The Mother of Elephants: 'Lek' Chailert, Elephant Nature Park, and the Gendering of Elephant Husbandry (Op-Ed)

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Abstract:
Often described as "elephant heaven," Elephant Nature Park (ENP) is a sanctuary located in Chiang Mai Province in Northern Thailand. Begun in 1995 by Sangduen "Lek" Chailert with a single elephant, ENP is now home to over sixty elephant rescues. Tourists wishing to visit ENP can choose between booking a day excursion or a weeklong "voluntourism" stay. In contrast to traditional methods of training and handling elephants, ENP employs positive reinforcement and target training to manage its herd. Although ENP's approach has been described as "ecocentric," I argue here that it actually represents a feminization of both the management of elephants and the animal itself, which has ultimately become a key to its success.

> *Today we celebrate Lek, who devotes her life to helping the elephants of Thailand. With trunks full of love and passion Lek is changing lives everyday and today we celebrate the mother of the Asian Elephant of Thailand.*
> - Patty Enp

Elephant Heaven

1 Often described as 'elephant heaven', Elephant Nature Park (ENP) is a verdant sanctuary located in Chiang Mai Province in Northern Thailand. Begun in 1995 by Sangduen 'Lek' Chailert with a single elephant, ENP is now home to over sixty elephants rescued from the illegal logging industry, trekking camps, circuses, street begging, and other forms of animal labor including forced breeding.[1] Here, the elephants wander across open grass, wallow in mud baths, play with 'toys' specifically designed for physical and mental enrichment, and – in some cases – receive special diets for digestive or dental problems as well as medical treatment for wounds or long-term disabilities. They are not, however, the park's sole residents. A veritable Noah's Ark, ENP also houses rescued cows, some twenty water buffalo, more than two hundred cats, and over four hundred dogs. It also plays host to a steady stream of elephant-loving humans from across the globe.

[1] I would like thank Lek Chailert, Jodi Thomas, and Darrick Thomson for their hospitality and generosity. I would also like to thank Dominik Ohrem for being such a patient and engaged editor.

2 Tourists wishing to visit ENP can choose between booking a day excursion or a weeklong stay; those staying at least a week are designated as 'volunteers'.[2] The park has offered a form of 'voluntourism' since its inception. Broadly defined, voluntourism (or volunteer tourism) is a form of travel in which participants pay to volunteer in development or conservation-oriented projects (Conran; McGehee; Mostafanezhad; Rattan et al.). Not only has voluntourism generated a growing body of scholarly literature, it is also now one of the fastest growing alternative tourism markets in the world (Conran 1454). Volunteers at ENP pay 12,000 Thai baht (approximately $400 US) for the privilege of living at and 'working' for the park ("Visit and Volunteer"). Because the park is privately owned and does not receive financial assistance from the Thai government or a private sponsor, its survival depends wholly on the income generated by tourism and donations (Rattan 6).[3] The accommodations consist of dorm-like rooms equipped with beds, ceiling fans, and mosquito nets. Although some rooms have en-suite bathrooms, the majority of volunteers share common bathroom facilities and showers. Meals are served buffet-style, include both Thai and western cuisine, but are vegetarian in keeping with Chailert's own beliefs.

3 Volunteers, who can number over fifty in a given week, are divided into teams. The teams are assigned a rotation of duties to help maintain the park and its nonhuman residents. Common duties include cleaning the elephant shelters, unloading truckloads of fruits and vegetables and then washing them, clearing the park grounds of elephant dung and uneaten fodder, and traveling off site to harvest banana stalks or corn. Other duties may involve general park maintenance, such as fence construction or tree planting. Typically each team will receive both a morning and an afternoon task, most of which involve physical labor. One afternoon 'task', however, usually consists of a guided, educational tour through the park during which volunteers learn the histories of individual elephants. During this time they are also given ample opportunity to observe the ele-

[2] In addition to its single-day visits and week-long volunteer (with elephant or dog-focused work), ENP offers a number of other volunteer options under its umbrella non-profit, Save Elephant Foundation (SEF). Other projects include: Journey to Freedom, which is situated in a Karen village that is home to several newly rescued elephants; Surin Project, where volunteers live among the Gwi community in the "elephant village" of Ban Tha Klang; Elephant Sanctuary Cambodia, a project in conjunction with the 25,000 acre Cambodia Wildlife Sanctuary; and, most recently, Elephant Haven, a newly formed collaboration with a former trekking camp in Kanchanaburi. All of the above entail week-long stays except Elephant Haven, which at this point only offers single-day or overnight visits ("Visit and Volunteer").

[3] The prices charged by ENP, it should be noticed, are considerably higher than that of elephant camps offering more traditional activities such as elephant rides. A 2009 study found that ENP's prices were 10 times higher than two camps in the same region (Kontogeorgopoulos 443).

phants in close proximity as well as enjoy limited contact with them, for example, by feeding them fruit. Volunteers are also welcome to take part in the twice daily snack feedings and almost daily bathings that are held for single-day visitors. It should be noted that the hand-feeding of elephants is strictly controlled. Visitors and volunteers are only allowed to feed specific elephants (in most cases, fully grown adults with mild temperaments), and the snack baskets are customized according to the elephant's age, nutritional needs, and dental health.

