectivities made it impossible for us, and for people living in these spaces, to know where people stood at any one time. Uncertainty over actors and their intentions produced intense fear for people in our field sites and caused people to discipline their behaviour and distrust others.

The overall uncertainty over where any person stood at any one time put us in the difficult position of potentially aligning ourselves with people who others might come to see as untrustworthy. For example, one of us stayed with a well-known local activist during our village visits. Six months into the research, her host was accused of selling out. This accusation carried such weight that it began to undo the researcher's other relationships with people in the activist network. Members of the network even asked the researcher to surveil their accused collaborator. Through experiences like these, we found that trust between ourselves and research participants was an ongoing challenge, and we had to reckon with the instability of contextual knowledge we had built over time.

Fieldwork Undone

Interviews and ethnographic observations were core to our research design, yet these too were undone by the operations of the land grab network. Key stakeholders evaded our requests for conversations, interviews, village records, and so on. Their evasion strategies were often less a matter of clear refusal to be interviewed than deferring or avoiding planned meetings, often stating "I'm too busy to meet". Being "too busy" could be uttered while lounging in a hammock, seated in an empty office, or drinking coffee alone outside the local cafe. The repeated refrain of "too busy" showed how closure is enacted through the subtleties of "a deferred decision, a question ignored in the hopes of its disappearance" (Belcher and Martin, 2013, 409). And when we got past "too busy", new difficulties arose. In one instance, a village chief agreed to an interview after one of us produced a signed permission letter from higher officials. He answered all the interview questions, but he did the entire interview perched at the edge of a bed frame with his back to the researcher. She pressed on with the interview, unsure if his position was a matter of physical comfort, a personality quirk, or if he was moments away from turning around. Yet he never did turn to face the interviewer. In retrospect, and with the totality of the interaction to consider, his stance seemed like a form of bodily protest. And yet this was an individual with a great deal of local power, including the power to shut the research down, and the chance to interview him seemed 'too good' to throw away. This was the only interview of a village chief she conducted.

Observations were also challenged on multiple fronts. Company security forces obstructed roads, villages were under surveillance, and while people sometimes encouraged us to attend community festivals and meetings, they seemed uneasy with our attendance at other times. In areas close to ELC boundaries, even observations of everyday activities such as rice planting and gathering firewood were tense as company security could intimidate us by watching us and our participants and by questioning our intentions. Sometimes we withdrew from situations we deemed too risky. Other times, community members asked us to accompany them to specific places to bear witness to, and take photographic evidence of, clear-cut forests, company logging machinery, recently burned homes, and new plantation zones. In response to these requests, we sometimes went unimpeded, and other times community members chose to disguise us using typical farming clothes, along with gloves and face masks to hide our whiteness, and then sent us on the backs of motorbikes driven by local men that would swiftly race through back roads to avoid security. As with the methodological challenges we faced in interviews and surveys, we were rarely fully excluded from observing, but we could not enter observation areas with any predictability.

Nagging rumours and hints of constant surveillance fuelled our sense of overwhelming uncertainty and caused us to censor our activities. State actors as well as individuals whose subjectivities were harder to position appeared to be watching us, as this story shows:

> When my supervisor came to visit we took the opportunity presented by a hired car to get an overview of where forests had been, where

> plots had been titled and where land had been seized by the concessionaire. The community representative assigned us a guide to accompany us in the car. Mid-way through twisting back roads along a former plantation, I realised the guide had been recording us with a simple Nokia handphone. Moments later he received a call. The short call included mention of what we had seen and the types of questions we asked. I was too nervous to ask a direct question about whom he had spoken to on the phone. I was never certain who was interested in our drive around the village, but a government official seemed most likely since the majority of the village did not have mobile phones.

Repeated small acts such as this covert recording did not in themselves prevent us doing research. But what may seem like 'trivial' matters can signal something more serious (Gentile 2013: 429). Over time our discomfort and fear built up.

