

In the Shadow of the Palms

Sophie
Chao

More-Than-Human
Becomings in West Papua

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More-Than-Human

Becomings in West Papua

SOPHIE CHAO

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Frontispiece. In the shadow of the palms. Sago fronds reflected in starch and water. Photo by Sophie Chao.

To Jacob, for his humbling courage in all walks of life.



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PROLOGUE

Oil palm killed the sago
Oil palm killed our kin
Oil palm choked our rivers
Oil palm bled our land

Valuable like agarwood, sago is not
Expensive like red meranti, sago is not
Elegant like the frangipani, sago is not
Majestic like the banyan, sago is not
But life it brings and growth to share
Food it gives and water it cleanses
Shade it offers, rest it promises

So, jail me, shoot me, burn me, kill me
But bring my shattered bones to the sago grove
To rest among the suckers, to drink from cleaner rivers

Sago, sago, you first came into being
In a place called Timasoe
There, our children grew strong and bold
Our wives had shiny skin and abundant sweat
Our men were tall and fit
Timasoe, Timasoe, Timasoe
You are west of the cassowary mound near Doeval
East of the last bend of the Milavo tributary
North of the juniper bushes
Where my ancestor Khiano gave birth to Yom
A sacred place, a peaceful place

Where wild deer and pigs and birds came
For water and shade and protection from the rain

Oil palm killed the sago
Oil palm killed our kin
Oil palm choked our rivers
Oil palm bled our land

Timasoe, Timasoe, Timasoe
Dare I visit you now?
With sorrow and shame, I tread your soil
My bones weak from riding trucks
My skin grey from eating rice
My hands bloodstained from the dollar bills

Timasoe, you are now a bare and barren place
Lodged between the Trans-Irian Highway and plantation blocks
Between roads and dust, you stand
Hostage to oil palm, the settler palm, you weep

For no sago here will grow
No rivers here will flow
No gentle winds shall blow
No songs tomorrow know
Our bones your earth shall stow

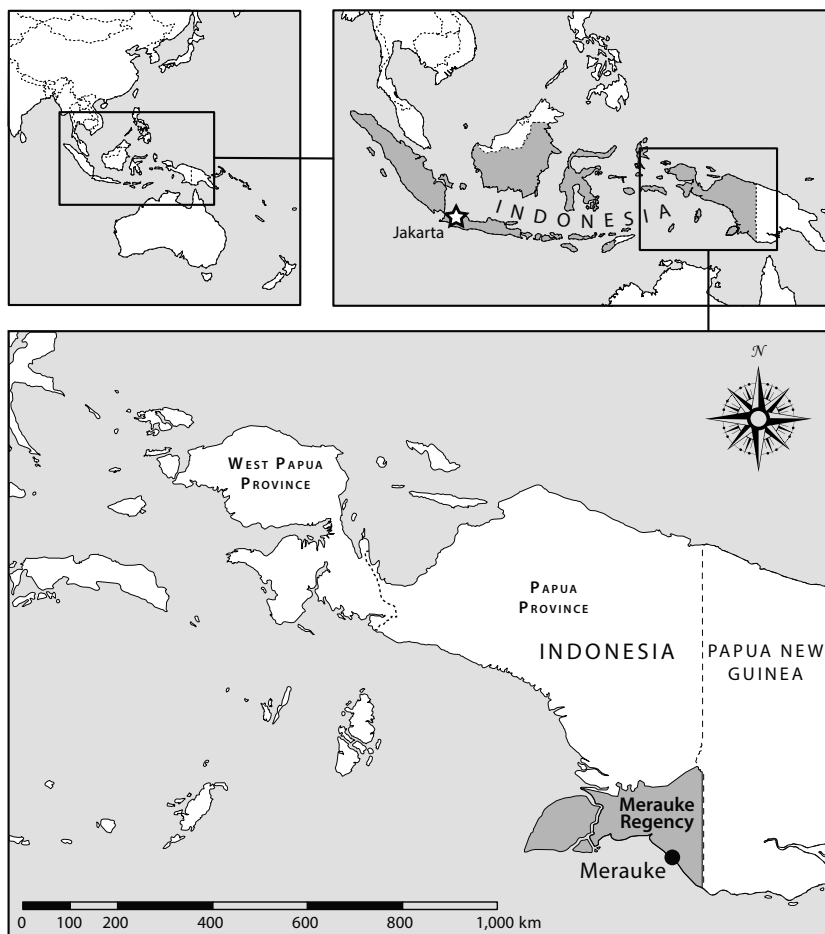
—The song of Marcus Gebze, elder of Mirav village, West Papua

INTRODUCTION

Nausea. Anger. Grief. Driving through oil palm plantations with my Marind companions in rural West Papua brought home to me the boundless devastation and disciplined monotony of industrial monocrops as no high-resolution drone footage or glossy environmental magazine ever could. Endless rows of oil palms surrounded us, silently condemning our clandestine vehicle. A cortege of trucks rumbled into the horizon, dragging loads of felled woods amid shrouds of stubborn red dust. The palm oil processing plant, looming on higher ground, spewed smoke and steam throughout the day and night. Illegal land-clearing fires consumed the forest, blanketing the landscape in a choking haze.

Hunched beside the road, young plantation laborers watched us drive by with dull gazes. Paraquat, a deadly herbicide, trickled down from rusty canisters strapped to the women's backs, the blue-green venom seeping into their exposed skin. Banned in many countries because of its toxic effects, no antidote exists for this lethal chemical. I thought of babies never to come. The faces of my friends, huddled in the bed of the truck, were caked in dust and watched the landscape unfurl, weeping. Infants retched from the stench of mill effluents as we jolted down dirt roads without stopping so as to avoid attracting the attention of military men employed by the companies to guard their plantations. Bunches of oil palm fruit lay strewn along roadsides, piles of moldering blood-red and coal-black, shot through with razor-sharp thorns. Bulldozers and chainsaws ripped through isolated patches of the remaining vegetation. Silhouetted against the bleary sun, pesticide-spraying helicopters zigzagged back and forth above us, spreading a milky veil of hazy toxins.

Crouched in the back of one of the trucks in late July 2015, Paulus Mahuze, a Marind clan head from Khalaoyam village in the West Papuan regency of Merauke, explained to me how oil palm had arrived in his homeland.¹ On August 11, 2010, a delegation of government representatives from Jakarta, led by then minister of agriculture Ir. H. Suswono, had officiated an inauguration



Map I.1. Merauke Regency in West Papua, Indonesia. Map by Geoffrey Wallace.

ceremony in the nearby village of Sirapu. They were launching the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), a USD \$5 billion agribusiness scheme intended to promote the country's self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs and make Indonesia a net-food-exporting nation. Papuans from across the region were invited to the event, including Marind community members from villages along the upper reaches of the Bian River, where I undertook my field-work. Paulus described the ceremony:

It was a hot day. There was dust (abu) everywhere, raised by the government convoys and military trucks.² The dust stung our eyes and made the children cry. The government brought oil palm (sawit) company

bosses with them from pusat (“the center,” or Jakarta). They gave us instant noodles, pens, bottles of water. They also gave us cigarettes—the expensive kind. They talked a lot about MIFEE. MIFEE this, MIFEE that . . . but we didn’t understand what MIFEE was. We did not know what oil palm was because oil palm does not live in our forests. Then, the government officials and the oil palm bosses left. They never returned to the village. They promised us money and jobs. They said MIFEE would provide us with food. I thought that they would plant yams, vegetables, and fruit trees. Instead, they planted oil palm. They planted oil palm everywhere they could. They turned the whole forest into oil palm. They cut down all the sago to plant oil palm. This is what happened. Since then, everything is abu-abu (“gray” or “uncertain”).