4 I visited ENP twice in 2015. My first visit occurred in early January as part of their Journey to Freedom program (see endnote 2 for information on their other programs). I returned again in May as a weekly volunteer and ended up extending my stay for an additional week. During my first week I participated fully as a regular volunteer. Volunteers who stay two or more weeks are far fewer in number and are given separate tasks after the first week. These tasks often include preparing special meals for geriatric elephants and creating mental enrichment challenges for select elephant families. Since ENP is not a fenced property, the elephants must spend evening hours in enclosed shelters. Enrichment helps prevent boredom, provides mental stimulation, and encourages foraging. Essentially, a portion of the elephants' nighttime food ration is arranged in a way that makes it a challenge to retrieve ("Doing What We Can"). Much of my time during the second week of my stay was devoted to preparing and delivering five meals a day to Saza, an elderly female who had arrived at ENP in early 2015. Although both trips were scheduled as vacations, I contacted the park's founder, Sangduen 'Lek' Chailert, via Facebook prior to my second visit. I explained to her that I was writing an article on gender and animals and asked if she would consent to an interview. Although we had met only briefly during my first visit, she immediately agreed.

5 In this essay I situate Chailert's and ENP's approach to wildlife – and in particular elephant – management against more traditional and still extensively used methods in Thailand. Although ENP's approach has been described as 'ecocentric', I suggest here that it actually embodies a perspective reflecting several tenets of ecofeminism. Moreover, I ultimately argue that ENP has effectively 'feminized' both the management of elephants and the animal itself, a move that has not only become a key to its success but is now effecting a wide-ranging shift in ecotourism in Thailand.

En-Gendering the Elephant

6 I began my interview by pursuing Chailert's thoughts on the relationship between elephants and women. My interest in the 'woman-elephant' question largely stems from the observation that female figures have come to dominate the *popular* discourse surrounding elephant conservation, the ban on ivory, and even scientific study. Of late nearly every television program or news story devoted to elephants has spotlighted one or more of the women who appear to be spearheading efforts to save the species. For instance, in 2014 the Oscar award-winning film director Kathryn Bigelow created a short film *cum* PSA called *Last Days* in conjunction with Annapurna Pictures and WildAid. The film, which debuted online in December 2014, presents a three-minute attack on the illegal ivory trade by linking it to terrorism. Behavioral scientist, conservationist, and co-founder of ElephantVoices Joyce Poole is regularly featured on programs and print media produced by *National Geographic.* Finally, one of the most prominent figures at present is Dame Daphne Sheldrick, founder of and the figurehead for the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya.[4] Sheldrick has achieved worldwide fame for her Orphan's Project, which accepts orphan elephants and rhinos, nurtures them, and ultimately reintroduces them into the wild ("About Us"). Not only has Dame Sheldrick published an autobiography titled *An African Love Story – Love, Life, and Elephants*, her life has been featured in the PBS series *My Wild Affair* in the episode title "The Elephant Who Found a Mom." Although the association between mothering and elephant management in no way dominates the discourse of conservation, it is echoed in the World Elephant Day greeting cited above and in Chailert's own approach to animal management.

7 As tourists are transported to ENP, they are shown a documentary about ENP and some of the issues facing elephants in Thailand (Rattan et al. 6). In the film, an episode of the television series *Caught in the Moment,* Chailert recounts how she 'trained' a wild bull elephant named Hope to accept medical care. She uses this anecdote to illustrate what has become something of a mantra for her, "Love can tame anything." With this in mind, the first question I posed to Chailert was whether or not she considers herself to be a *mahout. Mahout* is usually translated as 'elephant rider' or 'keeper,' and *mahouts* are typically male. Chailert responded with an immediate,