Disruptions to sampling strategies and survey work

In our quantitative work, we selected field sites according to different criteria than our dissertation research. In one survey investigating the factors associated with smallholders' access to land title, the survey team used a five-stage cluster sampling with proportionate probability, with the goal of a random, somewhat representative sample of a targeted 600 households. But when we reached the stage of village selection, the land grab network started to undo our research design. Local police turned away survey teams, and state officials warned that the research was too risky, causing the team to turn to provincial NGOs to help with village selection. The NGOs' assistance, however, resulted in an over-representation of villages with NGO support, and reduced our ability to determine the overall likelihood of accessing the titling campaign. In another case, one of us designed a large survey in an ELC area with the aim to include both communities that had retained their land and those with significant land loss. Out of seven villages the survey team visited, however, state officials and company personnel shut down or severely impeded the research in four villages (described in the opening vignette of this article).

Leaving the site

> *At some point it becomes wise to abandon the ship before it sinks, especially if there are more passengers* (Gentile 2013, 432).

Neither of us were ever fully excluded from a research site, but we both abandoned survey sites and had colleagues who abruptly left. One of us decided to leave her whole study region after she was followed into a cafe, photographed and then visited by state officials at night at her home in a provincial town—a visit which conveyed a "'we-are-watching-you' message" (Gentile 2013, 430). We found that while occasional acts of physical violence or confrontation may shock, hints are often subtle, and fear builds up over time, even if we tried to suppress it. One of us recalls, for example, the moment that her research colleague quit after several months

of expressing concern about the possibility that they were under surveillance. What made him quit was not any particular moment of threat, but rather an ongoing barrage of rumours and hinting:

> Rumours circulated that the village chief was cracking down on activists, and researchers might also be implicated. A local opposition party activist was run off the road while riding his motorbike. People made small comments over coffee about "having to be careful".

Rumours like these were the primary way that local people suggested at, and communicated to one another, the (possible) actions of the network of politico-business elite that controlled land in ELC areas. Assessing risk is difficult in environments of secrecy and obfuscation because, as Gentile (2013, 427) notes in regard to post-Soviet spaces, "the 'organs' ... prefer keeping their activities in the dark". Similar to the way respondents in Clark's (2006, 418) survey of academics working in the Middle East recognised the 'looming smell' of the secret police, rumours and feelings were part of people's repertoire for living within the ELC. They were also part of a generalised fear that was only occasionally punctuated by acts of physical violence, and this fear meant that small acts could trigger intense affective reactions:

> My colleague became increasingly withdrawn. He grew fidgety during afternoon interviews, abruptly ending conversations so we could get home during the daylight. One evening we were held up later than usual with an interview and didn't get on the road until dark. As I held onto him on the back of our motorbike, I could feel his body tense and he repeatedly looked behind us, making the motorbike swerve alarmingly. The next morning he was gone. He called me from the city and said he had decided to quit.

Moments of 'undoing' reverberated differently, but lingered and reinforced one another. We struggled to figure out what the research could look like and how we could work in a situation where things were never clear. Decisions over whether to leave were difficult because it was never entirely clear whether the field was safe—for us, for our research teams (for whom the risk was likely much greater), or for the people who participated in the research (who faced the most acute risk of any of us)—and thus any evaluation of risk was impossible to pin down. Leaving also leads to more questions: if we walk away (as we both did at different times), do we then seek out 'safer' areas? What does this mean for research motivated by social justice goals?

Our feelings of frustration and confusion were productive, however, because it helped us to find the limitations of an agrarian studies approach that we could apply. The 'undoing' of our research taught us that fear and obfuscation contour encounters with the field and, resultantly, our understanding of land grabs and land violence. Moments of openness, however, enabled us to deploy creative strategies to work through these obstructions. It is this productive aspect of fieldwork failure that

deserves more attention amongst geographers. Failure has a subversive, deeply political potential; as Halberstam (2011, 2) argues, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world". As our research was undone, we began to embrace the uncomfortable, uncertain and emotional, and this helped us understand the lived experience of land grabs in a different way.