By May 2011, the Indonesian government had allocated some two million hectares of land in Merauke to thirty-six domestic and international corporations for the development of oil palm, timber, and sugarcane plantations. Vast swaths of forest had been felled or burned. Major watercourses had been diverted to irrigate the newly established monocrops. Today, Paulus’s home village of Khalaoyam, along with several others along the Upper Bian River, are encircled by oil palm plantations that cover several hundred thousand hectares of former forest and extend north into the neighboring regency of Boven Digul. As we enter the third decade of the third millennium, dozens more companies are applying for operational permits. Agribusiness continues to expand relentlessly across the region.

I first visited the Upper Bian in 2011, while working as a project officer for the UK-based human-rights organization Forest Peoples Programme. At the time, I was undertaking field investigations with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and church institutions to document the social and environmental impacts of oil palm developments in Merauke. These investigations revealed that agribusiness projects were being designed and implemented without the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Marind (see Awas MIFEE 2012; Ginting and Pye 2013; Ito, Rachman, and Savitri 2014). Military-corporate collusion was rampant. Consultations, when undertaken, presented projects as a *fait accompli* and offered limited information to communities on the potential risks to their food security, land rights, and economic livelihoods. Oil palm projects were routinely framed in corporate and government rhetoric as key to national interests, regional economic growth, and the “development” (*pembangunan*) of West Papuans into modern, civilized subjects. Yet employment opportunities for local Marind proved limited, as companies preferred

to bring in their own labor force or hire migrants. Other grievances shared by Marind villagers included unfulfilled corporate social responsibility schemes, critical levels of water pollution, endemic biodiversity loss, and deforestation through illegal burning.

Oil palm developments in Merauke thus exemplified vividly what anthropologists have called the “dispossession dynamics” of agribusiness expansion—a process premised on and perpetuating structural violence in the form of land alienation, growing poverty, intergenerational displacement, and precarious rural livelihoods (Li 2017a; Tsing 2005; West 2016). The plantations also represented a classic case of “land-grabbing,” or the large-scale acquisition of land in the Global South for agricultural development, intensified by the food, fuel, and finance crisis of 2008 (Borras and Franco 2011; Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2015; D. Hall 2011). In this regard, the dispossession dynamics of agribusiness in Merauke were not radically dissimilar to what I had witnessed in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago where oil palm is industrially cultivated, and most notably in Sumatra and Kalimantan. However, the particular *ways* in which this dispossession was being experienced on the ground differed.

Very early on, I was struck by how Upper Bian Marind conceptualized the arrival of oil palm. The stories I heard in the field were not about global markets, corporate interests, or food security. Nor did they primarily revolve around the issue of rights—land, human, or Indigenous. Instead, cryptic statements abounded in villagers’ reflections on their present condition, which were invariably preceded by the temporal marker “since oil palm arrived.” Oil palm, people told me, was a modern totem that had made time stop. The forest had become a world of straight lines, haunted by a rapacious and foreign plant-being. Cas-sowaries and crocodiles were turning into plastic and weeping like humans as their native habitats disappeared. At night, oil palm depleted the flesh and fluids of dreamers in their sleep. Meanwhile, the skin of animals and plants was drying out as oil palm sapped wetness from the earth and devoured the forest.

These narratives challenged my activist habitus. They also stimulated my curiosity. Eventually, they brought me to leave the world of human rights advocacy and undertake long-term ethnographic fieldwork among Upper Bian Marind. These early experiences thus marked the beginning of a long personal and intellectual journey of encounter with difference—a difference whose many facets I will explore in the chapters that follow. Oil palm expansion, I came to realize, could not be framed as either a social or an ecological problem. Nor could it be addressed purely through the discourse of human rights or environmental justice. This expansion was radically reconfiguring Marinds’ sense of place, time, and personhood—their bodies, their stories, even their

dreams. It affected men, women, and children both present and to come who, together with their forest kin, appeared to be undergoing a more-than-human existential crisis—one that left no single sphere or species of life untouched. Many NGOs, including the one I worked for, targeted the Indonesian government, international corporations, and financial investors in their anti-oil palm campaigns. And yet the communities whose rights we advocated for seemed more interested in oil palm itself—where it comes from, what it wants, how it differs from native species, and why it is so destructive.

Against this backdrop, the book before you explores how Indigenous communities in an out-of-the-way place engage with the disruptive effects of an other-than-human actor.³ Specifically, I ask: How do Marind experience, conceptualize, and contest the social and environmental transformations provoked by deforestation and oil palm expansion? How do these transformations reconfigure the relations of Marind to each other, to other species, and to their environment? And how do plant-human dynamics in the Papuan plantation nexus inform our understanding of more-than-human entanglements in an age of planetary unraveling?

Appreciating how oil palm transforms the interspecies relations, geographies, and temporalities of the Upper Bian requires that, like Marind, we take seriously the attributes of plants as particular kinds of agents. The villagers with whom I worked do not conceive of oil palm solely as a sessile object of human exploitation or a passive instrument of capitalist gain. Rather, widespread speculation over oil palm's affects and effects arises from the fact that the plant itself is seen (and feared) as a willful entity—one that is voracious, destructive, and alien. In the proliferating being of oil palm, the forces of neoliberal capitalism and settler-colonization resist conceptual abstraction and find a material grip. Violence reveals itself as a multispecies act.