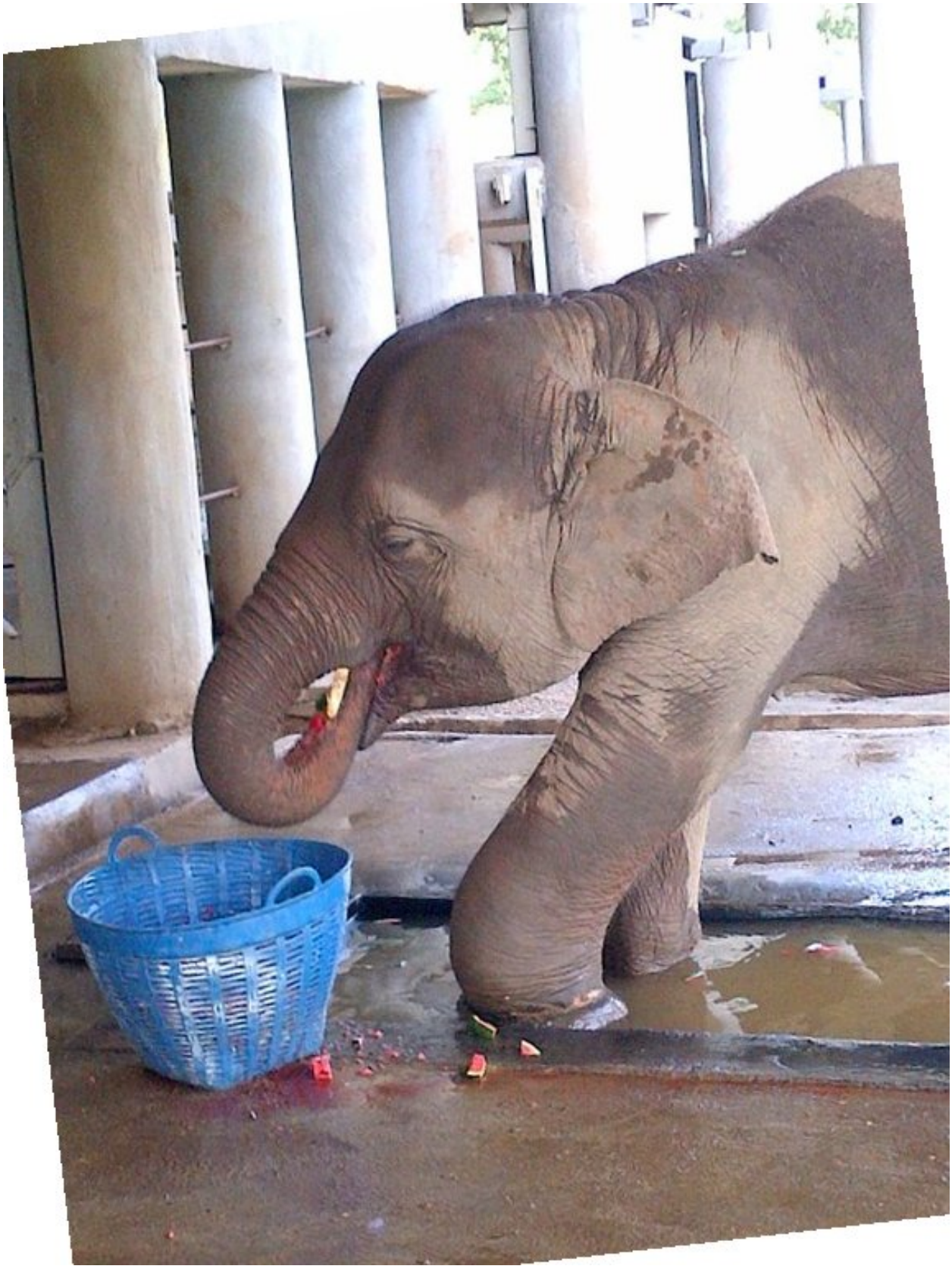
[4] Additional notable women include Caitlin O'Connell, elephant researcher, co-founder of Utopia Scientific, and author of *Elephant Don*, for which she has recently been touring; Cynthia Moss, director of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, who is also the focus of several *Nature* television programs; novelist Jody Picoult; Carol Buckley, co-founder of Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary and founder of Elephant Aid International; Soriada Salwala, founder of Friends of Asian Elephant hospital in Lampung, Thailand, and subject of the documentary *Eyes of Thailand;* as well as Lek herself.

"Yes, because I'm like an animal keeper". When I noted that there were not very many female *mahouts* (for instance, none of the *mahouts* currently employed at ENP are female) she added, "Yes, unfortunately. I would rather a woman to be a *mahout* as well, because women have a mother instinct. This is the best the thing for taking care of a gentle animal like an elephant". In keeping with her own philosophy, Chailert enjoys an intimate, familial relationship with the park's elephants. Not only does she know each elephant by name, but she spends much of her 'free' time at the park getting to know any new rescues, visiting long-time residents, and has even said that she feels safer sitting under an elephant than walking down a street (Upworthy). At one point during our interview I asked her how she devises her many ideas to keep the park economically self-sustaining. She answered, "I have a thousand animal including elephant, cow, buffalo, everything. I have to make this survive. So all the time my mind is thinking, if one day we have no tourists, what is the next way I can find the money to feed them? I have to make sure these animals, all my babies, will never suffer and go hungry". Thus Chailert's sentiments towards the park's residents would seem to extend beyond that of mere 'companion animals' to include a sense of familial obligation.

8 Despite the fact that ENP's current *mahouts* are male, Chailert's approach to elephant handling is nonetheless the standard at ENP, and all new *mahouts* undergo training in the positive reinforcement system ("Lek Is Training"). In this system, *mahouts* use food rewards and praise to manage their elephants. In addition to simply directing the elephants – for instance leading them to the feeding platform or back to their shelters for the evening – *mahouts* are encouraged to build a cooperative relationship with them ("Meet the Mahout"). Some *mahouts* take frequent photographs or short videos of their wards and post them online; a few elephants even have their own Facebook pages. ENP also employs a more specific form of positive reinforcement called "target training". In target training elephants first learn the names of various body parts. They are then taught to present a body part upon request. This training allows elephants to undergo medical examinations or even treatments such as injections or bandaging without the use of restraints or force.

9 Target training is a technique developed by Carol Buckley, founder of the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee and Elephant Aid International. Buckley has worked with ENP to train *mahouts* in her methods (see Buckley and "Mahout and Elephant Training Initiative" on *mahout* and target training and Ammon on Buckley's work with ENP). During my stay at ENP I was able to

observe a young male, Khun Dej, receiving treatment for an injury. Before being brought to ENP Khun Dej had caught one of his legs in a snare. He arrived at ENP in October 2014 with an infected wound. Despite medical attention, the wound still requires periodic treatment. The wound is treated by soaking the entire foot in a medicinal bath and then bandaging it. To eliminate the need for restraints, the veterinary staff places a basket of watermelon near a shallow pool full of the solution. Khun Dej simply feeds from the basket while standing with one foot immersed in the pool.



