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Spaces and Subjects of Rupture on the Papuan Oil Palm Frontier

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Crouched at the foot of a rambutan tree, Marius, a five-year-old Marind boy from West Papua, was drawing patterns in the dirt.[1] His body swayed back and forth as he traced rows of straight, crisscrossing lines. The child stared up vacantly when his mother and father, Eliana and Kristianus, tried to converse with him, only to return his gaze and fingers to the soil. Marius had been like this since he had strayed into a nearby oil palm plantation while gathering tubers with his brothers, just under two moons ago. After a week-long collective search, the villagers had found him at the concession outskirts, stripped naked, walking aimlessly, mumbling incoherently. No one knew what had happened to Marius because he would not speak and his eyes were empty. His body was limp and his mood lethargic. His sleep was crippled by bad dreams, punctured by screams, sobs, and spasms. Marius' waking hours were spent drawing lines in the dust—endless rows of lines.

"Before the plantations," Eliana explained, "Marind never got lost on the land. The forests, groves, and swamps were our guides. We knew them better than the wrinkles on our foreheads or the birthmarks on our thighs. But since oil palm arrived and destroyed the land, much has been lost. Our forests. Our bodies. Our children. This world feels strange and mad, full of silence and screams and straight lines. Everywhere becomes nowhere. We feel lost. We get lost. We lose ourselves."

[1] Pseudonyms are used through this article. Terms in *logat Papua*—the Papuan creole of Indonesian—are italicized. All translations are the author's.

Image 1: Marius and Eliana (photo by author)

In the last decade, Indigenous Marind in the Indonesian-controlled region of West Papua have seen over one million hectares of their forests destroyed to make way for oil palm plantations. These landscape transformations are rupturing Marind's intimate and ancestral

relations to kindred plants, animals, and elements (Chao 2021, 2022a, 2022b). They are also generating a distinctive modality of plantation-being—one in which loss and the destruction of loss operate in cumulative and catalytic conjunction, or as Eliana put it, "everywhere becomes nowhere."

Image 2: "Everywhere becomes nowhere"—a mature oil palm plantation in rural West Papua (photo by author)

Many Marind experience the plantation as a sensorially alien and alienating space—an infrastructure of affective excess and estrangement, known through the fleshly immediacy of the body (Dragona 2019; Knox 2017; Street 2011). As Eliana's husband, Kristianus, explained, "If you want to know the plantation, you need to *be* there—let it into your skin and bones. You must go to see it, hear it, smell it. You must *feel* it. Then, you will understand what it means to get lost and lose yourself in the plantation." As Kristianus intimates, what plantations do and mean—conceptually, ecologically, and imaginatively—matters as much as how plantations *feel*. Infrastructural violence and vulnerability are embodied through the act

of *being there*, pointing to the primacy of bodily affects in the production of plantations as more-than-human contact zones (see, in this collection, Labruto; Rudge).

Image 3: Oil palm seedling in a patch of razed forest (photo by author)

Approaching plantations as "affective infrastructures"—both an object of inquiry and research methodology—foregrounds the intertwined material, ideological, and experiential force of monocrop logics on human and more-than-human landscapes and lives (Larkin 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2015; Scaramelli 2019). It further draws attention to how plantation infrastructures, as relational assemblages, produce unevenly distributed possibility, harm, intimacy, and violence through their physical form and operations, troubling the conceptual and empirical separation of human beings from the non-human and the material (Appel et al. 2018; Hetherington 2019). Central to the kind of plantation-being generated by plantation infrastructures in West Papua is the experience of loss.

This loss manifests in the obliteration of plants, animals, and ecosystems within radically simplified landscapes rendered "productive" in the name of economic growth and

regional development. It encompasses peoples' incapacity to recognize, relate to, and orient themselves against the horizonless uniformity of landscapes stripped of all spatial and temporal markers. In its most anxiogenic form, loss manifests in the disappearance of villagers who venture into plantations on their way to hunt, gather, and fish in remote patches of remnant forest. Children are particularly vulnerable to becoming lost in plantations, but so are elders afflicted with dementia. These individuals' bodies and behaviors are irreversibly transformed. Like Marius, they become taciturn, confused, tormented—"like lost ghosts" in Eliana's words. In feeling and becoming lost, people lose something of themselves.

For Marind, plantation infrastructures accrue affective force through their contrapuntal relationship to the forest ecologies that they replace (Chao 2017). While forests are enlivened by the presence, sounds, and movements of Marind's plant, animal, and elemental kin, monocrops are places of deathly still silence, intensified by the high temperatures and stillness of wind created by a canopy of homogeneous height and density. Occasionally, a breeze animates the foliage. A frond collapses. An oil palm bunch crashes down. Other than this, there is no movement detectable in the plantation. Visual or auditory encounters with humans—plantation workers and security patrols—are extremely rare given the low labor-intensive nature of palm oil cultivation and the vast areas that plantations cover. The voices of singing birds, chirruping insects, and grunting cassowaries, are replaced by the screams of roaring bulldozers, gnawing chainsaws, burning vegetation, and rumbling trucks.