ALONGSIDE MELTING GLACIERS, MARINE oil spills, and inundated islands, large-scale plantations are emblematic of an era characterized by the unprecedented magnitude of human activity on the planet.⁴ Within the agribusiness industry, the palm oil sector is particularly notorious for its destructive environmental impacts. Palm oil represents one of just four commodities responsible for the majority of tropical deforestation and the second largest industry sector driving global warming (Global Forest Coalition 2017). Oil palm plantations dramatically reduce biodiversity and damage the habitats of endangered species. They undermine ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling, water purification, and soil stability. The adverse consequences of oil palm expansion

on the livelihoods and land rights of Indigenous peoples and other local communities have also been extensively documented (see, *inter alia*, Andrianto, Komarudin, and Pacheco 2019; Colchester and Chao 2011, 2013; Gabriel et al. 2017; Li 2017b). Yet despite growing controversy over their social and environmental impacts, oil palm plantations continue to spread across the tropical belt, driven by economic development imperatives, renewable energy policies, and a growing world population. Integral to the global agroindustrial food system, palm oil remains the cheapest and most versatile vegetable oil on the market, present in over half of all packaged goods globally (World Wildlife Fund 2020).⁵

Scholars from a range of disciplines have condemned industrial plantations for subjecting cash crops to totalizing human control and for jeopardizing biodiverse forest ecologies.⁶ Comparatively speaking, however, agribusiness has received less ethnographic attention than other environmentally destructive industries, such as mining and logging. Existing studies have focused primarily on the anthropogenic forces driving plantation expansion and the experiences of peasant groups involved (more or less willingly) in the plantation sector as laborers or smallholders.⁷ The ways in which Indigenous communities in Merauke conceptualize and engage with monocrops provide an important counterpoint to these accounts. Marind are directly affected by the ecological destruction wrought by agribusiness, but most remain excluded from the sites and circuits of palm oil production. Few are, or wish to be, employed by local corporations. Indeed, many Marind are averse on moral grounds to agriculture, horticulture, and other forms of plant or animal domestication.

Perhaps most important of all, Upper Bian Marind do not primarily attribute the destructive impacts of oil palm expansion to human actors, technologies, and market forces—even as they are well aware of them. Instead, they attribute these effects to the volition and actions of oil palm itself. The blame that Marind place on oil palm is pivotal to this story. It is what makes it differ from other works on plantations and plant-human relations. It is what disrupts the human-centered focus of political economy approaches to the agroindustrial sector. It is also what brings into the picture other powerful entities that, like oil palm, are deemed by Marind to be introduced and invasive—the state, settlers, soldiers, and corporations.

And yet blaming oil palm is only part of this story. As much as they resent the plant for its radically destructive effects, Upper Bian Marind also pity oil palm for its subjection to totalizing human control. Others express curiosity about oil palm's origins, needs, and desires. Ambivalent affects and heterogeneous perspectives coalesce around this alien plant of unknown ways and

wants. Taking seriously the conflicting meanings of oil palm prompts us to ask which lives and deaths matter within capitalist natures, to whom, and why.⁸ It invites attention to justices alternately enabled or preempted by agroindustrial landscapes—environmental and social, restorative and intergenerational, human and more-than-human (Chao, Bolender, and Kirksey 2022).⁹ It reveals the potential and limits of the “species” as a mode of analysis, relation, and practice. And it points to violence itself as a multispecies act—one in which humans are not always the perpetrators and nonhumans not always the victims.

In this book, both ethnographic description and conceptual abstraction help to reveal the granular textures of Marinds’ changing lifeworld. I avoid imposing a carapace of theory atop the moving flesh of ethnography. Instead, I thread thick description and distilled abstraction in the manner of the barks and filaments that my Marind sisters artfully fashion into woven sago bags. Some of the concepts I deploy in this story are Marinds’, and others are mine but draw from those of Marind. Some concepts are inspired by the work of Indigenous and critical race scholars and others stem from what might be considered the traditional Western canon of theory.¹⁰ Moving back and forth between theorizing ethnography and ethnographizing theory, I respond to Black feminist scholar Zakkiyah Imam Jackson’s (2013, 681) call to collapse the hierarchical distinction between Western theory and non-Western cosmology—a distinction that itself replicates and perpetuates the historical oppression of Indigenous and other marginalized peoples by (settler-)colonial regimes. In switching my analysis of Marind thought between Western eyes and Indigenous eyes, I work against the colonization of ethnography by theory when theory is taken to be “produced” by (and often for) the Global North, based on ethnographic realities that “happen” in the Global South.¹¹ Instead, I look for theory in “small places” (Agard-Jones 2013, 183) produced by peoples who persist in the face of imposed invisibility and who have something important to say about what it means to live under entrenched regimes of color and capital (see also Banivanua-Mar 2016; Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2018; K. Teaiwa 2014; West 2016).

Attending to theory in small places reveals the agentive and imaginative capacities of people in the face of structural inequalities that are relative to, but never totally determined by, macrolevel forces. It draws attention to the critical vantage points held by communities at the margins of the world capitalist economy and the complex idioms through which they articulate ongoing processes of accumulation through dispossession.¹² In the context of the global ecological crisis, starting from the local allows us to appreciate the specificity

of loss and potentiality in the very places where they materialize and come to matter. Rather than a study of the ontology of Marind, this is an account of Marind *as* ontologists of their own changing worlds—one that takes as its primary objective the acknowledgment of Indigenous creativity and the decolonization of anthropological thought and practice.¹³

This book adopts human-vegetal relations as a central lens for exploring the changing lifeworld of Upper Bian dwellers. In doing so, it contributes to a vast body of anthropological literature that has found in plants a fruitful entry point to understanding human cultural forms and social organization.¹⁴ Alongside their material uses and ecological functions, plants in Indigenous and other horticultural communities are often endowed with a soul or other form of agentive consciousness. In Melanesia and Amazonia, for instance, plants may be personified as kin (notably as surrogate children) or classified as male or female and associated with particular personalities or traits—gentle, aggressive, ugly, or beautiful.¹⁵ Some cultures correlate the substance and structure of particular plants to those of humans. The sexualization of plants is often linked to notions of fertility and procreation, giving rise to gender-inflected modes of plant cultivation, exchange, and consumption.¹⁶ Stages of vegetal growth may be associated with the human life cycle and intergenerational reproduction or serve as the basis for broader divisions of seasonal or calendrical time.¹⁷ In some societies, plants coaxed into maturation through ritual, magic, and song enable those who nurture and consume them to access sacred sources of knowledge or acquire other-than-human forms and faculties.¹⁸

Anthropological studies of plant-human relations have tended to focus on native vegetal lifeforms with a well-defined status within local cosmologies—for instance, taro, yams, and sago in Melanesia and cassava, tobacco, and ayahuasca in Amazonia. This book, on the other hand, focuses primarily on a plant—oil palm—that was only recently introduced into West Papua and that many Marind consider alien and invasive. I examine the ontology of oil palm by cross-pollinating classic environmental anthropological literature with insights derived from the *plant turn*, a budding interdisciplinary current that foregrounds the role of plants as communicative, sentient, and worldmaking actors.¹⁹ The plant turn moves beyond the treatment of plants in purely representational and functional terms. It invites us to think and theorize *with*—rather than just about—vegetal lifeforms as agents in their own right. It also considers the historical, affective, and mimetic entanglements of humans and plants, in a practice that Theresa Miller (2019) calls “sensory ethnobotany.”²⁰ In an age of rampant ecological crisis, scholars of the plant turn exhort us to “make allies”

of vegetal beings to sustain our mutual dependencies and generate “new scenes of, and new ways to see” plant-people relations (Myers 2017a, 299–300).²¹