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10 ENP's methods represent a radical departure from traditional elephant management in Thailand. In particular, Chailert's ideology reframes animal ownership as stewardship. I invoke the term stewardship with caution as it has been employed by feminist scholars to describe and critique human-animal relationships that reflect broadly western, patriarchal notions of human superiority over nature. In the west, the notion of stewardship finds its roots in the biblical creation narrative where Adam is charged with overseeing the Garden of Eden and Eve is given as his helpmate. Carolyn Merchant has pointed out that the Christian narrative actually offers two variants of the creation story—in one case man is granted dominion or mastery over the earth (Genesis 1), in another he is placed there as a steward of nature (Genesis 2-3). Yet despite the fact that stewardship offers a more ethical alternative to domination, Merchant underscores the anthropocentric nature of both variants (10-36). Regardless of its tenor, stewardship has remained burdened with hierarchies that privilege human over animal and male over female (Hoffman 18; Haraway 247). Yet Merchant herself is careful to point out that "[n]arratives however are not deterministic" (36). And more recently, Jennifer Welchman has called for a reconsideration of environmental stewardship. To this end she notes, "It is worth asking oneself what reason one has to suppose that the historical origins of stewardship concepts or practices must necessarily determine the forms it either takes now or will take in the future" (308). To her mind, contemporary environmental stewardship should now be seen as a role taken on by individuals "within the limits our prior and more encompassing moral principles, agreements and values allow" (310).

11 It is within this contemporary and morally self-conscious vein that I place Chailert's version of stewardship. Given the absence of the biblical narrative in traditional Thai conceptions of human-animal relationships and the 'special needs' nature of many ENP residents, I use the term to reflect Chailert's interest in protecting and preserving Thailand's wildlife beyond any instrumental value, a perspective that is in keeping with Welchman's recuperation of environmental stewardship (302). That is, although tourists certainly pay to visit ENP, its nonhuman residents are viewed as beneficiaries rather than sources of revenue. At the same time, stewardship also signals Chailert's recognition that the elephants at ENP are still confined to and dependent upon the park for their health and nutritional needs, although it has long been Chailert's hope to purchase several hundred acres of land where elephants not requiring special medical attention could roam without *mahout* supervision ("Elephant Nature Park Halts Rescues"). Thus stewardship in this context also embodies a state of 'in-betweenness' or perhaps, more accurately, 'not-yet-there'.

12 In order to better appreciate the conceptual shift from ownership to stewardship, one must first look to the lived history of the working elephant in Thailand. Based on the 1939 Draught Animal Act, all captive elephants are (still) classified as "working livestock" (Godfrey and Kongmuang 13). In particular, from the late nineteenth century up until a national ban on logging in 1989, large numbers of elephants were employed as the "backbone of the timber industry" (Laohachaiboon 76). The ban on logging – which was in part precipitated by flash flooding caused by deforestation – effectively resulted in the unemployment of approximately 2,000 of Thailand's then 3,243 domesticated elephants and a revenue loss of nearly 200 million baht per year (Laohachaiboon 78-9). As a result, many elephants were transferred from logging into the growing tourist industry (Godfrey and Kongmuang 13).

13 To a large extent, this move was facilitated by the Thai government. In reaction to both the ban and increased international attention to the elephant as an endangered species, Thailand's Forestry Industry Organization (FIO) formed the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC). Despite the TECC's purported goal of conservation, its investment in the elephant remained largely economic, with the result that elephants retained their status as commodities. In his study on the historical development of elephant conservation in Thailand, Suphawat Laohachaiboon notes, "Programs such as elephant riding and homestays became the dominant paradigm of TECC's elephant conservation activities […] utilizing the historical setting of working elephants in the north to conserve the elephants and captivate the popular attention of tourists" (80). In other words, elephants were still engaging in similar forms of labor, only now in the context of performance. Likewise the historically entrenched image of the elephant remained unchanged, as such attractions highlighted the immense size and strength of these animals and underscored their status as beasts of burden. The transformation of the elephant into a tourist attraction has been so successful that today "nearly every domesticated elephant in Thailand is employed in the tourism industry with most working in semi-captive 'elephant camps' (*baang chang* in Thai)" (Kontogeorgopoulos 430). These camps offer elephant rides and, in some cases, various forms of 'entertainment' such as shows in which elephants kick soccer balls, play musical instruments, dance, and/or paint pictures that are then offered for sale (Kontogeorgopoulos 433). Such camps are immensely popular, especially in Northern Thailand: "80-90% of 'Western' visitors to Chiang Mai […] experienc[e] some form of contact with elephants, including tourist camps" (Kontogeorgopoulos 431). In fact, Victoria Turesson, who has completed a recent study on ele-

phant welfare and tourism in Thailand, feels that travelers to Southeast Asia generally view an elephant-backed safari as the capstone of a trip to Thailand (14-15).

14 The traditional method for training elephants for any type of labor is called *phajaan* or *pha-chan*. This controversial practice involves either capturing a single elephant or separating a baby elephant from its mother. The elephant is then confined to a small cage or stall, where its mobility is restricted with ropes, and it is deprived of sleep and often sustenance until its will or 'spirit' is 'crushed' into obedience. The entire process may take anywhere from a few days to several weeks (Laohachaiboon 85-7; Kontogeorgopoulos 430; Ringis 168; Turesson 9-10). *Mahouts* have traditionally wielded a metal *ankus* or bullhook as a goad to maintain control over elephants after this initial 'crush'. Unfortunately, despite the shift from logging to tourism, methods of training and discipline have remained largely the same. In fact, TECC even offers a *mahout* training course where participants can learn such "skills" as "elephant command words, the fine points of controlling an elephant, correct use of chains, how to live in the forest, and the mahout's way of life" ("Trekking"). As with the displays of logging techniques and elephant-back rides, the *mahout*-training course represents the elephant as strong and even willful. Although the training course is designed as a tourist attraction and thus does not involve anything approaching the brutality of *phajaan*, the language used by TECC is of a piece with tradition. Broadly speaking, elephant training is situated within the sphere of masculinity and represents the elephant as an animal requiring superior willpower and at times violent forms of discipline in order to render it suitable for coexistence with humans.