Nevertheless, we persisted

In the face of mounting closures—both enacted and suggested—our strategies shifted towards finding openings through which we could continue to pursue research on aspects of the land grab network. Serendipitous encounters shaped our research in profound ways. In mid-2014, we were both hit by a series of setbacks to our research projects within weeks of one another. We decided to take a break from fieldwork to attend an academic conference (the Southeast Asian Geographers Association) held in a small Cambodian city full of backpackers. Tellingly, many scholars of Cambodia working on contentious issues opted not to present at the conference, but our attendance facilitated a string of rich, sometimes hushed, encounters over several days during coffee breaks, lunches and collegial dinners. We heard tales of the disorienting effects of uncertainty from other researchers working on resource conflict. Over one coffee break we swapped stories with a fellow foreign researcher until she exclaimed, "Yes! They make us act like criminals!" with a tone of exasperated frustration.

We also found ways through the impasse in our chance encounters at this conference. We attended one session simply because we had sat with the presenter at the buffet lunch the previous day. The topic seemed unrelated to our research, yet this session sparked a rapid-fire reflection of our own field experiences. Mark Griffiths (2014) spoke about the political potential of volunteering he saw in the affective intensity of embodied encounters between volunteers and hosts. He spoke in a calm, quiet voice, telling a story rich in subtleties in which he slowed down moments of encounter to detail their fullness. Sometimes the disruptive power of affective stories or testimonies can connect with conference-goers, rupturing the typical academic tempo of PowerPoints delivered with a voice of dynamic authority (Roelvink 2016). This presentation enlivened our thinking about affect, previously informed by heavy theory, and remade affect as a form of storytelling, a way of seeing, and constitutive of an alternative epistemology with political potential. We took stock of the obstructions we faced and what they communicated to us about the state's reach and the murkiness of land grab networks. And we started to undertake our own mini 'affective turn', revisiting our fieldwork and re-tuning our orientation.

In this section we delve into the ways we assembled periscopic lenses, mirrors and prisms (Hiemstra 2017) to build a creative methodological strategy in response to our experiences. We adapt Hieeimstra's (2017) metaphor of the 'periscope' by using 'lenses' to refer to the more traditional agrarian studies methods we set out to employ, like interviews and observation; 'mirrors' to refer to how we

integrated our own embodied experiences of fear into the design; and 'prisms' to refer to the insights offered by affective encounters, a constellation we unpack and explain below.

Hiemstra's (2017) metaphor of the periscope provides a heuristic device to constructively think through our reorientation to the field and a modality for working around obstruction. Researchers build a periscopic approach by assembling a set of tools that together can produce "a picture of elements" that had previously been illegible because data may not have been readily available or accessible. Periscoping allowed us to "pursue topics of study seemingly hidden behind masculinist barriers or lifted out of range on scaffoldings of power" because it serves as a tool that allows the viewer to see things out of her direct line of sight (*ibid*., 329). As our research methodologies were undone, we loosened the constraints of what we judged to be possible sites and moments through which we may better understand the land grab and considered how to assemble moments and fragments of insights. Turning to the pursuit of the "fragmentary present" and "pairing the reflections and refractions" with other sources of data (*ibid*., 330, 239), we assembled an approach to access knowledge on the land grab. Using this approach, we began to see the periscope as not just a methodological intervention to access knowledge of the land grab, but an epistemological one too.

We put our periscope into practice to understand land grabs at a distance from the physical concession itself, and this effort revealed land grabs to be a networked object. We saw that serendipitous encounters in city streets, cafes and Buddhist temples revealed moments to understand grabs and struggles in sites distant from dispossession. We put our periscope together by carefully collecting, assembling, and adjusting the lenses: Doing observation and interviews at public spaces such as wet markets where farmers gathered to sell produce revealed how land dispossession was tied into broader chains of food distribution and consumption. Involvement in NGO, activist, and donor-affiliated research projects allowed us to gather larger datasets through quantitative surveys and to access high-ranking and influential persons. Work on collaborative projects and alliances yielded access to key players and the chance to develop activist scholarship in new directions through participation in workshops and policy forums. Building friendships with journalists meant we could hear additional stories about shadowy figures that didn't make it to print, while media reviews gave access to political speeches and reactions of top-ranking officials to ongoing domestic tensions. One of us found herself uncertain of continuing fieldwork at several sites as she felt marked by state surveillance and likely to draw unwelcome attention. Instead, she directed her attention to studying the people and objects that travelled from the sites of land grabs, and the encounters between urban state officials and community land activists who had marched from rural areas. She traced the state surveillance that followed protesters (and herself) into town cafes and city streets, revealing the reach of the land grab network. At the same time, these encounters offered the opportunity to reach towards knowing sites from which she had been turned away by local officials (Schoenberger 2017).