The storied relations of plants and people recounted in this book speak powerfully to the ethical urgency of reimagining interspecies entanglements in an age of planetary undoing. At the same time, the sites and subjects at the heart of this story—Indigenous lifeworlds and monocrop plantations—offer a critical counterpoint to the predominantly Western- and technocentric focus of the plant turn and related strands of thinking in the broader fields of the environmental humanities and posthumanism. Departing from the prevalent focus on scientific and conservationist perspectives within these currents, I ground my analysis in the theories, experiences, and knowledges of an Indigenous community whose social relations have always encompassed other-than-human beings but are now challenged by the occupying presence of a lethal vegetal lifeform.²² In so doing, I seek to expand approaches for reimagining what is possible in more-than-human worlds that remain largely situated in the unmarked White space of Euro-American (settler-)colonialism.²³

But this book also invites a more fundamental critique of posthumanist currents. On the one hand, Marind practice a posthuman ethic in positioning themselves as one kind of self among a plethora of agentive forest lifeforms. No “Great Divide” separates or elevates humans from “nature” in the Upper Bian. Rather, Marind come into existence through their corporeal, affective, and material connections to kindred plants and animals, within a broader ethos of relationality in which all lives and lifeforms are interdependent.²⁴ Yet Marind are also grappling with an other-than-human being—oil palm—that is invasive and destructive. Many of them actively resist the technocapitalist assemblages attempting to turn them into posthuman “cyborgs.”²⁵ These assemblages include the plantation economy and its production-driven logic; the dreams of “modernity” promoted by the government and incarnated in oil palm; the racialized treatment of Papuans as primitive peoples in need of development; the commodified foodstuffs replacing Indigenous, sago-based foodways and ecologies; and the conversion of animate forests into homogeneous monocrops.²⁶ Together, these imposed transformations perpetuate the dispossession of Marind of their bodily and territorial sovereignty. Together, they alienate Marind from the multispecies relations that make Marind human in the first place.²⁷

In this light, the posthumanist effort to decenter the human and practice multispecies love becomes problematic. It brings us into alliance with a plant whose entanglements with Marind and their forest lifeworld is neither

desired nor conducive to multispecies thriving. These entanglements stem from a capitalist formation—the plantation—that is itself imbricated with imperial forms of violence, enslavement, and expropriation, including racialized hierarchies of humanness and attendant necrobiopolitical regimes.²⁸ Far from solely an economic production system, the plantation, in the words of Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, is also a race-making institution (2002, 200). As landscapes of empire, plantations remind us that environmental problems are indissociable from histories of colonialism, capitalism, and racism, which have rendered some beings less or differently human than others.

In the story that follows, the racial logics of capitalism and colonialism manifest in the paralyzing effects of state-corporate geographies, the asymmetric relations of Indigenous Marind to non-Papuan settlers, and the paternalistic rhetoric of progress surrounding agribusiness developments. These dynamics reveal how oil palm's relatively recent arrival exacerbates the ongoing subjection of Indigenous communities to racializing assemblages that render them subhuman and disposable before the law.²⁹ West Papuans today, independence activist Filep Karma (2014) notes, continue to be treated like half-animals.³⁰ Their imprisonment, killing, and torture are not only tolerated by the state but also at times celebrated (Hernawan 2015). Their right to self-determination continues to be denied and their lands and resources continue to be appropriated without consent (Chao 2019a). In arguable contrast to the postcolonial world, where the imperial logic of discrimination and displacement perdures as ruin and debris (see Stoler 2013, 2016), the racialized logic of settler-colonialism in West Papua is very much alive and well.³¹

Giving center stage to plants in a world where colonizing plants and people are destructive and racialized multispecies communities are their victims serves to challenge universalist assumptions of human exceptionalism—a widely critiqued concept in the posthumanist tradition. It demands that we approach posthumanism itself as a *plural* category of being—one alternately embraced or eschewed by communities positioned as subhuman under colonial and technoscientific regimes. It demonstrates the importance of attending to Indigenous epistemologies in appreciating which lifeforms are deemed loving or unloving, and consequently lovable or unlovable.³² Never straightforward binaries, these categories reveal themselves to be species-inflected—but not always species-determined—modalities of being within the dispersed ontologies of the Upper Bian.

The poetics and politics of more-than-human entanglements in Merauke invite us in turn to rethink the notion of violence as solely or primarily an anthropogenic act. As my host father, Marcus Gebze, sings in the Prologue,

Marind inhabit a world held hostage by an invasive “settler palm” that kills the sago, murders their kin, chokes their rivers, and bleeds their land. This world demands that we take seriously the possibility of plants, not as amoral, but as *immoral*, subjects. It brings into question the prevalent characterization of plant-human dynamics as reciprocal and beneficial and of plants as nonappropriative, giving beings.³³ It also offers a sobering counterpoint to the celebration of more-than-human encounters as inherently conducive to multispecies intimacy and thriving.³⁴ Instead, the words and worlds of Upper Bian Marind draw attention to the potentially exclusionary and diminishing effects of more-than-human entanglements.³⁵ In doing so, these words and worlds provocatively reframe the assumed human monopoly on violence as potentially yet *another* instance of human exceptionalism. When a particular group of humans and their other-than-human kin are subjected to the damaging effects of a proliferating plant, we find ourselves forced to redefine violence itself as a multispecies act.

In elaborating this argument, I explore how oil palm—a literal *neophyte* (from the Greek words for *new* and *plant*)—becomes a potent object of wonder for Marind, which alternately indexes or challenges the ontological ruptures wrought by agribusiness expansion (cf. Scott 2016, 476). Such ruptures manifest in the dynamics of Marinds’ everyday village life, in their material engagements with the environment, in their interactions with state and corporate entities, and in their dreams, which magnify the dystopic effects of oil palm on the landscape and its lifeforms. Across these and other settings, multiple diverse scales, subjects, and species coalesce or collide in generative friction (Tsing 2005).³⁶ The frictions I examine arise from Marinds’ fraught encounters with colonialism and modernity, along with their associated actors, technologies, and claims to knowledge and power, including knowledge as power. They entail the substitution of sentient forests with technocapitalist plantations. They encompass the antagonistic relation between introduced cash crops and native species, whose respective proliferation and obliteration speak unsettling truths to Marind about their own fates and futures. Together, frictions in the plantation as *contact zone* reveal an ontological dissonance between the Marind lifeworld and the forces of agroindustrial capitalism, as incarnated in the sago palm and the oil palm, respectively.³⁷

Exploring the dispersed ontologies of the oil palm and the sago palm brings me to examine the clashing visions, projects, and desires of state and corporate actors, on the one hand, and Indigenous actors, on the other—what emerges in these spaces of encounter, what is excluded from them, and what might be hoped of them.³⁸ Drawing from almost a decade of involvement in the land rights campaigns of Upper Bian Marind, I assess the obstacles faced by activists

as they struggle to curb the proliferation of oil palm and protect their sago-based ecologies, foodways, and relations. I also demonstrate how Marind engage creatively with the ambiguity of oil palm to generate new possibilities of being for themselves and their forest kin.

