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The after-lives of no arrival: How Papuans make their lives matter

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**AbdouMaliq Simone**

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Abstract

The essay considers heterogeneous Black temporalities in West Papua, Indonesia's largest urban region. Here, "Papuan time" is an extension beyond the dilemmas of being human or not. This is the possibility of being a human that has not experienced irremediable loss or a future foreclosed. But rather an entity that endures an after-life beyond what anyone might know it; a life situated in the *middle* of freedom and abjection. Such a life takes place in a city, Jayapura, that appears perpetually unsettled, something always "new." But in the repetition of such newness, it is a city that does not seem to go anywhere specific, that does not promise any sense of redemption. A city that never arrives.

Keywords

Afterlives, collective life, race, temporality, urban politics, West Papua

Introduction: Nation time

Jayapura, West Papua (Indonesia) is a brutal place of immense beauty, combining extraordinary surveillance and indifference, claustrophobic rule and the absence of any significant non-militarized regulation. In a metropolitan region of 800,000, Indigenous Papuans are a minority in the face of substantial inflows of, largely subsidized, migrants from other parts of Indonesia (Mote, 2015). While much of this inward migration might be understood as a kind of settler colonialism, the intersections of migrant lives and what they do to make a living are rarely consolidated or stabilized. There are also an estimated 100,000 military and police, as this region is considered by the Indonesian state as not only a zone of terrorism, but a kind of permanent "frontier" in which careers and vast sums of money are to be made.

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There is a constant sense of temporariness and uncertainty that maintains Jayapura in a time of an interminable present, a sense that the city is always unsettled, turbulent, never sure of a specific trajectory of growth or decline. These are the conditions, at least as they have been presented to me, when I undertook a six-month residency in the Dock IX district of the city in 2022, engaging in conversations with neighbors, far and wide.

Where did these conditions come from? What kind of time seems to intensify a sense of time slipping away, of a long history of continual colonial “refinement” that has long buttressed the identity of one category—the Malay—with the capture of another, the Papuan (Ballard, 2008)—and where that very identity is under threat of disappearing? In what ways do Papuans identify, engage and play with the visibilities of their own identities, as they have in past colonial engagements, where the purported relinquishing of cultural values in favor of rampant, seemingly irrational, accumulation and assimilation was simply a guise through which to reiterate important cosmologies and strategic maneuvers, as well as a mimetic response to the conceits of imposed Western values—the pretense of control, destiny, or knowledge of the infinite (Dalton, 2000; Lindstrom, 1993)?

West Papua has long sought to be an independent nation. This was an aspiration dutifully expressed according to international law in 1962, when the peoples of West Papua were promised by both the Netherlands and the United Nations the opportunity to ratify their status as an independent nation. This aspiration failed in its realization due to the political mechanizations of cold war politics that saw the United Nations succumb to the complicities between the U.S., Netherlands and Indonesia governments to postpone this process in the interest of deterring the supposed spread of communism (Kirksey, 2012; Viartasiwi, 2018). Kluge (2020) argues that the relentless and strident framing by Indonesia to the international community of Papuan aspirations as a continuing manifestation of colonialism and the rapid occupation of Papuan institutional space by Indonesia in 1963, following the exit of the Dutch, prompting the exodus of most Papuan political leaders, made it difficult to seek redress from the salient international bodies. Yet, from exile, Papuan political leaders continued efforts to mobilize solidarity and support, particularly under the rubric of Pan-Africanism—something which had diminishing returns in light of the ascendance of Afro-Asian solidarity. Not able, within international law, to appeal for independence based on the prohibitive actions of the Dutch, who had supported independence, the provisions available to Papuan nationalists were the same as those cited by Indonesia to support the integrity of their own national sovereignty. Coupled with the ambivalence on the part of African nations, with their own waning sense of racial solidarity, Papuans could not attain the support of Africa during crucial votes at the United Nations overseeing the process.

Indonesia was delegated control over the territory until a referendum on West Papua’s definitive status could be held. This referendum did not occur until 1969, involving only 1025 “tribal chiefs” selected by the Indonesian military, who voted in favor of incorporation. As the 60-year hold of the Indonesian state over West Papua has worked its way through various iterations of military overkill, concessions to gestures of self-rule, and systematic attempts to alter the demographic complexion of the territory, the urban form of Jayapura has also shifted to reflect oscillating centers of economic and cultural gravity.

Appropriating a term widely used by Christian missionaries to mark moments of intense spiritual revival and fervour, an attack on an Indonesian military installation in July 1965 commenced what is popularly referred to as the “great awakening,” which would gradually work its way across all of West Papua’s diverse terrain and populations in an enduring fight against Indonesian colonization/annexation and for national self-determination. From then on in, from highland guerrilla movements, to the elaboration of Papuan epistemologies at

schools and universities, from ministrations from pulpits to street-corners, to everyday subversions and refusals, to the intensive circulation of bodies, marked with all kinds of designations, across the territory and beyond, from the musical voicings of liberation on the part of Arnold Ap to the later blossoming of hip hop (Richards, 2015), nation-time was being constituted within the confines of what has been called “slow genocide” (Chauvel, 2007).

Papuan temporalities

What is this sense of nation-time? This is the question this essay takes up. It does so not by looking at such time as a matter of anticipation, nor the arrival at independence as a destination. But it considers time as an extension. An extension beyond the dilemmas of being human or not. This is the possibility of being a human that has not experienced irremediable loss or a future foreclosed. But rather an entity that endures an after-life beyond what anyone might know it; a life situated in the *middle of* freedom and abjection. Such a life takes place in a city that appears perpetually unsettled, something always “new.” But in the repetition of such newness, it is a city that does not seem to go anywhere specific, that does not promise any sense of redemption. A city that never arrives.