Bringing fragments together to construct a narrative requires analytical work. By combining various forms of data from different spaces, encounters and methods, we were able to link what may appear to be eclectic moments to gradually map some of the ways in which the land grab (and the related system of conferring property rights) operates through networks that foster uncertainty and fear in rural populations. In this work of construction, we attended to affective encounters as moments in which the land grab overflows time and space so that it leaks out of obscured sites.

Working through affective encounters

As we became increasingly attuned to how the effects of the land grab travelled along with embodied experiences, emotions and people on the move, we began to focus on the affective intensity of everyday encounters as a set of mirrors and prisms that we assembled, alongside other ways of knowing, and constantly readjusted as we experienced research openings and closures (Hiemstra 2017, 330). This approach, that we term 'affective encounters', asks the researcher to be open (or 'attuned') to the affects that are produced in and through the research process. Our attention to everyday affective encounters builds on a rich history of feminist geographers who have emphasised the importance of scrutinising the everyday for understanding power (Rose 1993, Hiemstra 2017), and the way space is produced through relationships that can extend across space and time (Massey 2005; Hiemstra 2017). Our focus on encounters also entailed engaging our bodies as tools in the research process (Dyck 2011), a scale of analysis "often overlooked by traditional research methods... as too banal or private to merit consideration" (Hiemstra 2017, 330). We found that bringing the scale of the body into the assemblage revealed "processes, relationships and experiences otherwise obstructed" (Mountz 2004, 328).

Working through affect raises questions about what we can know, and whether and how we can "simultaneously identify with, and recognise as different from ourselves, the others on whose experiences we draw" (Bondi 2003, 67). We are certainly not suggesting that our feelings of fear mark our experiences and emotions as equivalent to those of Cambodian researchers, farmers, or activists. Instead of assuming identification with others, focusing on affect produced through encounter may allow for a certain empathy (Watson 2012; Woon 2013), or "affinity" (Haraway 1991), with its potential to transcend the split of subject and object. This potential is rooted in the understanding that our embodied experiences and identities shape, but do not determine, affect; rather, affect is produced, spread, and subverted in intersubjective encounters that resonate through the social body rather than existing within the individual (Ahmed 2004). Researching affect therefore demands attention to the spatiality of encounter, as we use more than our rational capacities to interpret our research participants' tone, gestures, silences, facial movements etc., as well as sensing how our own emotional responses arise and shift in our encounters with research participants in particular spaces. Sensing the way emotional intensities

travel across space and stick to objects, binding subjects together (Ahmed 2004, 119), showed us how the land grab worked to discipline people in different spaces within and beyond the site of the grab, as fear and uncertainty are re-placed in specific encounters. This opens a way of thinking about methodological approaches to land violence that operate from multiple spaces rather than from the site of land violence itself.

Treating our embodied experiences of fear as one mirror of the periscope, or one way of knowing, allowed us to better understand how fear is embodied in encounters among the researcher and others, how it manifests in conversations, and how it travels in groups and crowds. We came to recognise how intense affects such as shock, surprise, or fear can arise in exceptional moments of trauma, but they can also be a core element of the everyday. Recall, for example, that police and state officials appeared unannounced at one of our homes. After this, she became much more attuned to the ways that violence ripples through everyday life:

> While having a coffee with another female researcher who had been intimidated and detained for her research on land conflicts, the sound of an electronic camera shutter flickered and I jumped. My friend flashed a teasing grin as I sat up to scan the room only to slump down again once I realised that it was simply another patron snapping a selfie with their iced coffee and not, as I realised only once I had settled down, someone documenting our rendezvous to report to authorities. The intensity with which I startled struck my friend as funny at first, until she remembered that she had cycled away furiously from a uniformed parking guard trying to hand her a parking slip because she had at first thought it was the police reaching out to catch her. This brought us pause, as we started to think about the way state intimidation had altered our everyday conduct in the aftermath and far away in the capital city.