15 Logging and transport constitute only two uses of captive elephants in Thai culture. Rita Ringis, scholar in elephant history and lore, points out that "commerce, not to mention war, and elephants have been traditionally linked throughout the history of Thailand" (155). As a result, the representation of elephant handling as well as the animals themselves appear to reflect their association with these traditionally male spheres of activity (as opposed, for instance, to their representation in Buddhist art). In addition, elephant hunting and handling have borne links to animistic beliefs well into the end of the twentieth century. For instance, elephant hunting has traditionally been undertaken only from December through March, when elephants are said to be at their physical peak. Ringis even cites a proverb that states, "The cool season is the time to catch an elephant at its best while summer is the best for a girl" (162). Although elephant hunting and keeping may no longer be considered a mystical undertaking, the gendering of the elephant

and its handling persists to this day. Being a *mahout* is still considered a male occupation. And TECC's website notes that they ordinarily use a large bull (male) elephant for riding. Employing males for transport is actually less comfortable than females – their greater height can translate into a less stable ride – but it upholds the long-standing belief that "riding females was considered ignoble for a man of substance" (Ringis 169). Given the popularity of tourist camps, the constant demand for trained elephants, and the way in which elephants have been figured in relation to these activities, it should come with little surprise that elephants working in such camps often display signs of emotional stress as well as physical injuries or ailments due to confined living conditions, lack of socialization, insufficient nutrition, and physical abuse at the hand of their *mahouts* (Kontogeorgopoulos 430; Turesson 10; "Elephant Trekking Holidays").

16 It is within the context of this burgeoning tourist industry that Chailert established ENP in 1995. As mentioned above, ENP's nonhuman population comprises rescues. Aside from healthy calves that have been born on site, the elephant residents are, for various reasons, unfit for work: several elephants are blind, some suffer from permanent injuries to the hip or back, and four are land-mine victims ("Pornsawan"). Some also arrive severely malnourished and psychologically damaged. While the condition of the animals as well as the lack of the usual tourist 'attractions' should come as no surprise given ENP's status as a sanctuary, the line between charitable sanctuary and economically driven camp is not always clear. ENP, for example, calls itself a "park" although it is a sanctuary, whereas TECC offers elephant-back rides along with a show that includes elephant music performances and painting ("Activities"). With its emphasis on the observation (as opposed to interaction) and care (as opposed to exploitation) of damaged animals, ENP represented at its inception what Nick Kontogeorgopoulos has called a "paradigm shifter" (442).[5] Citing the work of G. Tyler Miller, Kontogeorgopoulos characterizes Chailert's approach as *ecocentric*, which posits the notion that "all species, including human beings, have an equal importance and right to exist". He contrasts this view to the more *anthropocentric* perspective (adopted by the vast majority of elephant camps) in which wildlife is "valuable only in the context of human needs, values, and desires" (432). Kontogeorgopoulos contrasts these perspectives in the service of a comparative study on tourist experiences. Ecofeminists such as Val Plum-

[5] Kontogeorgopoulos's article comprises a study of three elephant camps in the Chiang Mai area. In his article he has changed the names of these camps for the sake of anonymity. Based on the description of both the camp and its founder, the camp he calls *Thai Ruk Chang* is, without a doubt in my mind, ENP.

wood, however, have long pointed out the underlying conceptual link between anthropocentrism and a number of other hierarchies and systems of power and oppression (*Mastery*). In fact, Greta Gaard locates ecofeminism's emergence in the "intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation" ("Ecofeminism" 28).

17 In her final book-length publication, Plumwood simply and succinctly states: "Dominant western culture is androcentric, eurocentric and ethnocentric, as well as anthropocentric" (*Environmental Culture* 106). Her critique focuses specifically on the inherent centrisms of dominant western culture and their dualistic underpinnings—epistemologies that not only enable multiple social inequities but also produce disastrous environmental effects, which have become increasingly evident in recent years. It is well beyond the scope of this essay to trace the mutual imbrications of Thai androcentrism, environmental exploitation, and animal management. It is, however, worth noting the convergence of masculine and human dominance in the lore and practice of traditional elephant handling. Examples such as the elephant-hunting proverb quoted above show not only how both women and animals are rendered as objects to be hunted, but also how, within the dualistic hierarchies of man-woman and human-animal, the female elephant appears relegated to a doubly subordinated position on the basis of both gender and species. Given the fact that such a framework has enabled both the exploitation of elephant labor and the destruction of forest lands, we can begin to glimpse the wide-ranging potential in a broader ecocentric-ecofeminist approach to elephant management.

