

# BOOK REVIEW

**Thomas Hendriks. *Rainforest Capitalism: Power and Masculinity in a Congolese Timber Concession*.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 320 pp. Note on Photography. Notes. References. Index. \$104.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1478015239.

Thomas Hendriks' compelling book is an intricate tale of felled trees and their capitalist value, of the inhabitants of logging camps such as Congolese labourers and expat managers, but also of jobseekers, traders, prostitutes, farmers, and smugglers. *Rainforest Capitalism: Power and Masculinity in a Congolese Timber Concession* is eloquent and captivating; it takes the reader into the dense forest of Congo where enormous trees, gigantic tractors, and intricate encounters and their affects make up the landscape of a logging concession. *Rainforest Capitalism* exposes an erudite mind.

The usual approach to the topic of what is commonly framed as racial extractive capitalism is clear; not only the forests are exploited but also the communities and a larger chain of dependents. While many studies analyze the inherent violence underlying the logic of current extractive capitalism, Hendriks eruditely and carefully challenges such representations of corporate strength. He takes up the multifaceted character of capitalism, not only by examining the everyday lives of loggers and their families, but also by concentrating on the lives of the expat workers. He draws out the commonality between these differently located groups rather than presenting them as being in opposition. His particular method of focusing on their commonality of feelings and affects is perceptive, and daring. Life is murky, for all of the groups albeit in different ways, and life connects, albeit in unequal ways. Such an approach is not intended to relativize the exploitations, but rather it is an invitation to look at exploitation from within.

In other words, the book is an evocative argument against seeing capitalism as the strong and phallic monster that we "love to hate," in Hendriks' words. He invites us to do so by a sophisticated argument. First, we need to be less suspicious. This sounds truly odd in this contemporary moment of post-truth claims, rampant aggression between groups and nations, and general malaise about the well-being of the climate and the earth. Yet, being less suspicious helps us to move beyond self-evident truths,

such as that capitalism can only be understood as monstrous. It is not that capitalism is not monstrous, but that we must not rely on notions such as that power is unambiguous. More precisely, Hendriks argues that we must “refuse strength as a standard,” as this will open a vista of how capitalism functions as a web of dependencies. This is not intended to expose, but to comprehend the murky entanglements of how life in a capitalist venture unfolds. Refusing strength as a standard is an unusual step which Hendriks proposes, as we are accustomed to seeing monsters as potent beings. In contrast, he proposes not to understand our topics by emasculating them but by queering them.

This is a bold and titillating move, particularly as Hendriks breaches an old capitalist and feminist debate about power. His writing demands: how to write without reducing the topic to what we think we already know? That is, that power is subjugating and therefore we know the outcome of what we study: that power subjugates. Hendriks analyzes power beyond the usual binary of dominance and resistance and, instead, he shows how those two are fictions of our own analysis, which actually naturalize dominance. Here he takes a position by writing “against producing strong theory.” So *Rainforest Capitalism* proposes a different relation to power, from the position of vulnerability, of weakness, of instability, refusing the masculinist standard of strength. In other words, he analyzes the cracks in the monster called capitalism. In an exciting move, Hendriks connects logging with the erotic by radically re-thinking desire beyond the limiting framework of “sexuality.”

*Rainforest Capitalism* is built on the concept of “ecstasy.” Hendriks broadens the notion of ecstasy beyond its focus on the spectacular, the altered state of consciousness, and moments of frenzy to include the mundane affects and lingering moods of “being out of control” that many interlocutors shared. The logging world is rife with paranoia, and ecstasy is a fundamental reality of life. Hendriks hence proposes ecstasy as an analytical way to think *with*, not *about* people. This approach enables him to see the commonalities between the different groups, and he shows that commonality does not undermine but rather reproduces racism, misogyny, inequality. This is truly insightful and provocative, as thinking in differences has come to dominate many debates.

Thinking with people also presupposes a merging, a deeper participation, giving rise to erotic encounters, and here again commonality appears. Hendriks writes about his own fears and even paranoia during the research, and so positions himself not as the anthropologist expert but as a subject in the research, one subject among many. As he writes, this approach raises the methodological and epistemological question of complicity. Complicity, the participation in a wrongful act or process, is particularly policed at the moment, and it has a negative connotation. But there is more to it; Hendriks seems to suggest that complicity can be a new feminist tool for reflection, for transcending the simplicity of binary notions of the right and wrong. Moreover, he implies that we must integrate (our) discomforts as a

feminist tool. He thus invites the reader not to sanitize, rationalize, and explain away the extractive quality of power, but rather to accept that power produces encounters of conflict and co-optation as well as collaboration and appropriation.

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