Jayapura exists in a space that is clearly not of the inhabitant’s own choosing or self-determination, but at the same time is not fully reified, not consolidated as a definitive arrival. As Sophie Chao (2022) explains, her Papuan interlocutors possess a sense of time that has stopped, experiencing a future will never arrive. But refusing the passage time is to refuse the Indonesian narratives that link past to future. She calls this a temporal resistance, where nothing is awaited, neither the restoration of an authentic past nor the tropes of an economically enhanced future. Likewise, freedom may be a place not recognized as a place, or a place not available to the familiar tropes of freedom. It is a story removed from noun-verb agreement, a story of life or exile in the middle of things.

The middle passage for Papuans in Jayapura is a place of exile—in the *middle* between inclusionary exclusion (that is the way being evicted from the norm buttresses the norm) and exclusionary inclusion (the way being part of the game, getting the pie, excludes once cherished ways of living). This is a story that not only is running away from a troublesome, uninhabitable past, but also a future that is not yet inhabitable, a past and future that is not *just* for the narrator—just in both senses of fairness or exclusivity.

An important aspect of struggles for national liberation under conditions of intense military occupation, targeted killings of Papuan militants, public intellectuals, students, and gangsters is the way in which growing urban areas are used as platforms for the reciprocal extensions of Papuan households and resources across the entirety of the region. This entails the effort to constitute a circulatory force to contrast an occupying one. Lives are less consolidated in place but rather are availed and avail to others the possibility of a differentiated positioning, a new angle, a surfeit of relationality. Papuan cities become crossroads in a multiplicity of exchanges that proliferate interfaces and points of contact with an exterior reached through a network of pathways, secret “highways” and interconnected fields, streams, backroads leading in and out and toward different towns and settlements.

This is not simply the product of a spatial imagination, but a temporal one as well. It is an ongoing project of “Papuan time”, a time of extending lives to each other as the materialization of a nation not yet realized in terms of the prevailing tropes of sovereignty and recognition (Kusumaryati, 2018; Rutherford, 2003). Even as subject to the familiar civilizing missions that lead to little besides dejection, there is a sustained refusal to cultivate the self as property even as the Indonesian apparatus tries to divide the Papuan “body” into

increasingly finite micro-units, like that of digital time keeping. This has been evident in the Otsus Law 21/2001 (autonomy agreement), which created two distinct provinces in West Papua with the trappings of self-rule and reserving the governorship and 80% of civil servant positions for Papuans (Resosudarmo et al., 2014). This legislation, recently renewed in 2022, has divided things further with the creation of four additional new provinces—in attempts to buy the consent of educated Papuans and provide a pathway to some limited form of economic accumulation (Chairullah, 2022). However, any significant decisions concerning the disposition of resources, policing, and policy remain *de facto* the purview of the central government in Jakarta (Bertrand, 2014; Chauvel, 2011).

Amongst afterlives: Time as non-arrival

So the continuation of the “great awakening” does not move toward some foregone conclusion, as the tropes of subjugation and liberation are changing. There may be an obdurate commitment to nationhood on the part of the Papuans, but just what this nation might look like is being rehearsed all of the time through experimental forms of gathering. These are gatherings which reflect efforts to constitute “something else besides”, right next to the predominant realities of suffering. Taking a notion used by Jaime Alves (personal communication), Papuans live in a state of “non-arrival” in that these practices are deployed outside the anticipation of a destination. They are deployed not so much in the service of incremental steps toward emancipation or an imagined future, but a disposition indifferent to any object of attainment. Nijah Cunningham (2007: 117) presents this notion as a “testament to the social practices and relations, affects and gestures, claims and imaginaries that exceed the normative horizons and political expectations of liberty, equality, and civil rights.”

In a recent special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “Black Temporality in Times of Crisis”, time is both drawn out and compressed, replete with enduring dread and the revitalization of critical historical aspirations, as well as the anticipation of an always ambivalent future. It entails the impulsion to “take up the unfinished work of resolving historical harm” (5) and practices, orientations not apprehendable through the predominant ontological frameworks (Ibrahim and Ahad, 2022). The issue emphasizes the ways in which Black feminist thought has embodied a sense of time beyond crisis, something that this article’s empirical engagement with Jayapura intends to illustrate. This is in line with the symbolic versatility of Papuan collective imaginaries, their recourse to narratives that situate themselves in a larger world of operations, that continuously re-territorialize Papua as the site of an originary time (Timmer, 2015).

Non-arrival would seem to be associated with the more familiar notion of “after-lives.” There has been much recent discussion on this notion, particularly in reference to slavery, Indigeneity, and colonialism (Hartman, 1997, 2008), where the “persistent survival of anti-blackness in its divine, mythic, and profane formations and structures is an absolute violence that thrives on the conceptualization of blackness as a flaw.” (Park, 2022: 14). On the one hand, it refers to the consignment of a people to a fixed temporal and spatial position without recourse or consideration as to the ways in which a way of life is able to transform itself and become something else by virtue of its own inventiveness or practices of valuation. It connotes an inability to actively extend a sense of liveliness into the future. By virtue of becoming a relic or exotic anachronism (various modalities of flaw), all of those incipient potentialities assume a spectral presence embodying a past that is not yet completed and a future that yet can be made from what might have been or what actually might be (Parikh and Kwon, 2020; Sexton, 2010; Terreffe, 2016).

As Park (2022: 12) emphasizes, afterlife “not only relies on a survival of something living that ought to have been dead but draws on a capacity to represent something ostensibly hidden within the sphere of the living and among the profane structures of representation.” The assumption here is that inordinate investment must be made in maintaining these ways of living as static, frozen in time, and then not simply through the same forms of capture and impediment (Zeiderman, 2021). Rather, subjugation lives on through variegated apparatuses partly deployed to generate the impression that a reality of capture has been laid to rest, where resistance or countervailing claims are disarmed through relocating the terms of suffocation, trauma, or underdevelopment to the characteristics of the subjugated themselves, and where they are seen as being incapable of taking full advantage of transformed situations (Al-Saji 2019).