In the physicality of that moment, the jolt caught us off guard. Communicating on a nonverbal channel (Griffiths 2016), it revealed to the two of us that we were marked by experiences with the state that were not so easy to shake off and that were not necessarily easy to narrate. This embodied reaction also revealed a line of thought that resonated further as phone calls from unidentified people persisted for days afterward. When we assembled this prism of the periscope in constellation with other methods, it revealed the inconspicuous and capricious workings of the land grab network. All of a sudden, the way that community leaders, activists, and development workers repeatedly complained to us that they received too many phone calls made sense in an entirely new way as we realised that repeated phone calls could be a violent act. Moments like these engendered a new awareness that caused us to revisit past conversations in which fixations on seemingly banal occurrences had seemed out of place, repeated and oddly emphasised. We realised we had missed the way these accounts mattered. This realisation opened a different epistemology for understanding the violence enacted in land grabs in the way that it

moves through our bodies and others' bodies beyond the site of the land grab and along connections to collective memories, anxieties, and surveillance networks that further shift across space and time (Schoenberger and Beban 2018). This approach forced us to confront our embodied presence in the field (as white women) and the tensions we experienced as we sought to bear witness to violence, and to protect our research participants and ourselves.

This awareness also caused us to examine the way that threats and intimidation are directed differently to differently situated actors, and in particular, how threats and intimidation are gendered as women defy the land grab network and masculine state power (Kent 2014; Lamb *et al*. 2017; Lilja 2008). Women have been threatened, intimidated, detained and legal tools have been deployed against them, notably urban land activists like Tep Vanny and the Boueng Kak 15 (see Brickell 2014). The cases drawn from foreign researchers presented in this paper—which all detail women's experiences of intimidation in the field—also suggests that state authorities and security forces, who are almost always men, do not have a problem with intimidating or incarcerating defiant women. Female researchers in cross-cultural settings are exposed to greater risks and must navigate complex power hierarchies, as "gender alone can put female field researchers in subordinate positions relative to men, in a way that effectively trumps their cultural power" (Ross 2015, 182). To reckon with these challenges, Ross (2015) asserts that gendered risks must not be approached as "one woman's account of a singular act" but rather as an example of experiences that are part of women's everyday lives (Moss 1995, 447).

Political possibilities of working through encounter

Incorporating affective encounters into our assembled methodologies meant not only attending to fear, but also to moments of hope. Hiemstra (2017, 332) frames periscoping as "an activist methodology in step with long-standing feminist goals, an intentionally political strategy that seeks to interrogate power relations and disrupt epistemic violence" (332). In the same way that the periscope pushes back against obstruction, the encounters that produce anxiety, fear, and uncertainty also have the potential to generate hope and new articulations of power (Wilson, 2017, 7), for affect has an autonomy that can never fully be captured (Massumi 1995). "The temporality and the quality of affects—and the ways that these two properties come together in the opening (or closing) of certain political agencies" (Griffiths 2016, 8) raises the question: What are the political possibilities of knowing through encounters?

We found an answer to this question by participating in, feeling, and documenting encounters that work to subvert uncertainty, fear, and violence. As one example, one of us attended meetings of a community activist network that brought people from ELC areas together in a nearby town NGO office. In late 2014, the activist network held an emergency meeting to discuss fears about a new irrigation project that threatened to submerge people's rice fields. No one knew precisely who

was involved in the irrigation project, what the construction was for, or what land would be taken, but rumours flew:

> The three-day meeting of around forty people grew increasingly quiet as, one by one, people talked about their fear that they would lose their land. No one was sure how to respond; it all seemed too overwhelming. On the second afternoon, the head of the community network stopped the meeting and put on some music. She persuaded people to start dancing, and we all struggled up and joined in a Khmer folk dance in an unruly circle around the room and onto the courtyard outside. I felt awkward at first and confused (why are we dancing when there are serious issues to discuss?), but I let myself be dragged into it and my jerky hand movements slowly relaxed into the music. After an hour of dancing, people took turns at singing, performing improvised songs about the community, their love for the forest and for the people in the network. The words themselves were of less importance in that moment than the collective affect that was produced. As it went on, I realised that the dancing and singing was a conscious effort to produce a feeling of community that resisted fear and uncertainty through its collaborative performance. I felt a release of tension that I didn't know I had been holding. Across the collective a qualitatively different atmosphere seeped in and took hold. That evening, people worked in small groups to devise strategies of resistance to the project. The groups spread out on the floor; laughter and loud conversations punctuated the space.