In focusing on the radical ruptures engendered by oil palm in Merauke, the story that follows exemplifies what Sherry Ortner (2016) calls “dark anthropology”—an anthropology that attends to social experiences of oppression and injustice in the rise of global neoliberal capitalism. To this end, I explore the Indigenous modes of analysis and praxis through which Marind conceptualize and critique the ontological ruptures wrought by agribusiness expansion.³⁹ I situate these ruptures within broader processes of cosmological decline that manifest in the transformed bodies and relations of humans and other-than-humans.⁴⁰ I examine how plants themselves come to act as potent symbols for larger sociohistorical forces that shape the contested spaces of the plantation, forest, and village. I also attend to the moral and sensory dimensions of plant-human entanglements as they manifest in the tangible violence of the waking world and in the anxiogenic dreams that haunt Marind in the sleeping world. By interweaving political ecology with phenomenology, I seek to bring to light what Paige West calls the “affects of dispossession” (2020, 122), or the sensory and affective ways in which systemic loss, violence, and destruction are experienced by people in their situated relations to each other and to the more-than-human dwellers of unevenly shared and increasingly vulnerable environments.

At the same time, this story engages with dark anthropology’s counterpart, or what Joel Robbins (2013) calls “anthropologies of the good.” To this end, I explore the meaning of the good life among Marind in light of their conceptions of morality, relatedness, and interspecies care.⁴¹ I investigate how beings in the forest participate in the (trans)formation of moral selves and relations through bodily exchanges of wetness and skin. I examine how the good coalesces in the affective textures of Marinds’ relations with sago—a plant that my companions invariably describe in contrast to oil palm.⁴² Following Unangax scholar Eve Tuck (2009), I also analyze how Upper Bian communities resist and refuse the darkness of the present and the precarity of futures both imposed and arrested through their daily interactions with human and other-than-human beings, their involvement in land rights campaigns and participatory mapping, and their emergent sense of solidarity as collective victims of the violence of oil palm.⁴³ These everyday imaginative acts in turn invite us to reflect critically and capaciously on the (im)possibility of hope in a present of impasse—a present when, as many Marind affirm, the arrival of oil palm has made time itself grind to a halt.⁴⁴

The good and the bad form one of several counterpoints that animate the story. As entities that accrue meaning through their relationship to each other, counterpoints reveal how Marind creatively flesh out the categorical differences that matter as they forge a “Papuan Way” in the wake of ecological destruction.⁴⁵ The counterpoints I explore include the materiality of the landscape and its cartographic representation, the duality of body and mind, and the mirrored ontologies of human and bird shape-shifters. They encompass the opposed moralities of sago palm and oil palm, the gastropolitical divides embodied in rice and sago, and the fraught dynamics of oneiric possession and diurnal suffering. Other counterpoints include the interplay of interspecies violence and care, the opposed perspectives of plastic drones and forest birds, and the seemingly incompatible patterns of monocrop capitalistic production and multi-species social reproduction. The text before your eyes, which draws together multiple voices, utterances, and discourses that I gathered through my own intersubjective interactions with Marind in the field, is itself nothing less than contrapuntal.⁴⁶

More than anything, however, the story I tell attends to the generative spaces that lie *between* the counterpoints of good and dark, or what Paulus Mahuze—the head of Khalaoyam village—described as the realm of abu-abu.⁴⁷ Many Marind in the Upper Bian referred to 2015—the year I started my fieldwork—as a time when the world became abu-abu, meaning “gray” or “uncertain.” That year, the sky turned hazy and dark from the thick smoke raised by large-scale forest burning—a cheap and fast, if illegal, way of clearing land to make way for agribusiness concessions. As the ashes of incinerated vegetation dispersed across land and sky, 1.5 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions were released from over 120,000 fires across the archipelago. The gray year was also one of severe drought caused by El Niño and aggravated by the diversion of major waterways to irrigate the newly established plantations. When the rains finally fell they were brief. By then, the waters of the Bian had turned gray from the daily discharge of toxic palm oil mill effluents.

Much like gray is neither black nor white but rather a mix of both and ashes are the barely tangible residue of irretrievably incinerated forms, the oil palm, the MIFEE project, and the future itself, were shrouded in menacing opacity during the year of ashes. Compensation payments and employment opportunities that had been promised to local communities had yet to materialize. Instead, cheap housing popped up across the landscape to house a sudden influx of Javanese laborers. New concession markers were erected in unexpected locations and without prior notice to local inhabitants. Despite sustained efforts, local and international advocacy initiatives were failing to slow agribusiness expansion.

At the same time, rumors that MIFEE might be relocated to other parts of West Papua rippled sporadically throughout the villages. Several oil palm companies were said to have gone bankrupt. Others had vanished after reportedly making a fortune by illegally logging the precious woods in their concessions and trading them on the international market.⁴⁸ While many Marind remained staunchly opposed to oil palm developments, others sought employment within the plantations or worked as intermediaries for the corporations. Opaque like the tenacious haze blanketing the parched landscape of the Upper Bian, oil palm itself lay at the heart of a material and ontic crisis of visibility.⁴⁹ Intense concerns and curiosity were exacerbated by uncertainties surrounding the plant's own *abu-abu* dispositions and desires.

Abu-abu, as I examine in this story, encompasses ambiguous affects and atmospheres, things and beings, and spatialities and temporalities.⁵⁰ It is a condition of awkward existence distributed across unevenly situated human and other-than-human communities of life whose futures are threatened by intensifying agroindustrial landscape transformations. Amid such transformations, inhabiting *abu-abu* means living with opacity as a generalized and constitutive state of being. But *abu-abu* can also generate new becomings amid ruptured more-than-human meshworks. In certain instances, embracing *abu-abu* can even become a form of covert resistance—one that refuses the exclusions and erasures produced by fixed classificatory schemes intent on governing matter and meaning through reductionist logics of separation and stratification.⁵¹

In the Upper Bian, *abu-abu* manifests in the uncertain fate of the forest, the ambiguous efficacy of Indigenous maps, and the strange lives of village-bound cassowaries. *Abu-abu* shrouds the conflicting desires of Marind as they make do in a world of plastic foods, concrete totems, and deadly dreams. It haunts the clashing temporalities of the world before and after oil palm, the violence of imposed futures, and the shape-shifting beings that lurk within the murk. *Abu-abu* will follow us throughout this account, alternately foregrounding or subverting the contrapuntal dynamics of the Marind lifeworld.

Acts of resistance and refusal in the world of *abu-abu* are often mundane and rarely heroic. These acts, to borrow Elizabeth Povinelli's words, are "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime" (2011, 13). For some Marind, resistance takes the form of defiant, self-directed violence—the ripping of one's hair and the drawing of one's blood. For others, resistance means making maps that won't sit still, eating sago rather than rice, rebuffing the passage of time, or finding solace in the world of dreams. Perhaps most important, resistance among Marind entails an epistemic refusal to reduce oil palm to any singular or bounded ontology—good, bad, or other.