Thus, afterlives refers to a terrain of contestation that extends the terms of politics to processes that are both an integral “part of” discernible struggles over rights, autonomy and “breath” and “apart” from the terms of overt antagonism—a more ephemeral terrain of complicities, dissimulations, and forces. While this ephemeral terrain may be difficult to grasp or consciously mobilize, it unsettles the predominant arrangements, subjecting them to spaces of incessant speculation, rumor, gossip, and questioning (Benjamin, 1996, 1999; Gordillo, 2014).

Drawing from the work of Neferti X.M. Tadiar (2022), one sense of after-life refers to the perpetual war to be “human”, to exemplify a life worth living, which derives from the constant assault upon those to whom such a position is promised but which is foreclosed. In this context, being human assumes the character of a mutable operating system rather than a specific state of being. An operating system predicated on limitless attainment and the progressive accumulation of capacities, which is enacted with particular finite constraints at any given moment. But where the constraints do not constitute a limiting horizon of potential.

Geographies of Blackness as enfleshment

As this special issue examines Blackness as a hinge in relationships between the human and non-human, I want to engage Jayapura and the everyday urban political practices of West Papuans as a means of thinking about the conundrums entailed in attempts to get out of the position of being “other.” To think of an afterlife to being other. To think about the extent to which this is possible. Where there is a disposition that does not arrive at anything like a proper destination.

One way into Papuan sensibilities of non-arrival are through the largely American reflections on Black enfleshment. In an oscillating indeterminacy about what is human or not, of the possibilities of dissimulation that have become an essential aspect of being human, the politics of attribution (who is really human or not) and sensing which underlie the very concrete applications of coloniality are subject to a way of existing, a nonarrival, which appears perpetually incomplete (Weheliye, 2014). Here, flesh represents nothing but signifies everything, including an unassimilated semiosis. A making of meaning not fully digested into the anthropology of “Man,” which can only imagine the world as constituted in a process of production, whether called that or called providence, or nature, over which Man is destined to acquire mastery (Judy, 2020; Wynter, 2003). As such, *freedom* is not some clear, specific destination. But something that in important respects is *always already here* (Walcott, 2021). This is in part because Blackness is also the mode of flow (Judy, 2020) *living on*, in bodies, selves, situations, and times *somewhere else besides* (Stevenson, 2014).

Attempts to define and control a stable, individuated subject are hollowed out from the inside, always unsure of their effects and efficacy. So it has been important to keep in mind the discursive politics and violence necessary to suture things together, and that operated, for example, through managing the intensive spatial proximities of masters, overseers, slaves, and the indentured. These proximities contained the over-coding of genealogical ties for some (Whites) and their total abruption for others (Blacks) (Spillers, 1987). They also entailed the regimented temporalities of industrialized agricultural production and the seasonal cycles of the plot, the total surveillance of socio-spatial organization and the dissimulative operations of black spiritual practices. There was something inseparable here, without clear identifying marks and a capacity for unbounded extensionality (Ferreira Da Silva, 2014). As such, all attempts to scale and enclose are punctuated by a certain *waywardness* (Hartman, 2019).

The alignment of Black efforts and labor, the ways in which Black peoples had to continuously reposition themselves in face of carceral conditions in order to know or love each other, in order to cushion the impacts of command, always were elongating and providing textures to spaces that remain unmapped, unidentified. Multiple recesses, vacuums, and dead zones, where things took place out of view or narration, continuously occupied the heart of settlements and plantations (King, 2019).

Once the black body is revealed as featureless flesh by the violence imposed upon it, there is the danger, for the capturer, that this flesh will do something that cannot be grasped by any language, any form of control (Gray, 2022). Here, a potentiality, brutal though it may be, emerges out of the most blatant disregard of one for another, a fundamental act of misrecognition, but which unleashes from the humanity denied another plane of extensionality, of the flesh without definition, which saturates the field with the very questioning of distinction, and which challenges the presumption of the individual as a master of a life of their own (Hortense Spillers in Jafa, 2014). Also relevant here is what Tina Campt (2019) refers to as the affective work of *adjacency*, i.e. the making of relations in spite of and because of the differences of experiences and power. Something which is not empathy for the other but an acknowledgement that there are no words or feelings sufficient to do the work of translation or to put yourself into someone else's shoes. Rather it is important to confront and address the divergences, the extensiveness of unacknowledged suffering, and rework the possibilities of proximity, of people being together.

The empirical explorations that follow emphasize the ways in which Papuan enfleshment manifests itself as a multiplicity of intransitive specificities, each embodying varying proportions of indifference, resistance, collective imagination, rehearsals of nation time, and reiterations of long-honed cosmologies. They are an acknowledgement of all the work that must be done, work that entails not only obdurate struggles for liberation and dignity but to act as if they are capable of acting seriously within the sanctioned forms of enunciation without necessarily taking them seriously (Rutherford, 2003) and also as if they are not even there; that they have no traction whatsoever. But as they are very much present, how to disarm them by offering performances for which the dominant apparatus has no terms for apprehending.

Blackness and Papuan ways of being in the world

Here, the dilemma of Blackness has less to do with its status of being insufficiently human than it does with being something extraordinary and inexplicable, something exceedingly relevant to life in general but being just beyond life, without discernible vernacular or mode of appearance. While these two conditions are inextricably tied together—since insufficiency

connotes a sense of disproportion, an absence of balance or mediation—the fact that Papuans have been reduced to exemplifying the primitive does not obviate the status upon which they are most feared. That is, their status as bearers and conveyors of an almost mystical collective presence, an exertion of force for which there is no definition. So while migrants from other parts of Indonesia may speak of Papuans in the most animalistic and derogatory terms, almost every one with whom I encountered also justified their caution and everyday defensive maneuvers in terms of how Papuans possessed an uncanny ability to be everywhere at once, to capitalize on any small slip or opening, and of their ability to live in many different times at once.