18 As noted above, Kontogeorgopoulos categorizes ENP as an ecocentric elephant camp. I would agree that ecocentrism aptly describes ENP's commitment to its residents' rehabilitation and welfare. But the term elides one of ENP's defining factors: its emphasis on the emotional aspects of elephant care. I earlier characterized Chailert's ideology as one of stewardship. But to encompass fully both her affect and practice, I would add the term *kinship*, which is implied in her use of phrasing such as "my babies" or "mother instinct". As with stewardship, kinship is not a term used by Chailert; it is a term I have adopted to attempt theorizing the impulses and sentiments that underlie her beliefs and actions. I would first locate Chailert's sense of kinship with elephants in her identity as a member of the Khmo hill tribe and the granddaughter of a traditional healer or shaman. During presentations she offers to ENP volunteers, Chailert often relates how she witnessed firsthand the tourist industry's promotion of both wildlife and ethnic minori-

ties (including her own village) as objects for touristic consumption. Thus her apparent kinship with elephants (and animals in general) would seem rooted in her exclusion from dominant Thai culture and her recognition of the similarly 'othered' status of its wildlife. In *Animal Lessons*, Kelly Oliver explores western philosophy's use of animality and animals. She does so in part to denaturalize human kinship, to estrange us from our own "brotherhood" so that we might consider (invoking Merleau-Ponty) a "strange kinship" with other living creatures (208-28). While far removed from post-Heideggerian phenomenology, we might see a reflection of that kinship in Chailert's relationship with her wards at ENP.

19 I would also point out that within a historically androcentric sphere such as elephant keeping, the concept of 'mothering' offers a strategic and legible language for opposition. That is, Chailert's willingness to call herself and be called the "mother of elephants" places her in direct contrast to the realms of dominance and mastery. Finally, I actually asked Chailert whether or not she considered herself to be a feminist. She offered a provocative answer, "You know, sometimes I feel a feminist. Most of the time, I never believed about that difference between men and women". Yet earlier she explained how she has been able to exploit her status as a woman, for instance, to enter heavily guarded areas. She noted, "If you are the man you might get grabbed and asked questions, but they say, 'Ah, woman it's no problem, she can come because she is a silly woman,' so this is how I can get the job done". Thus despite her seemingly essentialist association between women and mothering, Chailert's notion of gender would appear more performative than at first glance, even teachable – as seen in her willingness to hire and train male *mahouts* for ENP.

20 ENP employs an extensive online presence to promote their practices and values. As Chailert herself explained, "One thing I have to thank is the social media. Social media is the new word. We have to take this opportunity to voice for animal. This is our tool, the tool for the animal lover". Thus linked websites dedicated to the Save Elephant Foundation (ENP's umbrella nonprofit) and ENP itself feature regular blog posts about the park's many residents, rescues in progress, and ENP's efforts to attract other camps to their philosophy and methods. ENP also maintains a YouTube channel called "Elephant News". In addition to websites and the video channel, ENP and SEF manage separate Facebook pages. Chailert herself actively maintains personal Facebook pages in both Thai and English; her English language page is followed by nearly 20,000 people. Through extensive cross-posting, Chailert and her team at ENP ensure that fans

have access to a constant stream of media from the park and its many programs. This stream broadcasts Chailert, her *mahouts*, staff, and volunteers as enthusiastically attending to both the physical needs and the emotional lives of their residents.

21 Many of the most popular Facebook posts and videos spotlight one of more of their baby elephants at play. These videos usually contain no narration, but they often include whimsical background music and in some cases have been sped up to amplify their comic effect. One of the most popular "Elephant News" videos features Chailert singing a lullaby to a six-year-old female named Faa Mai ("Lullaby"). To date the video has garnered over 2.5 million views on YouTube alone. Popular Facebook and blogposts are no less emotionally evocative. It is not uncommon for a Facebook post featuring photos or video clip from, for example, the reunion between two rescues, to amass hundreds of 'likes' within minutes of posting. Blog posts include titles such as "Now a day [sic], Faa Sai has been changed from the aggressive baby elephant to be the most lovely girl with warm love from our herd at Elephant Nature Park" and "The aggressive elephant, Noi Nah changed to be a gentle and generous lady with love from her mahout". Another post, titled "The Loving Care of an Elephant nanny", states, "The nannies at our park come from many different places but when the time is due they volunteer to be a nanny for the expectant calf. They relish their job as one of great importance and their love is so pure and beautiful."

22 This image of the elephant as a fundamentally emotional creature stands in sharp contrast to the formidable beast of burden promoted by traditional trekking camps. To a certain extent, this characterization reflects the gender distribution and histories of the elephants at ENP. The vast majority of mature adults at ENP are rescues from the tourist industry, an industry that prefers females due to their "relative docility" (Godfrey and Kongmuang 14). Female elephants typically live in family groups for the entirety of their lives. In such groups females other than the birth mother assist in the care of young calves. These "allomothers" (referred to by ENP as 'nannies') help rear the young while gaining valuable experience in mothering (Poole and Moss 80, 93; Lee, 278). Since it is not wholly uncommon for elephants to form bonds with genetically unrelated individuals, ENP's elephant population comprises a number of makeshift or 'adopted' family groups. Hence the focus on females stems in part from the fact that most of the elephants at ENP are female. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable emphasis on activities and behaviors such as 'nannying'. While encouraging a conceptual link between reproduction and womanhood might seem regressive in terms of feminist politics, we might better reframe this move as a strategic

uncoupling of elephant reproduction from elephant commodification. Such a strategy stands in opposition to elephant camps where individuals are denied socialization, calves are seen as a lucrative form of capital, and reproduction can become a form of labor—in the form of forced breeding. I further suggest that ENP's attention to behaviors such as child rearing should be viewed in tandem with practices such as their extensive visual documentation of elephant rescues. Images and video are posted over the course of several days as gaunt and wounded victims of the tourist industry travel in trucks laden with fruit and banana stalks. Upon arrival at ENP they are welcomed and inspected by the curious trunks of resident elephants. On such journeys the elephant is not merely rescued from servitude, it is reconstituted as a whole being. By highlighting the rich complexity of elephant emotions and the vulnerability of elephant bodies these narratives invite our empathy.[6] Feminist biologist Lynda Birke has suggested that recognizing our shared embodiment and deep connections with other species "complements feminist concerns with, and challenges to, human oppression in all its forms" (151). As seen in the case of ENP, the 'feminized' image of the elephant has functioned as an effective mechanism for eliciting sympathy for its residents and global support for it efforts.