As destructive as it might be, oil palm *also* exists to Marind as an exploited victim, an object of curiosity, a pathway to an expanded world, and possibly even a kind of kin. In this shadowy world, where new beings subvert the realities and relations of Marind and their forest companions, the line between the good and the bad remains very much in the making. But before we enter the murky realm of abu-abu, let me flesh out the ethnographic setting where our story unfolds.

MERAUKE REGENCY IS LOCATED at the southern tip of Indonesian Papua, a region that borders Papua New Guinea to the east, the Boven Digoel and Mappi regencies to the north, and the Arafura Sea to the south and west. In ecological terms, the area is composed of low-lying and generally flat peat land, grassland, and dense swamp forests. In the inland back plains, serpentine rivers heave to the cadence of monsoonal rains, giving rise seasonally to Papua's most extensive wetlands. A range of resident and migratory birds, including waterfowl and waders, inhabit this zone of the TransFly EcoRegion. Larger animals, including cassowaries, tree kangaroos, possums, and crocodiles, populate its forests and rivers.

Plant life in Merauke is equally diverse, with monsoon forests containing an exceptionally high number of endemic plants unique to the region. A mixture of Phragmites, tall sedge grasses, and low-swamp grasses flourish in the permanent marshes, while semipermanent to seasonal Melaleuca swamp forests occupy terrains on higher ground.⁵² Riverbanks and mangroves are home to dense groves of sago, a pinnate-leaved palm of the tropics known in Western taxonomy as *Metroxylon sagu* Rottbøll and as *dakh* and sagu in Marind and Indonesian, respectively.⁵³ Today, these biodiverse ecosystems are increasingly being replaced with monocrops of oil palm, a plant known scientifically as *Elaeis guineensis* Jacquin and as kelapa sawit or simply sawit in Indonesian.⁵⁴

The villages of Khalaoyam, Bayau, and Mirav, where I undertook my fieldwork, are three of eight settlements lying along the upper reaches of the Bian River in Merauke's inland subdistricts of Ulilin and Muting. They sit within the customary territories of Marind, a vast triangle that stretches two hundred kilometers eastward along the coast from the Muli Strait in the west to twenty-five kilometers east of Merauke City and two hundred kilometers inland beyond the banks of the Fly River in Papua New Guinea. The villages are home to approximately six hundred households who self-identify in the Upper Bian dialect as Marind Bian (Marind of the Bian River) or Marind-deg (Marind of the forest).⁵⁵

Each Marind clan (bawan) is related to a group of species whom they call grandparents (amai) or siblings (namek). Clans and their amai share descent from dema, or ancestral creator spirits, who drew them out of fissures in the earth at the beginning of time.⁵⁶ Many Marind names take the form of the plant or animal amai followed by “-ze,” meaning “child of.” For instance, the Mahuze clan are “children of the dog” and the Balagaize clan are “children of the crocodile.” The interactions of amai and Marind are anchored in principles of exchange and care. Amai grow to support their human kin by providing them with food and other resources. In return, humans must exercise respect and perform rituals as they encounter amai in the forest, recall their stories, and hunt, gather, and consume them. These reciprocal acts of nurture enable humans and amai to partake in a shared community of life within the ecocosmology of the forest.

The communities of Khalaoyam, Bayau, and Mirav derive their subsistence primarily from hunting, fishing, and gathering. Sago flour, the staple starch food, is supplemented with forest tubers and roots (mainly taro and yam), fish, and forest game such as Rusa deer, lorises, possums, cassowaries, fowl, kangaroos, crocodiles, and wild pigs. Fruit including rambutans, papayas, bananas, golden apples, traditional mangoes, figs, watery rose apples, langsats, kedondong, jackfruit, and coconuts are also obtained from the forest, alongside leaves, roots, barks, resins, and saps that are used to make medicinal ointments and concoctions.⁵⁷ With large-scale deforestation underway, however, access to these foods has become difficult. Today, imported foodstuffs, such as government-subsidized rice, cooking oil, sugar, coffee, tea, instant noodles, and cookies, are increasingly consumed in the villages of the Upper Bian. These goods are also offered by oil palm companies as part of their land compensation or social welfare packages and now constitute an important component in Marinds’ diet.

Aside from Marind, a minority of other Papuan ethnic groups live in the villages along the Upper Bian, such as Jair, Auyu, Muyu, and Wambon. Kinship connections across these settlements, as well as with villages in the northern regency of Boven Digoel and across the border in Papua New Guinea, are close. Community members travel regularly up and down the river and through the forest to visit relatives and attend customary rituals and meetings. These movements, however, are increasingly hindered by the establishment of privatized and strictly guarded monocrops along the national border. Most Marind in the region are Catholic, with a minority of Protestants concentrated in the upstream villages of Wam and Pasior. The Upper Bian is also home to a small population of primarily Muslim transmigrants (*orang trans*) and spontaneous migrants (*pendatang*), originating from Java, Makassar, Nusa Tenggara, and

Maluku. This non-Papuan population has increased significantly over the last decade, as settlers relocate to Merauke to work as laborers and harvesters in the newly established oil palm plantations.

Accounts produced by anthropologists, explorers, and administrators during the Dutch colonial years frequently portrayed Marind as violent and invasive warmongers.⁵⁸ According to archival materials from the British Public Record Office dating from around 1891 to 1903, Marind—whom the British and Dutch administration called *Tugeri*—were renowned throughout the region for their frequent headhunting raids on the neighboring Wasi and Buji tribes (MacGregor 1893a, 1893b).⁵⁹ Joining forces to go out on war parties, Marind reportedly managed to venture far east into what Europeans designated as British territory, west to Frederik Hendrik Island (now Yos Sudarso Island), and north across the Digul River. Headhunting and the adoption of children from raided communities purportedly enabled Marind to expand their territorial control and increase their population. At the same time, trade, intermarriage, cultural exchange, and ritual cooperation with other ethnic groups remained widespread.

Repeated Marind incursions eventually led the British administration to request that the Dutch establish a physical presence in the region. In February 1901, the governor of the Dutch East Indies demarcated Merauke as an *onderafdeling* (subdistrict) under the *afdeling* (district) of Southern New Guinea, and an official outpost was founded in Merauke City in February 1902. Three years later, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart established themselves in the coastal village of Wendu and its surrounds. The mission gradually spread up north, reaching Okaba in 1910 and the hinterlands of the Upper Bian two decades later. The first inland mission was established in present-day Mirav in 1930.