What is clear are the attempts Papuans make to extend themselves beyond these binaries. The ways in which considerable amount of time and effort are spent on the part of Papuans extending themselves across geographies, social statuses, and religious identifications to continuously find ways to spend time with each other, know each other beyond the apparent classifications. Chao (2021) describes how the derogatory attribution of the term monkey to Papuan student demonstrators gets turned into a Papuan appreciation for the political struggles of non-human entities and more than human solidarities, as well as a desire to explore their lifeworlds, as Papuans rarely encounter monkeys of any kind. An important aspect of such extensionality is the way in which Papuans continue to re-articulate their connections to a larger Black world of struggle, as evidenced by the recent Papuan Lives Matter (PLM) movement (Lundry, 2022). PLM is itself a continuation of a long history of civil rights and national liberation struggles undertaken through various organizational ambits—some of which focus on the immediacies of racial discrimination, while others tackle the repressed nationalist aspirations of a legitimately differentiated sovereign “people.” Papuan “Blackness” is the convergence of the ways in which Papuans respond to their own multiple exclusions and the appropriation of more globalized versions of Black identity—from Pan Africanism to Black Lives Matter—as an underpinning of claims to both everyday dignity and eventual national independence (Webster, 2022). It is also the basis from which both historical, cultural and political extensions are forged across Melanesia (Shilliam, 2015).

Yet, after-lives—as a space of extending matters beyond what counts as discernible and legitimate life, is also a modality of being that exists *after* the life normatively imposed on Papuans, and within the present. This is a life that views Papuans as not fully human, as in need of development, but also as a life that essentially has no capacity to be other than what has been frozen in time and needs to be re-lived as “Indonesian”, which itself is always materialized as partial, only a part of what the entire archipelago embodies.

From the mobilization of both slave and indentured labor across the Western Pacific (Horne, 2007) to Dutch efforts to justify its hold on Papua to Indonesia’s present insistence that it is a multi-racial nation as a way of “watering-down” Papuan claims to uniqueness (Rutherford, 2012; Webster, 2022), Blackness has been mobilized to legitimate colonial rule. But according to Kabutaulaka (2015), it is also something always in the making, foregrounding its diverse manifestations across Melanesia, and which at the same time attempts to consolidate itself into effective regional institutions wrestling with the complexities of exerting political power. Taking that which is seen to limit both full citizenship and national liberation, i.e. Papuan Blackness, after-life here points to the very extensions of Blackness beyond its limits as pointing to something else *besides* it. Both in the sense of being next-to and different from. Something that cannot ignore the long histories of racial subjugation, but also accompanies it with the use of Blackness as pointing to a way of living that cannot be pinned down. A way of living that refuses to be other or subject. A way of living that

circumvents the need for assessments about whether or not one is fully human. Something which dispenses with the use of the “human” as a destination, an arrival.

Dock IX: The other side of the seen

This sense of looking beyond the conventional tropes of the human has come to exert an outsize influence on life in the rambunctious port-side district of Dock IX. By reputation this is an area of long-term migrant residency; of Bugisese and Butonese peoples coming from distant Makassar, who characteristically live on the shore in intricate assemblages of platforms across the water. They are low-level seafarers and merchants who displaced much of the local Papuan fisher population, forcing them upstream along creeks and up into the surrounding and largely impenetrable hills. Nevertheless, the mixtures in population have been extensive, and it is often on the surface difficult to tell who is ethnically who. This is a rough place full of all kinds of rough deals and small improvisations. Local officials nominally responsible for administering the area repeatedly claim that they have no idea how anyone makes any money besides theft. There are all kinds of stories about surreptitious nocturnal boat journeys and roving packs of young children that spread out across the city.

In recent years, West Papuans have been reclaiming much of these shores in light of repeated “incursions” whereby the sheer act of gathering in all kinds of combinations and gestures has generated an incessant mystery and unease as to what is taking place. For years, several times a week, West Papuans from the surrounding area have taken “their positions” in various sites, in various numbers and constellations, engaging in different kinds of interchanges, sometimes singing, sometimes talking all at the same time, and sometimes performing robotic gestures. But in each instance, they perform something that cannot be easily attributed to any specific function. The gatherings are not overtly political, religious, festive, entrepreneurial, and so forth. No one knows quite what to make of them.

Ezekiel, a prominent self-described thug and hip hop artist, states that these are all “empty bodies”, bodies emptied of any identifications and, as such, are made available to choreographies designed by the mixtures of random conversations that are taking place across the district. That these are the concretizations of bit and pieces of words being uttered that reverberate across other words and intermix as a poesis that takes visual form. Yet, Ezekiel emphasizes, “in these moments, we are not there, we have already left; we are always one step ahead; already where we saw ourselves possibly being.” “Still we aren’t anything besides what we already are.” “The police and the *amber* (the local word for hair that is not kinky, for those persons who are not “black”) just don’t know how to see.” Here, what you see is both what you already know and something else all-together. As Ezekiel puts it, “it is all that we know all together at once, and as such, it is going to look different every time.”

These surprising convocations of West Papuans clearly provoke unease, in part because the audience just cannot see these gatherings for what they are—as simply the possibility of experiments with gathering for those who have little to bank on except the sheer acts of gathering. On the other hand, individual West Papuan participants deny even “being there”—as for them, the experimentation even exceeds the possibility of providing a narrative or account. They are busy elsewhere, growing meager crops along deep ravines, or carrying messages to kin across a city that spreads out for 100 kilometers. At the same time, they know that whatever performances occur in this vast array of gatherings, each one somehow different from all that have transpired before, that a “mathematics is involved.” Ezekiel again, “it’s a formula, an equation, but what it all equals, well, I don’t think the answer ever arrives.”