Such an intervention may seem trivial if viewed in isolation. But these moments of affective intensity extend capacities in unpredictable ways (Gibson-Graham 2006). As Griffiths (2016, 6) notes in a discussion about the affective power of music and dance to bring people together, it is such moments of intimacy that "renders the world sensual, cutting loose—momentarily—structural impositions and attendant constructions of identity". Such light-hearted moments of possibility may not disrupt the likely eventualities of the land grab "but more important is that these moments take place despite such messy actualities" as they build the 'glue of solidarity' (Griffiths 2016, 7). We suggest that this encounter demonstrated a different kind of power and hope which, as researchers working through encounter, we also have a responsibility to recognise and take seriously.

Conclusion

The ways the land grab network worked to undo our research was transformative, not just of our research design and the methodological tools we deployed, but also of what we understood to be 'the land grab'. As our orientation shifted towards a methodological assemblage inclusive of affective encounters, we embraced the ways that a singular chance meeting holds deep potential for understanding violence. Encounters—intended, unplanned, and wholly

spontaneous—reoriented us epistemologically and exposed us to fresh academic approaches. The social world described in this paper is full. Its fullness is made up of co-researchers, friends, colleagues, and teammates; state officials from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom; everyday farmers, community leaders, and activists. All of our encounters layered and interlaced with one another so that taken together they formed the arrangement of lenses, mirrors and prisms of our periscope. We re-tooled our periscope to fully account for the richness of encounters and re-trained it to study what constitutes a land grab so that we came to see the phenomena differently. What we ultimately encountered was a grab unmoored from the moment of displacement, no longer confined to the boundaries of a polygon on a map; a grab that travelled instead through bodies and across space.

Our intervention focuses on researching land conflict, but broadly resonates with scholarship on fieldwork in violent contexts, which is criticised for not offering a "conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding the difficulties it entails, or a proposal for how to use them in order to further our knowledge of these phenomena" (Maček 2014, 2). In partially closed research contexts like Cambodia, where access is uncertain, openings are fleeting, and much is obstructed, we suggest that researchers work to prepare ourselves (and our students) to consciously embark on fieldwork open to encounters that may overflow and deviate from the research design with which we set out. Focusing on encounters "that confronts, engulfs and even overwhelms us" (Drewsbury and Naylor 2003, 286), and creatively assembling a collection of lenses, mirrors and prisms also means accepting that research is always unpredictable and the researcher must always be on her toes. Approaching the field through attention to affective encounters means embracing the uncomfortable and the unexpected and working to learn about the object of our research by facing the feel of things.

Looking ahead

Since submitting this paper Cambodia has changed yet again, making a "descent into outright dictatorship", as the final headline of the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper declared. In the lead up to the 2018 election, the ruling party dissolved the main opposition party and arrested the party's leader, shut down NGOs and independent media outlets, and stepped up surveillance and detainment of activists. Our reviewers invited us to extend our analysis to this current conjuncture. In late 2017, we had the opportunity to return to Cambodia for new research but deemed it too risky to our interlocutors, and too volatile to make informed decisions. Instead we assembled a new periscopic approach that involved working collaboratively, but from a distance, by assembling media analysis, skype and phone interviews with people in Cambodia and those making asylum claims abroad (Schoenberger *et al.* 2018). We cannot be sure if the current crackdown will be a moment of closure or a new normal, but the turn to outright authoritarianism is likely to accentuate the challenges we faced, to expand the list of 'risky' research topics, and to intensify the risks for Cambodians who speak with researchers. Thus, attention to the feel of

things, to the subtleties of encounters, and to creatively assembled methodologies is ever more important.

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