However, the advance of foreign missionaries, colonial administrators, scientific expeditions, and traders in the Upper Bian was hindered by a landscape of semipermanent swamps and thick forests, the prevalence of various mosquito-borne diseases, and the purported reputation of Marind as lawless headhunters. The large body of colonial and ethnographic literature concerning the coastal—rather than inland—Marind reflects the limited influence of external actors in the hinterland. This includes Dutch ethnologist Jan van Baal's detailed monograph, *Dema: Description and Analysis of Marind-Anim Culture (South New Guinea)*, which, as van Baal acknowledges and as my own fieldwork confirmed, is primarily a description of coastal Marind groups (1966, 12–13).⁶⁰

By the 1930s, many Marind ritual practices had been abolished by the Dutch administration—for instance, ceremonies that marked the transition of children

across age-groups and headhunting expeditions that once sustained Marind populations through the adoption of children from raided tribes (Boelaars 1981; Corbey 2010; Ernst 1979). Nevertheless, informal activities in the forest remained key indicators of children's growth into anim, or "humans"—the first capture of game among boys, for instance, and the first weaving of sago bags among girls. Despite the sedenterization of Marind into "model villages" (model kampong) and the establishment of "civilizing schools" (beschavings scholen), village and school absenteeism was prevalent and Marind continued to regularly travel to the forest with their kin and children (Derksen 2016, 129).⁶¹ The dema were recast by missionaries as primitive fetishes to be abandoned in the age of Christianity. But the dema lived on in the forest and continued to exert their influence on the landscape and its diverse dwellers. From the early twentieth century onward, the coastal Marind adopted introduced horticultural techniques such as rice paddy cultivation and entertained a lively (albeit at times animus-filled) trade in copra and iron with Chinese, Javanese, and Makassarese merchants (Swadling 1996, 178; Verschueren 1970, 57).⁶² In contrast, and with the notable exception of the plume-trade boom of 1908–1924, traditional modes of subsistence in the interior continued largely unaffected throughout much of Dutch rule (Garnaut and Manning 1974, 15–17; van der Veur 1972, 277).⁶³ Horticultural projects initiated in this period were small-scale and located near the coast and the city rather than the hinterland.

Even today, the Upper Bian remains relatively less urbanized compared to coastal Merauke. Telecommunication services are available only a few hours a night in Mirav and there is no telephone signal in Khalaoyam or Bayau. Roads and other infrastructure in the region are minimal. Settlements consist of rows of rickety wooden houses with one or two small kiosks that provide limited basic supplies. Villages receive some income from government-support programs such as GERBANGKU and RESPEK and from the sale of nontimber forest products in Merauke City. Such income, however, is scarce and sporadic. Government funds only occasionally reach the villages and community members' access to urban markets is impeded by distance and transportation costs. Compensation payments for lands surrendered to oil palm companies represent another one-off source of income for some villagers. Averaging just under 5 USD per hectare, these payments are disproportionately less than the value of lands that were ceded (Al Jazeera 2020; Forest Peoples Programme, PUSAKA, and Sawit Watch 2013). Education rates in the Upper Bian are low, with less than half the population completing high school, 1 percent attending university, and 13 percent receiving no formal education (Basik 2017, 46). In the province with the lowest Human Development Index of the nation, infant mortality

rates are high, life expectancies are thirty-five years for men and thirty-eight years for women, and HIV infection rates are the second highest in Indonesia.

The modern history of West Papua, which I explore in greater detail in ensuing chapters, is notoriously violent and volatile.⁶⁴ The Dutch authorities transferred administration of the region to Indonesia on May 1, 1963. This was followed by the controversial Act of Free Choice in July–August 1969, which resulted in what many Papuans see as the forceful incorporation of West Papua into the Republic of Indonesia. In response to ongoing demands for independence, a Papuan Special Autonomy Law was passed in 2001 but then radically weakened under the rule of Megawati Sukarnoputri, when political and economic power were firmly redirected into the hands of the central government. Hopes for peaceful resolution of what Jason MacLeod, Rosa Moiwend, and Jasmine Pilbrow (2016, 8) call the longest-running and most violent political conflict in the South Pacific, grew in the buildup to the election of Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) in 2014. Soon thereafter, however, concerns were raised when the president appointed several contentious military commanders to West Papua and established a new transmigration program, prompting a renewed influx of settlers into the region (Munro 2015a; Wangge 2014).⁶⁵

Little has changed on the ground for most West Papuans since Jokowi’s election. Top-down extractive activities have exacerbated community impoverishment and ecological degradation. Government corruption, military-corporate collusion, and the criminalization of activists restrict Papuans’ capacity to seek recognition of their rights to lands and livelihoods. Cultural and religious assimilation policies are compounded by a growing population disparity between Papuans and non-Papuans across the province (Elmslie 2017). This disparity is particularly marked in Merauke, where Papuans now represent less than 40 percent of the population (Ananta, Utami, and Handayani 2016, 472). The violence of the colonizing state perdures in the form of incarceration, harassment, torture, sexual violence, and brutal military responses to Indigenous social justice movements. Since 1969, military clampdowns have occurred every year on the first of December, when Papuans commemorate their stolen independence by raising their national flag, the Morning Star.⁶⁶

The entrance of Jokowi into office has also seen an acceleration in the implementation of the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate, the mega-scheme driving oil palm expansion in Merauke. Central to Indonesia’s Masterplan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Economic Development 2011–2025, MIFEE is expected to encompass three regencies and connect Merauke to six other economic production centers in the Papua–Maluku Economic Corridor. Although originally designed as a paddy cultivation scheme, the actual composition

of MIFEE is dominated by oil palm, timber, and pulp and paper operations. Today, oil palm plantations, planned or projected, extend across some 1.7 million hectares in Merauke regency and occupy over 20 percent of the Upper Bian area (Franky and Morgan 2015). Ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 hectares each and operated by thirty-six national and international corporations, plantations creep right up to the edge of the villages, encroaching on sago groves, hunting zones, sacred graveyards, and ceremonial sites.

In historical terms, MIFEE constitutes the latest development in a long process of top-down resource exploitation in West Papua. This exploitation has included large-scale pulp and paper production, timber plantations, endangered wildlife trafficking, and nickel, oil, coal, gas, copper, and gold mining (see *Down to Earth* 2011). Moreover, MIFEE sits within a long history of oil palm cultivation in Indonesia, dating back to the early 1900s, when the first monocrop estates were established in Deli, North Sumatra. While oil palm plantations expanded rapidly under Dutch colonial rule, palm oil yields suffered episodic plunges during the Japanese occupation in World War II, the struggle for Indonesian independence up to 1945, and following the nationalization of Dutch companies in the 1950s. With the establishment of the New Order under Suharto, full-scale government support for agribusiness development led to a tenfold expansion in oil palm monocrops within two decades, boosted by capital injections from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. State-owned and smallholder-managed agribusinesses were gradually subsumed within larger estates, operated by a handful of private conglomerates. Political decentralization and global market forces have done little to undermine the sustained flow of profit to this powerful politicobusiness oligarchy, whose rise to power was facilitated by the close ties of its magnates to Suharto's totalitarian regime.⁶⁷

In 2006, Indonesia surpassed Malaysia as the top palm oil-producing country, and today it supplies some 61 percent (thirty-six million tons) of the world's palm oil (Indonesia Investments 2017). According to the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics, oil palm plantations in the country covered 12.3 million hectares as of 2017, representing a 1.1 million hectare increase from the preceding year (Badan Pusat Statistik 2017, 9). With arable land increasingly scarce in Sumatra and Java, the monocrop frontier is now moving east into West Papua, a region deemed attractive for its vast areas of unexploited lands and cheap labor force.⁶⁸ This expansion is further boosted by the government's annual crude palm oil production target of sixty million tons by 2045. Achieving this target will require developing an additional 8.2 million hectares of land, an area equivalent to the entire island of New Guinea (Saleh et al. 2018).