Dock IX is replete with still other kinds of “sentinels”, who pursue another mathematics. For, there are those who spend their days watching from high embankments along the main road, or from lines of rafts less than a 100 meters from the shore or from rooftops. In my exchanges with these watchers—primarily young men who had once constituted dynamic hip hop crews—Dock IX has long conceded control of the district to an invisible force, a collective body they affectionately call *cekakakan* (a kind of infinite laughter despised in Javanese culture). This is a force indifferent to whatever people think of it, which in turn, affords the gift of indifference to those constantly harassed, detained, and plundered by military and police. As Romo, one interlocutor points out, “It does what it wants, when it wants; it does what it is.” “We are asked only to watch. Not to watch ‘it’, not to detect its activities, but to mark a ‘world’ for it. Not to trap or enclose, but only to mark a place where it can exist without the need to do more, go further.” As Romo describes, “we watch out for it, make sure it feels at home, has a home.” “We are where it lives, and we live with it.”

Dock IX is a district marked by its never-ending accumulation of traumas. Resided by those who have been displaced from once viable if minimal lives and those whose ancestors had come from afar to a place full of largely empty promises, Dock IX is a place where no one seems interested in putting down roots or allowing the building up of a sense of history. For these residents, the materialization of a body that is called “laughter” does not so much displace the affective experience of those traumas. Rather, it enables collective enunciations to be something else. It suspends the sedimentations—in the hearts and minds of residents and in the environment in which they live—that register various stages of loss and failure. It then turns them into apertures of images that do not represent anything in particular. Yet, these images nevertheless crisscross the apparent divides among ethnicities with lines of mutual implication, and, of course watchfulness. It is as if residents know that the military apparatus that really runs the city needs to ferment constant low-level ethnic divisiveness; that residents are being played, but yet have little choice but to exhibit ethnic solidarities and resentments above all else. At the same time, they know that everyone is further trapped by this.

Computing on the front lines

The sheer volume of military presence in Jayapura, and in West Papua in general, would seem to approach overkill. Extraordinary effort and expense are made in ensuring that the military presence shows up nearly everywhere. Additionally, weapons are in the hands of the city’s major migrant communities—the Makassarese, the Javanese, the Manadonese, and Bugisese, those who exert nearly total hegemony on the urban economy. Indigenous West Papuans are thoroughly put in “their place.” Increasingly relegated to the most difficult physical terrain, given that much of their traditional land holdings have been sold off in order to attain some basic income, West Papuans have also become a demographic minority in Jayapura (Chauvel, 2011; Kusumaryati, 2018).

While the autonomy arrangements imposed by the Indonesian state reserve 80% of provincial civil service positions for them, Papuans control little. Over the course of many decades, they have spawned hundreds of churches of different sects that afford a locus of social extension and anchorage, limited protection from state incursions, a platform from which to express discontent and aspiration, and, most importantly, the semblance of stable institutional forms of consolidation and investment. Even when associated with long histories of missionary “civilizing” projects, the “church” becomes an important platform to embody important cultural sentiments, translate them into forms that resonate with other

non-Papuan Christians, amplify dissent, and demonstrate a capacity for self-determination (Chairullah, 2022).

Yet, what troubles the now majority migrant population of Jayapura is less demonstrations of this institutional capacity but an “otherness” that is manifested, like in Dock IX, in a wide range of “collective appearances” that take place outside of any institutional frame. Appearances that seemingly demonstrate a collective power that has no need of institutions, that is infused with a capacity on the part of Papuans to respond to an inaudible “call”, to gather in large numbers in ways that cannot be defined as demonstrations or rituals. These are gatherings which make it difficult for the military or police to legitimately intervene. Yet, in the past have occasioned displays of wanton violence, undermining the claims of the Indonesian state that force is deployed only to deter acts of terrorism. These manifestations of an inexplicable “otherness” appear critical to Papuan endurance in Jayapura. Still, there are occasions when Papuan urban residents seek an after-life to otherness, or at least a way to inhabit the “middle” of seemingly mutually exclusive positions, where they try to carve out a space of “beyond capture” within the obvious constrictions they are forced to endure.

As Ezekiel talked about a different kind of mathematics at work—something beyond the established equations—there are urban territories where the dynamics of everyday living are computed in a different way. For example, Polimak 5 is an Indigenous Papuan district up and over a few hills from one of the main arteries that run across the city. It is a place of spacious homes and well-ordered lanes curated incrementally over the years; a place exuding an abundance of confidence and well-being, as well as architectural experimentation to accommodate varying intersections of residence, agricultural cultivation, and artisanship.

Facing away from the urban agglomeration, toward verdant hills, Polimak is nevertheless distinctly of the urban, welcoming the internal densities of new activities and kin coming from other parts of the province. While adamantly protecting its tenure in face of wildly escalating land prices, most of its residents, made up largely of school teachers, social workers, government officials, and preachers, continue to imagine elaborating a more expansive urban life. Not one that displaces pastoral contentment, but that is replete with industriousness; that does not have their discipline, dedication, and attainments qualified by the extreme militarization of the surrounds. They are adamant in their refusal to be “other”, nor do they intend to be portrayed as model citizens—the culmination of that which the state claims to have made possible. They refuse the position that, despite the systematic reduction of Papuans to the status of the non-human, it was possible for some Papuans to become “human” as a structural exception.

The refusal to be “other” is a refusal to be *essentially different*. It is a refusal to embody some kind of power or capacity that exceeds the apparent confines of the human, an otherness wrapped up in the extraordinary. A capacity which, nevertheless, many Papuans still must rely upon to wedge some space of maneuverability within an apparatus that produces multiple dispossessions, such as those we have seen in Dock IX. At one level, it is possible to see Polimak as an almost remarkable concretization of the collaborative spirit of its residents. Yet, residents have a somewhat different take on the process. For they do not see the comfortable and livable homes, plentiful gardens, well laid out plots and market spaces as the culmination of their skilled action and community spirit. Nor do they see it as the logical culmination of Papuan value translated into urban form.