Plantation soundscapes speak to the uncanny, unnatural singularity of monocrops, conjuring sadness, solitude, and loneliness among those who experience it—a sense of severance from one's native plant and animal kin, a harrowing sorrow for the many beings annihilated by the proliferation of capitalist natures, and a visceral estrangement from a landscape and crops themselves alien and occupying. Plantations also erase the relational pasts of humans and other-than-humans embedded within the landscape—the sacred sites that were created by ancestral spirits in time immemorial, the droughts and fires inscribed upon the patterned bark of sago palms, or the sweat of hunters shimmering through the glossy fur and feathers of boars and cassowaries. Imposing their mono-time of homogeneous growth on the polytemporal rhythms of the forest, plantations produce what Lauren Berlant (2011) terms a "spatio-temporal impasse"—an out-of-joint present whose horizonlessness thwarts the possibility of imagining and enacting meaningful, multispecies futures.

Image 4: Roadkill—a manifestation of ecocide on the Papuan plantation frontier (photo by author)

The singularity and sameness of the plantation in turn undermines the relational positioning that produces Marind body-subjects and their capacity to orient themselves in space and time. This sense of spatiotemporal suspension takes the form of a disturbing loss in motility, proprioception, and orientation within homogeneous landscapes that look exactly the same no matter how far or how long one walks in any direction. In the plantation, there are no reference points to situate oneself against, either in time or in space. One is surrounded by endless rows of identical oil palms—like the lines that Marius traced in the soil. Marind experience intense nausea, entrapment, terror, and paralysis as they roam through the silent vastness of the plantation—screaming, weeping, desperately seeking recognizable visual or auditory markers that might help them find their way out—that together partake in producing plantations and plantation-being as infrastructures and experiences of haunting alienation. Eventually, people lose track of hours and days passed, miles traveled, and oil palm blocks crossed. As they wander in a trance-like state, the errant encounter multispecies worlds

through their strange and ghostly afterlives—the sinewy silhouette of a long-felled gaharu tree, the mellifluous song of a deceased relative, the crushed remains of a snake smeared across the road, or the rhythmic beating of sago pith by imagined villagers in a disappeared grove. When they return home, these individuals are tormented by the silence and screams of the plantation, manifest most vividly in nightmares of possession during which they relive in repeated loops the dread of being lost and losing oneself in a place where, in Marind terms, "time has come to a stop".

Image 5: Marind children are particularly vulnerable to becoming lost in plantations (photo by author)

In experiencing plantations as much by what they render present as what they render absent, Marind invite us to think about infrastructures not only in terms of their success, failure, contingency, or side-effects (Ferguson 1990; Howe et al. 2016; Star 1999), but also in terms of what must be destroyed, disordered, or dissociated for these infrastructures to exist in the first place. As the "material sedimentation of destruction" (Gordillo 2014: 10), plantations

manifest for Marind as ruptured selfhoods, residual affects, disoriented bodies, ecological undoings, and dystopic dreamings. Intersubjectively and environmentally produced affects enmesh as plantation infrastructures generate fear, sadness, and confusion among those who experience, narrate, and interpret them in sensorially mediated ways (Navaro-Yashin 2009). The more-than-human ontology of these infrastructures manifests in multiple, more-than-human modalities of loss that take as their objects the material animacies that matter to Marind—forests, animals, plants, and rivers—at the same time as they entail the loss of a point of view on the world, together with a loss of the self and the world itself. As spaces of terror, violence, and estrangement, whose rules and dynamics Marind cannot control, their affective grip as zones of sensory alienation is further enhanced by the fact that they appear to affect people who cannot *in turn* affect them (Stewart 2007), who sense but cannot yet *make sense* of it (Feld and Basso 1996), who are dispossessed but also *possessed* by it (Manjapra 2018), who are not rendered mobile but rather *immobilized* by it (Berlant 2016).

Image 6: Disfigured landscapes produce a sense of spatial disorientation among many Marind (photo by author)

Approaching plantation-being and plantation infrastructures through the lens of bodily affects and its relationship to destruction, alienation, and loss counters the presumed scalarity,

transposability, and homogeneity of the plantation as material form by focusing attention on the granular, situated, and differential textures of more-than-human plantation being and (un)becoming. Such an approach can in turn offer plantation scholars a pathway to recalibrate, or enrich, anthropological analyses that theorize the plantation primarily in conceptual terms as enduring logic or ideology. The plantation, Katherine McKittrick reminds us, "is not a cool concept … [it] is terrible and violent and deadly."[2] Centering the terrible and deadly violence of plantations as affective and alienating infrastructures, as this essay invites, thus reframes the question of what a plantation is and does as one that, in Karen Barad's (2017: 85) terms, cannot be answered once and for all but must be asked "over and over again with one's body."

Asking with one's body and being, as plantation methodology, involves feeling one's way into and through the plantation logic and form—even as there is no guarantee of feeling one's way *out* of it. It thickens our understanding of the spatial and temporal situatedness of plantations and the palpability of their infrastructural and affective violence as it presses upon, rubs up against, and constitutes, the wounded flesh of lively worlds. In doing so, it foregrounds how plantation infrastructures disturb ecological forms at the same time as they disrupt people's sensory sovereignty and sense of self through their eerie, haunting indeterminacy.

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