Across the national border, the oil palm sector is also expanding rapidly in Papua New Guinea (see Cramb and Curry 2012; McDonnell, Allen, and Filer 2017). Today, palm oil constitutes Papua New Guinea's most valuable agricultural export and oil palm plantations represent the largest source of non-government employment (Allen, Bourke, and McGregor 2009). In 2017, oil palm concessions accounted for 2.2 million of the 5 million hectares alienated through Special Agricultural and Business Leases, a legal process designed to enable customary landowners to exploit their land for business purposes and to participate in the cash economy (Gabriel et al. 2017).

As in Indonesia, oil palm plantations in Papua New Guinea usually take the form of private estates owned by mega-conglomerates of predominantly Malaysian origin, which are also active in other sectors such as sugar and beef production and logging (Filer 2013, 316; Gabriel et al. 2017, 219). Patronage politics has facilitated the allocation of land to these companies without the free, prior, and informed consent of local landowners, fueling horizontal disputes and community fragmentation on the ground (Filer 2011; Nelson et al. 2013). Increasingly reliant on palm oil for their income, many rural villagers struggle to maintain a livelihood balance between subsistence horticulture, small-scale business, and export crops (T. Anderson 2015; Koczberski and Curry 2005). Competition over land, resources, and benefits also provokes tension between incoming migrant workers and native inhabitants (Koczberski and Curry 2004).

Local communities in Papua New Guinea and Indonesia have resorted to an array of institutional mechanisms to seek redress for the violation of their land rights. These include cases submitted to national courts, transnational advocacy campaigns, and complaint mechanisms activated under the voluntary certification standard of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (Pye and Bhattacharya 2013; Filer 2017; Gabriel et al. 2017). Similar land rights advocacy efforts have been underway in Merauke since 2011, when oil palm was introduced to the region under the MIFEE mega-project.⁶⁹ These efforts, however, have been mired in a dearth of accurate information about the corporations active in the area and by the often contradictory policies regulating land acquisition and development at the national and provincial levels. Repeated attempts to activate UN mechanisms and palm oil certification schemes have been hampered by bureaucratic red tape, ineffective redress mechanisms, and communities' limited knowledge of their rights under national and international laws. Poor infrastructures, high travel costs, land privatization, and a prevalent military presence make access to the area difficult and dangerous for NGOs and researchers. The politically volatile context of West Papua and the

threat (whether real or perceived) posed by independence movements to the Indonesian State further impede the efforts of Marind to secure their rights to lands and livelihoods. Government surveillance has intensified in response to their campaigns, including in the form of interrogations, extrajudicial incarcerations, and harassment from the police and military.

BEFORE I OFFER AN outline of the story to come, allow me to dwell briefly on how this book came into being. Like the shape-shifting humans, animals, and plants that enliven it, this is a “becoming” book—both in terms of the places and peoples I describe and in terms of my own changing relationship with Marind over the last decade. The themes, subjects, and setting of this research were specific, selective, and situated—both by me and by my interlocutors in the field. Neither comprehensive nor timeless, the study I present is thus a necessarily partial and subjective reconstruction of the Upper Bian lifeworld.⁷⁰

My fieldwork was facilitated by the Merauke Secretariat for Peace and Justice, the humanitarian branch of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and a key collaborator in my previous human rights advocacy work in the region. During my eighteen months in the Upper Bian, I divided my time equally among the settlements of Khalaoyam, Mirav, and Bayau, following the movements of local inhabitants and the practicalities of weather and transport.⁷¹ The greatest portion of my fieldwork, however, was spent, not in the villages, but rather in the forest, in the company of Marind groups traveling to meet friends and kin, to forage, and to process sago. These expeditions were crucial to understanding Marinds’ place-making practices and their relations to the forest and its diverse lifeforms. It was in the forest, for instance, that I was enskilled by my companions in the arts of pounding sago, sharing skin and wetness with the grove, walking, and listening to the voices of birds and rivers. Cultivating these bodily ways of knowing was central to my transformation from foreign friend to near-kin—a transformation that culminated when, finally, I learned to dream in the forest like Marind.

But this world was also a difficult and dangerous one to enter and navigate. Inter- and intracommunity tensions ran high in the Upper Bian at the time of my research. The slow violence of ecological degradation was compounded by the immediate violence of the everyday. While forests were being systematically decimated to make way for oil palm, over a dozen community members had been incarcerated for opposing agribusiness. Twenty-two local land rights activists had died under mysterious circumstances after receiving anonymous death threats. Many faced ongoing intimidation and harassment from

the police and military. My own fieldwork was cut short after two nuns at the Franciscan nunnery in Mirav, where I would seek shelter whenever military surveillance intensified, were beaten and raped by company-hired thugs. At the same time, a growing number of local landowners were ceding lands (their own and others') to companies in exchange for cash. Elite co-optation, bribery, and inequitably distributed compensation were breeding conflict between Marind standing "for" (pro) or "against" (kontra) oil palm and the many more individuals who sat somewhere in between. Disputes within clans, villages, and households had taken the lives of five community members.

In a place where the haunting force of the state, military, and corporations manifests as both lawfare and lawlessness, I had to be enskilled by my companions in the arts of strategic concealment and cultivated (in)visibility. As a person of French and Chinese descent, my Eurasian physique proved both an advantage and a challenge. On the one hand, my Asian traits reduced my visibility in a region where the presence and activities of foreigners are strictly monitored. On the other hand, some Marind initially regarded me with suspicion as a possible government spy or Javanese migrant. Others voiced concerns that I was working as an undercover consultant for oil palm companies because of the associations they made between my Chinese origins and the world of "business." My role as a foreign researcher had to be disguised under other identities, both prearranged and improvised. Depending on the setting, I was alternately a nun finishing seminary in Jayapura, a voluntary English teacher from Korea, a cousin thrice removed of the local Dayak priest, or a first-time tourist and avid birdwatcher. My tools of data collection, too, had to be camouflaged under various guises. Notebooks written in Chinese and French, encrypted hard drives, and quadcopter drones made their way to and from the villages at the bottom of jute bags filled with salted fish and sago flour, which were then set aside for me to collect from trustworthy traders. Meanwhile, second-hand mobile phones recorded police patrols' conversations and decimated forests from inside carefully punctured cigarette boxes—some brands, not all—held out of passenger windows or balanced between my knees during strategically timed toilet breaks.

The longer I spent in the Upper Bian, the better I became at noticing and dealing with situations of potential danger to myself and my hosts. I learned to recognize undercover militia from their crooked right index finger—"it never recovers from pulling the trigger"—and identify spies from the smell of scented aftershaves available only in the city. I learned to time my movements against the rounds of plantation security patrols. I learned to wait for days for cars that never arrived because their drivers had been called in for