Rather they see Polimak as a manifestation of a design that comes from elsewhere, that comes from a destiny that has not yet arrived. It is not a matter that what has been built so far has not yet reached the imagination that residents are reaching for. Rather, what presently exists is part of something that has not and will not arrive; that there is no destination,

no objective; that what has been built is in the middle of things, between that which is gone and will not come back, and that which is not yet here and will not arrive. Sometimes as Yance, a resident puts it, “we all come out in the streets late at night, simply to look at what we are, not here, not there.”

Residents claim that what has been made comes from a version of themselves that has never been there in any concrete recognizable way, but which they fully believe they are, even if they are constantly having to put this version aside of any fully fledged image or discourse. They say that this version is basically “useless” to them, even as it accounts for what in totality has been created. This is the case even though this perspective may seem to have no impact on the individual stories about how a piece of land has been passed down and subdivided; how and who may have built a particular house. As Freddy B, a local musician, indicates: “We are educated people after all.” We are “god-fearing” and believe in the “power of Christ.” “We are a people that have been denied our basic human rights.” These are the *useful* attributions of everyday life articulated by several of my interlocutors. Yet, within that *useless* version that is repeatedly invoked as the “real force” behind the viability of Polimak, there is the refusal to be “other.” Yance again, “they (*amber*) think they know us, and they will keep on trying, what a waste of time.”

Across various theorizations of Black resistance, there have been contestations about the forms of noncooperation with oppressors, about the extent to which the shattering of Black subjectivity dispossesses it of all positivity beyond refusal. There have been contestations about whether noncooperation implies the endurance of specific contents and capacities that apparatuses of antiblackness were unable to reach (Kelley, 1994; Robinson, 2020). To what extent is non-arrival then descriptive of the ontological incompleteness of Black life; that Blackness being about both everything and nothing cannot specify a destination beyond abolition of the terms and conditions that engendered it in the first place? Or, is non-arrival the capacity to generate a life worth living outside the terms of any destination? That no matter what, something can be made in the middle of things without regard to assessments about how close or distant it is from emancipation or subjection, noncooperation or complicity, incorporation or refusal. That after the trajectories of life have been mapped out, specified, and measured, there remains collective materializations that cannot be apprehended in terms of “self” or “other”, “human” or “non-human”.

The notion of afterlives has been criticized by some scholars as obscuring the ways in which apparatuses of subjugation actively recalibrate their methods of operation to endure as a direct continuous structuring force (Colebrook, 2014; Marwah et al., 2020; Sexton, 2010). Rather than simply constituting a haunting, spectral presence, such apparatuses are continuously remade, adapted to deepen and extend their hold on social processes. But what if we put the emphasis on *after*-life, a mode of existence that is not centered on liveliness as we might conventionally know it? That there are forms of affecting that are neither human nor non-human, but rather are extensions across various technical processes that do not simply act as prosthetics or enablers of life, but have their own way of existing in the world devoid of human intent.

For, the techniques of operating an interaction between the abstract materializations of signals and syntax—the building blocks of calculation—can sometimes posit unanticipated and indecipherable meanings and propositions that suggest a completely different way of being in the world (Parisi, 2022). The former characteristics of the urban, replete with the symbolic mixtures applied to different kinds of bodies, physical and social arrangements, took on the status of *real and natural* existences. Yet, this stabilization demanded something that simultaneously exemplified both a natural state of abjection and a domain of existence

beyond anything that could be subsumed under the clear lines of demarcation between “man” (human) and the world.

Computation, as a means of deciding what counts and in what way, which lives have values and which do not, demands an incessant particularization of the world. It breaks it down into differences that are weighted in terms of each other. These are differences that existed only to be compared according to an unyielding equation, i.e. man=human=white. These are differences that were compared computationally as a way of both reaffirming and extending the terrain through which this equation could be identified and applied. But as Luciana Parisi (2021) points out, there are also incomparable differences that are products of computation; ways of interacting entities and elements that are indeterminate. These

indeterminacies become enfolded in the interactions of localities. As such, indeterminacies do not simply demarcate how meaning can change through use but rather how techno-semiosis brings forward alien meaning or know-hows of another language that does not seek to match symbolic inputs with outputs”. (38)

These are “conclusions” of computation that produce no distinguishable self or others, and no clearly demarcated power arrangements. As Ezekiel said, a different mathematics.

The pursuit of the useless

While these reflections from a cultural theory of algorithmic processes may seem a long way removed from Jayapura imaginaries and politics, they point quite specifically to the ways in which residents of Polimak “compute” what has happened to them. There have been the long histories of give and take, of struggling against dispossession of land and liveliness, of engaging the various purveyors and conditionalities of seemingly interminable colonialities. Papuan residents have sought to tactically seize the opportunities accorded to them, to re (de)fine themselves as Christian subjects, and create habitable spaces. But besides these practices, there was something else at work all along. There was something else that was there without precedent or discernible form, to which ultimate responsibility is accorded. At the same time, there were no discursive tools to describe exactly how that responsibility was materialized. That what is subsequently produced, even as a design of a collective imagination that remains largely unimaginable, is not experienced as a culmination of anything. It is something that does not evidence a people closer or more distant from specific goals or objectives. It is something that does not arrive, but not in the sense of falling short, bypassing or exceeding. It is not something other to itself or to others. It refuses each and every term applied (Moten, 2008).