This Women's Work

23 In a brief survey of key movements in the history of ecofeminism, Greta Gaard notes that in the late twentieth century, "*Feminist* empathy for animals was soon *feminized*, and women's activism for animal rights was mocked as a movement of 'emotional little old ladies in tennis shoes'" ("Speaking" 521-22). In particular, although ecofeminist attention to animals has long engaged issues of social justice such as animal experimentation or industrialized food production's dependence on and exploitation of undocumented migrant workers ("Ecofeminism" 36), Gaard has argued that the animal rights movement gained legitimacy "only when white male philosophers distanced themselves from kindness, empathy, or care" ("Speaking" 522). In other words—and in keeping with the broader celebration of 'reason' in western culture and history—emotions have all too often been relegated to an inferior, feminized status along with women more generally, people of color, and even the body itself ("Ecofeminism" 28; but see also Plumwood *Mastery* 189). Yet despite the suspect nature of emotions and empathy in many academic

[6] For recent work on the complexities and challenges to a human experience of empathy towards nonhumans, see Gruen.

circles, this very same sentimentalization appears to be a key factor in ENP's success, as might be suggested by the park's ever increasing flow of visitors and the growth of its programs. Even since my return from Thailand in early June, ENP has accepted over twenty more elephant rescues and partnered with the Sai Yok trekking camp in Kanchanaburi to convert from a traditional elephant camp to a satellite program of ENP called Elephant Haven ("Future of Thai Elephants"). As of the end of summer, the park itself was almost fully booked for weekly volunteers through the end of 2015. While such events suggest a blanket growth in the acceptance of Chailert's philosophy and methods, an informal breakdown of the park's visitors suggests something far more intriguing.

24 Thus far, no formal study of how gender relates to volunteer tourism at ENP exists. Yet in an extensive study conducted over a four-week period in 2009, Jasveen Rattan found that 59.5% of *non-volunteer* visitors to ENP were women (89). Through post-visit surveys, she also determined that a significantly higher percentage of women were affected by their visit to ENP. In particular, women were less likely to engage in activities such as elephant trekking and feeding street elephants after their visit (84). Since Rattan's study, the gender disparity among visitors to ENP appears to have increased. According to Chailert:

More than 80% of the visitors here [are women]. When I see a man come to volunteer I always go and ask, "Sir, how do you know about our project?" The answer is "My girlfriend recommended me. I come because my wife. I come because my daughter wants to come. My mother wants to come". 15% are men, 85% are women. Then when I ask the 15%, the men, it's almost more than 5% [of the total, i.e., one third of the men] say they come because women recommend. So I can say that 90% is because of women. Some weeks, we do not even have men, only women.

25 It is tempting to relate ENP's popularity – and in particular its appeal to female tourists – to its rebranding of elephant-centered tourism. In a review of academic studies on human-animal relations, Jennifer Wolch and Jin Zhang note that, "Findings with respect to gender differences in values and attitudes have been remarkably consistent [since the 1970s]…. [Women] tend to be more biocentric, or oriented towards ecological or environmentalist values" (460). Based upon the largely sociological and psychological literature they surveyed, Wolch and Zhang found that the women involved in those studies tend to be more "humanistic and moralistic […] more likely to support animal protection […] less apt to favor lethal methods of wildlife management" (460-

61). Wolch and Zhang are careful to point out that "gender differences may be rooted in the way women and girls are socialized and relate to others" (465) and not due to any inherent or essential difference. Such data suggests that female tourists have increasingly been drawn to ENP through a confluence of their own socialization with ENP's practices and ideology.

26 Although my findings would not be based on a blind survey or a large sample, I felt that any insight into my fellow travelers' motivations for volunteering at ENP could contribute to the developing study of voluntourism, turn more attention to the relationship between voluntourism and gender, and shed light on the effects of ENP's branding. Upon my return from ENP, I reached out to the fellow volunteers whose contact information I had acquired while there. I sent individual messages to each asking, "I was wondering if you would mind answering a question for me. What made you decide to come to ENP?" The group I contacted comprised a mix of women and men, some of whom came as part of a couple, and several who were traveling as individuals. Most of the participants had been in a volunteer 'team' with me during my first week at ENP. While the respondents had learned of ENP through a variety of sources, their reasons for choosing ENP were remarkably consistent.[7]

27 Regardless of gender, all nine of the participants surveyed chose ENP deliberately, although their initial degree of knowledge varied. Some based their decision on word of mouth, while several had done extensive research in anticipation of traveling to Thailand. Of those who had conducted research, all four explicitly mentioned ENP's online material as their source of information. The key factor in every case was that they felt that Chailert actually had the elephants' best interests in mind. One individual, Jordan, even contrasted ENP's treatment of their residents with other 'animal attractions' available in Thailand: "We have seen so many people (via Facebook) go to Thailand, ride elephants and get photos next to doped up tigers and monkeys and I have always thought it cruel and unethical. So hearing about a sanctuary for these elephants where they are completely looked after rather than abused sounded just right!" Jordan's emphasis on ethics was echoed by many of the other participants.