This does not mean that the residents of Polimak are simply caught within the vertigo of an intensified self-referentiality. It does not mean that their sense of non-arrival is not cognizant of the need to continuously recalibrate their sensibilities and practices to the changing conditions around them. For example, residents in recent years have made increasing reference to what is going on “down the road.” By this, they have several things in mind: First, this is a temporal foreboding related to the more desperate measures being taken by the Indonesian state to clamp down on resistance movements, and secure control over larger swathes of traditionally held land. This intensification of control addresses the continued struggles waged by the United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP)—now the primary organization of resistance amongst many. While claiming majority support within West Papua, the ULMWP remains a largely diaspora-based coalition, first led by

Octovianus Mote from exile in the United States and then by Benny Wenda from exile in the United Kingdom. The movement finally in 2015 managed to win an important mark of legitimacy through being granted observer status at the intergovernmental group of Pacific nations, the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG)—even if not the full membership sought (Lawson, 2016). It also responds to the emergence of #Black Lives Matter Melanesia and Papua Lives Matter as a different reframing of West Papuan dissent and resistance that potentially opens up the possibility of different kinds of both national and regional alliances. Second, it is a reference to a particular form of disturbing urbanization taking place most emblematically several kilometers down the road on the outskirts of Abepura—the main commercial center of the Jayapura metropolitan region and the historic site of what had been intensely ethnically mixed neighborhoods by a nominally “black” population (Kusumaryati, 2021).

Given the convoluted land politics and allocation systems controlled by the Indonesian state, land is liberally available to religious institutions, and now particularly to mosques. This reflects the determination of the Indonesian state to attenuate the influence of the church in West Papua and to concretize signs of a steady Islamicization of the city through the influx of migrant populations, which ironically, have largely been Christian in the past. For the construction of the big mosques is also being used as a platform to draw in thousands of migrants from marginalized rural areas, most particularly from Sulawesi. So there are now large swathes of new territory replete with hastily constructed hostels packed tightly together, as well as other makeshift constructions assembled from scrap. Youtefa, for example, is a district that accommodates thousands of new residents, sometimes up to 15 people living in a 20 square meter room, most who barely eke out a subsistence existence, usually from some form of day labor.

But as residents of Polimak speculate, they really have no idea about what this most recent wave of newcomers are doing to survive. There are few factories left. Most of the agricultural production takes place on state subsidized Javanese plots in the Koya districts on the outskirts of the city. Transport and delivery drivers, auto repair mechanics, betel nut distributors, welders, shop clerks, security guards—all of the conceivable absorptive professions have long been dominated by ethnic groups long present in the city. Rumors run rampant about how the Indonesian government is supporting basic subsistence needs with cash payments distributed through the major ethnic associations. At the same time, walking through these districts at any time of day reveals the paucity of men; for it is women and children who are most visible, who mostly have some kind of public presence. This fuels speculation that the men have been deployed on secret missions, are working deep in the hills and forests on projects that are off the books.

Then there is the demographic, political impetus for such massive settlement. While provincial government positions are largely reserved for Papuans, including the governors of now six distinct provinces, metropolitan positions are not. As such, the demographic shifts in Jayapura have resulted in a progressively diminishing base of representation for Indigenous Papuans. Of the 17 members of the Jayapura City Council, only five positions are now occupied by Papuan representatives. What makes residents in Polimak apprehensive is not simply the invasion of “foreigners” but a conversion of a larger swathe of urban space not simply as reserve for a population in waiting, not simply as an extension of a legitimation for an allowance of the most precarious conditions to exist within the city, now applied to a non-Papuan population. Rather, the concern is with the infusion of a temporality that centers on the perpetual “now”—of something that remains unsettled, without clear destination. While they themselves may be accustomed to an experience of non-arrival, they feel that even this is being stolen and misapplied in other settings.

Their worry is that the materialization of Polimak's refusal of otherness, of its own embodiment of a non-arrival, of a collective mode of being that refuses to be concretized within everyday life as something extraordinary and is, rather viewed as "useless", ordinary beyond words, is itself being "othered." It is being othered by a form of urban emplacement that simply aims to abrupt, unsettle, and be constantly available for any use anyone might want to make of it. It is interesting that the spatial layouts of these "unsettlements" are often right across the road from the well-developed, highly secured and gated districts of fellow ethnics from Makassar and Manado, who make up the entrepreneurial classes of the city. The relationship among them is full of deference, unilateral obligations, but also vitriol and violence.

An interminable now, and towards a then

What makes Polimak wary might be construed as a temporality defined by the "now"—something that contrasts with their own sense of timelessness combined with their concrete practices of incrementalism. The fear is that Jayapura will increasingly become a space unanchored not only from a rule, which however brutal is yet familiar, but from any pretense of an economic narrative that might allow Polimak to exist within a larger surrounds of Papuan industrious and culturally syntonetic urban development.

As Rev. Yoman, a pastor of an evangelical church in Polimak explained,

these *amber* are willing to entice thousands of their kind to flood Jayapura, to live in inhuman conditions, just in order for them to control the local politics, to make sure we Papuans never have a chance to look outwards beyond our prison.

What he meant by looking outwards he later explained was the Pacific, the Black world of the nations to the east, with whom connections were limited to occasional meetings outside of Indonesia or the albeit prolific on-line cultural exchanges, as concrete articulations directly from Jayapura were few and far between.

We in Polimak have never been that interested in aligning ourselves with what the Indonesians had in mind for this city; rather we envision ourselves as part of a larger world, and so we wait, remain as detached as we can until that time comes.

In Jayapura, the city stretches long distances primarily because of the characteristics of the terrain—coastal, riverine, mountainous, which continuously insert their interruptions on any possibility of a seamless elongation of urban fabric, instantiating a structural disarticulation only partially remediated by expanding the road system. At the same time, these interruptions permit a range of feral settlement practices. This is the case particularly for those who desire to attenuate the intensity of urban connections, who may wish to live off-grid and pursue more traditional subsistence-based livelihoods. In fact, many Papuan settlements endure or are relocated to various interstices, such as riverbeds, steep mountainous slopes, ravines, and difficult-to-access valleys. In part, this situatedness reflects terrain that is less subject to expropriation or what is left over following the sale of more strategically placed land.

Atmospherically, this fragmentation creates the impression of the rural still extending itself into the urban. But yet bookended by urban form, this large swathe of bush assumes an ambiguous character, always potentially surveyable, all within conceivable reach. Still, at the same time, such territory haunts the coherence of the urban. It retains a sense of unruliness that always threatens to engulf large swathes of the urban environment whose

proximity to the bush demands large expenditures of time and labor for maintenance and repair. Such is often not forthcoming since Jayapura residency for many is largely an extension of fundamental attachments elsewhere. From any vantage point from the urban tissue which extends across valleys and coasts, the surrounding mountains are visible and thus also the Papuan settlements which reach to even higher elevations. These are settlements that are largely inaccessible except by paths generally unknown. This omnipresent visibility, which might normatively be unattended to in day-to-day affairs, nevertheless seems to haunt the imagination of the majority migrant population as something structurally unknowable and to be defended against.

But in increasingly desperate rejuvenations of a colonial impetus, the *amber* power brokers of the city simply are “stuffing the ballot boxes” in their willingness to subject a new wave of newcomers to conditions that parallel those associated with most impoverished Papuans. As Rev. Yoman insists, “the *amber* will go to any lengths to win.” This is not simply a demographic maneuver but a psychic cushion, a maneuver to attenuate a perpetual haunting. But as Rev. Yoman refers to Polimak, “we live aside all of this, even though it concerns us immensely.” “We must persist believing that what we have built already addresses what always comes after; we are always one-step ahead.” This is a phrase repeated so many times by so many people, and refers to a place always beyond arrival.

A recent security agreement concluded between the People’s Republic of China and the Solomon Islands registered alarm bells throughout the Pacific, signaling perhaps a momentous realignment of regional affiliations and geopolitical dynamics. Imaginations ran rampant speculating about substantial extensions of the Belt and Road Initiative in terms of new maritime corridors, fishing practices, and nascent IT industries. Even as the actual instantiation of BRI projects in the Pacific have been quite limited, and the Solomons agreement was largely spurred by contentious internal politics, on the ground, it is unavoidable to weigh in on the potential implications. Especially, as the intensity of affiliations with China is increasingly becoming a major fault line of political contestation, not only in the Solomons, but in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu as well. PNG has officially signed on to be a BRI partner, and there are purportedly over 70 Chinese State-Owned-Enterprises operating in metallurgy, fiber optics, and construction, as well as a substantiation of a long existent Chinese presence in retail and distribution, to the dismay of many PNG Papuans.

While increased Chinese presence has enabled significant sectors across Melanesia to be more overtly committed to issues of regional autonomy, consolidation, and West Papuan aspirations for independence, it also remains a double-edged sword in terms of the often brazen Chinese indifference demonstrated to Indigenous economic processes. Even as the Chinese increasingly dominate the elaboration of a green extraction economy in Eastern Indonesia, centering on nickel mining and smelting, as well as lithium, copper and rare earth metals, the bulk of investments and activities are centered in Sulawesi and Halmahera. Chinese on the ground presence in West Papua has been limited. While it has been reported that the Chinese have financially underwritten the Indonesian stake in Freeport (Papua), one of the world’s largest mines, the security situation has largely limited the scope of foreign investment and presence.

Still, many West Papuan residents of Jayapura, while always professing the need for independence, increasingly see a more expansive regional role of Jayapura as a potentially Melanesian economic powerhouse as a much more attainable modality of everyday self-determination. Thus, a rumor circulating across Papuan neighborhoods that the Chinese were preparing to build a “new city” in Papua is not entirely baseless in terms of how urban Papuans think of potential dispositions and trajectories of their social and economic

aspirations. Within an urban economy where Papuan routes to accumulation are primarily limited to their usually ambivalent participation in the apparatuses created by the (OTUS) *Special Autonomy Law in West Papua*, which continues to churn out new provincial governments, an extension of relations with other Melanesian nations is imagined as a medium of brokerage and entrepreneurship. This brokerage is envisioned as being largely unavailable to the *amber* residents of the city who have come to dominate almost all economic activity.

But this means rethinking the basis of Papuan identity. Rethinking who belongs to it and who does not. As a minority in their own largest city and in the now five regions as a whole, to be “Papuan” is no longer a sufficient condition of “arrival”, of coordinating its scores of “tribes” and ethnicities. So here, Blackness returns as a locus of gathering up the “loose ends.” Not as a point of contrast, a locus of resistance, or even the melding of a sociality held in common by dark-skinned residents from Ambon, the Kei Islands, Alor, and Timor, which often share the same attribution of being Melanesian, and therefore, “Black.” Rather, Blackness returns to open up Polimak, Dock IX, and Jayapura, to a larger world—a larger world that both Polimak and Dock IX already see themselves living within, albeit in slightly different ways.

Vulnerable to manipulation and the extraction of their energies and ideas, Blackness seems particularly well suited for pointing to solidarities that are being continuously worked out, that remain unembedded in line with the logistical universes they attempt to navigate.

Blackness becomes a strategic conversion of the interminable now of non-arrival into the materialization of a new possibility of living, something that lives on after any discernible usefulness. Here, there are no clear criteria of eligibility or worthiness. It is not a political block to be consolidated, but an always mutable and growing form of inexplicable gathering. It is something to throw the surveyors and surveillants off-guard. Something that does not repeat a perpetual now of provisional life.

In the same backstreets where rumors of a Chinese-instigated “new city” were being proffered, there has also been talk of Jayapura as Indonesia’s predominant “Black city”. Here a mode of urban existence is imagined that pries away its Ambonese, Kei, Timorese, and Alor residents from the status of migrants to rather enfold them in a speculative deployment of Blackness as a form of alliance that both circumvents and exceeds the constraints of either Indonesian or Papuan citizenship, ethnic or regional belonging. It is the imagination of a cosmopolitan urban sensibility that might further establish Jayapura as the key node, the key manifestation of a Pacific urbanism, which in turn might effectively loosen the grip of obdurate coloniality.

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