28 Emma admitted to a "longstanding obsession with elephants". She noted that when the opportunity arose to choose an elephant sanctuary, "ENP was the place to go", as she wanted to go to a place that was "actually working for the welfare of the elephants." Somewhat similarly,

[7] All of the respondents were told that the purpose of my question and their answers were for a scholarly article about Lek Chailert and ENP. All agreed to my using their answers and first names.

Hannah engaged in extensive research before choosing ENP. She had read numerous visitor reviews and followed some of rescue cases online. Ultimately she chose ENP because she felt it was "actually ethical," a place that "truly did put the elephants needs first."

29 While I would not claim that these responses provide a representative sampling, they do suggest that ENP's reputation remains singular. For instance, although several other sanctuaries offering volunteer packages similar to those at ENP do exist in Thailand (namely, BLES and BEES, which was founded by a former ENP staff member), none of the participants mentioned that they had considered or were even familiar with those places. This may be due in part to ENP's larger size, its longevity, as well as the global recognition it and Chailert have earned (Kontogeorgopoulos 433). In fact, several individuals mentioned Chailert by name. Emma wrote, "The fact that is was started by THE Lek Chailert had a huge appeal".

30 Somewhat similarly, Sarah singled out Chailert as truly exceptional in her commitment to wildlife, "I feel not enough people in this world care, but Lek does. […] And I am so glad that people like her exist in this world, people who work tirelessly to make the world a better place for wildlife". Hannah's response mirrored Sarah's and even described Chailert as "one of the most inspiring and influential people I have ever met in my life". It is not surprising that Chailert herself contributes to the park's appeal nor that some participants see her as something of a role model. Chailert can seem both larger than life (poster-size versions of news stories about her and ENP adorn ENP's dining area) and extremely approachable. Both online and at the park she maintains a very visible presence. As noted above, she usually delivers a powerful presentation to the volunteers. This presentation spotlights the issues faced by elephants in Thailand and is accompanied by gruesome photographs and film footage of brutal training practices from across Southeast Asia – many of which she has covertly photographed herself. It is not uncommon for volunteers, regardless of gender, to weep openly during her talk.

31 In addition to ENP's work with elephants, Chailert also discusses SEF's work with the local community, which includes education initiatives for the children of staff and local villages that partner with ENP (both of which largely comprise ethnic minorities) along with sustainable agriculture in conjunction with reforestation ("Thailand Cares"). Consequently it should come with little surprise that most of my respondents felt that they had made a real difference by volunteering; several even found the experience transformative. Sarah referred to her week at ENP as "the most rewarding experience of my life". Rosie felt that she had gained tremendous knowledge

"about the politics surrounding animal welfare in Thailand, elephant behaviour and conservation," but also that the experience fostered a sense of community that encouraged shared values and lifestyle practices: "I met some seriously special people that have actually lead to me having come home and made some serious lifestyle changes and who I think will now be true friends for life (I have now taken up Tai-Chi, I am attempting Yoga and I made the transition from vegetarian to vegan)".

32 Ultimately, by radically transforming elephant tourism in 1995, ENP seems to have anticipated a global shift towards greater interest in and concern about the lives of captive animals as well as the popularization of voluntourism. As mentioned above, since ENP's inception several other sanctuaries with similar ideologies have sprung up in Thailand, and several elephant camps have become ENP affiliates and shifted their offerings from elephant rides and shows to elephant care and observation. ENP has accomplished all this not in spite of but on account of their ideology, methods, and public branding, all of which find their roots in Chailert's feelings of stewardship, kinship, and empathy. More specifically, ENP has constructed and actively promoted an understanding of the elephant, its body, and its care that reads as feminized in contrast to traditional ways of seeing and handling the elephant. In this way, ENP has – perhaps unintentionally – tapped into the economic, emotional, and even the physical power of the female traveler. That is, volunteer work at ENP entails physical labor, and the duties are not segregated by gender or age. Given that the majority of visitors to ENP are currently women, a significant percentage of the wildlife management there constitutes a form of female labor. Yet despite the predominantly female population of current visitors and volunteers, my preliminary survey suggests that male and female travelers alike are being drawn by ENP's values and methods.

33 As this new generation of male and female backpackers joins Gaard's "emotional little old ladies in tennis shoes" ("Speaking" 522), and as ENP continues to expand its programs and partnerships, it would seem that Chailert must have inherited something of her grandfather's shamanistic talents. Theoretically speaking, the interspecies relations that characterize the work at ENP serve to articulate an implicit critique of so many of the toxic 'centrisms' identified by Plumwood and other ecofeminist scholars. In practical terms, ENP's increasing global appeal breathes life into some of their real-world aspirations. As both a steward to countless volunteers and the "mother of elephants" in Thailand, Chailert embodies Oliver's "strange kinship". In doing so she gives hope that we might rearticulate other formulations, embrace heretofore unimag-

ined possibilities, and ultimately engage in compassionate and cooperative relationships with what Plumwood has called our "earth others" (*Mastery* 137).

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