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Lively Multispecies Communities,  
Deadly Racial Assemblages, and the Promise of Justice

**M**ultispecies ethnographers, from the outset, have worked to get beyond the notion of the nonhuman. Following Susan Leigh Star, we have assumed that “non-human is like non-white—it implies a lack of something” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 555). Recently Alexander Weheliye reinforced this point as it applies to people. Weheliye (2014: 4) describes how “racializing assemblages” divide up groups of people “into full humans, not-quite humans, and non-humans.” People who are marked by racial assemblages are routinely abused or killed, and they often have no standing before the law (Weheliye 2014; cf. Wolfe 2013). The notion of the nonhuman often subjects people, plants, and animals to slow violence (cf. Nixon 2011)—marking categories of life as expendable, external to the value system of capitalism. Communities confined to the realm of bare life (*zoe*) are routinely exposed to toxic chemicals and infectious diseases, and they are sometimes targeted for outright destruction.

Indigenous peoples worldwide have lived with racial assemblages that render them killable. Ongoing processes of dispossession, displacement, and genocide are taking place in human worlds as plant and animal communities are rendered into “natural resources” for extractive industry or picturesque backdrops for tourism (Haritaworn 2015: 210). Kim Tallbear (2015: 234) notes that recent critiques of settler colonialism “clearly link violence against animals to violence against particular humans who have historically been linked to a less-than-human or animal status.” Despite pervasive

violence targeting “people who are close to nature” many indigenous people continue to recognize other species as “agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives” (234).

I first traveled to West Papua, the half of New Guinea under Indonesian rule, in 1998—intent on studying the intersection of biological and cultural spheres in indigenous communities. After witnessing a series of massacres by Indonesian security forces, I changed the focus of my research. *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Global Architecture of Power*, my doctoral dissertation and first book, explored the interplay of imagination and collaboration in the struggle by indigenous Papuans for national independence. Drawing on unpublished material from my 1998 notebooks, as well as a 2015 return visit to my original field site, this essay is my first attempt to bring together my research on indigeneity and multi-species worlds.

Power is functioning predictably in West Papua as forests are logged, as natural resources flow out of indigenous lands, as people die from treatable diseases, and as black boys are shot dead by the side of the road. Papuans are searching for opportunities even as deadly assemblages and infrastructures violently collide with lively multispecies communities. Amid ongoing disasters, indigenous groups are pursuing the elusive promise of justice (Derrida 1992).

### **Life by the Side of the Road**

In West Papua I initially lived in a space by the side of the road—listening for stories of people who were getting around and making do, seizing on moments of shock when endangered life ways were suddenly shot through with profound significance (Stewart 1996: 107). Unipo, the village where I lived in 1998, had been built by a logging company at the behest of the government a few years before. Technocrats in distant metropolitan centers hoped to turn the nomadic hunter-gatherers living in the region into a governable population. Unipo sat on the crest of a high, sloping ridge—commanding a view of the surrounding mountains. When I first arrived in the village I was struck by the visual contrast of a huge yellow backhoe against a backdrop of rainforest and simple wooden houses. This machine had been left by a road repair crew six months before.

The indigenous people who lived in Unipo called themselves the Mee (pronounced “May” like the month, meaning simply “the people”) of the Siriwo Valley. The Mee saw the new village as an experimental arena of

sorts. Novel technologies, emergent infrastructures, and competing dreams were changing human lives and the surrounding ecological communities. Unipo was a place where people were actively testing out strategies for engaging with and leaving modern systems of economic production (cf. García Canclini 2005). Around twenty people lived in Unipo full time, and I came to know about sixty others who were semipermanent residents with other homes in the city, tents at nearby gold panning sites, and hamlets deep in the forest.

Outside of the Amazon, New Guinea has the largest contiguous tracts of old-growth rainforest in the world. Unipo was built as this old-growth forest was being destroyed. The community emerged within a blasted landscape, amid ongoing environmental and social disasters (Kirksey et al. 2013; Tsing 2014).

About one week after I arrived in Unipo, a woman named Marcy came down with the telltale symptoms of malaria—chills with intense shivering alternating with high fever. Malaria was a new disease for the Mee. They historically lived at higher altitudes, in places where there are few malarial mosquitoes. Nomadic lifestyles of Mee groups that ventured into the lowlands, seasonal migrations that disrupted the life cycle of the malarial parasite, had kept transmission rates low. As Mee people settled in Unipo, embracing a sedentary lifestyle, they confronted epidemiological risks as they inhabited a new multispecies world. Alongside these risks also came opportunities.

One sunny Friday morning in 1998 a group of girls tumbled into the tin-roofed shack that was my temporary home. The faces of Melanie, Agatha, and Betty—who ranged in age from eight to eleven—were alive with excitement. “Let’s go collect grasshoppers!” they shouted, pulling me away from the notebooks in which I was busy writing. As we walked through Unipo, a five-year-old also got swept up in the enthusiasm of the group. Together these girls showed me a space of autonomy and freedom that persisted along the side of a road, despite destructive forces beyond their control. Foraging for food on the margins of market economies, in the ruins of recently logged forests, they showed me how to exploit opportunities in emergent ecological communities. They taught me how to find fleeting moments of happiness while collecting edible insects.

“Having good ‘hap’ or fortune,” notes Sara Ahmed (2010: 22), was the original sense of the word *happy* in Middle English. While this meaning may now seem archaic—since happiness is not something that money can buy or power can command—Ahmed insists that we return to this original

definition, “as it refocuses our attention on the ‘worldly’ question of happenings” (22). Snatching grasshoppers and other insects from the grass that lined the road, the girls of Unipo showed me how to find happiness in the *hap* of what happens in multispecies worlds. As we grabbed prized snacks, the girls taught me the names for their tiny prey: *bigai pugu* (spur-throated grasshoppers), *kekegelke* (giant katydids), *ugapuga* (palm katydids), and *amatape* (leaf mimicking katydids).<sup>1</sup> Quickly darting in and out of the grass, they grabbed insects and quickly killed them by pinching their heads. These small morsels of food were then put inside hollow bamboo tubes that each of the girls carried inside of net bags, made with tree bark string, slung over their backs.

Peals of laughter erupted as I grabbed a praying mantis and then shook it off my hand as it began to needle me with its sharp front legs. The mantis, one of the favorite insect foods of the Mee, is called *egokago*, or fishhooks. As I watched Mary did not even flinch as she deftly picked up another praying mantis and the hooks on its front legs poked into her flesh. After I collected a number of pyrgomorph grasshoppers, I noticed that the girls were ignoring them. I asked why, and Betty said that they were called *didimigo* (hurting head). If you eat too many *didimigo* then you will develop a headache.

We encountered some cicadas on this foraging trip, but we did not collect them. Mary told me that the spirit of her father, a prominent shaman, entered a cicada when he died. When the bodies of the Mee die a *tene* (departed shadow) is born—if you are on good terms with a *tene* it may pass along critical information from the spirit world, or if you come into conflict with a *tene* it can make you sick. Mary said that her father would warn her with loud cries when trouble was afoot. Thus we did not collect perfectly edible insects since they were regarded as agential beings who maintained ongoing social relations with the living (cf. Tallbear 2015: 234).<sup>2</sup>

On the way home we gathered greens from one of their parent’s gardens—leaves of sweet potato, cassava, and taro plants—along with a bundle of bananas. Back at home the bamboo tubes full of insects were pushed into the coals of the fire to slowly steam, while the greens were wilted in a large wok with salt, oil, and red peppers. Crunching through the crispy outer shell of the insects, I found that flavor varied with species: katydids and grasshoppers tasted like shrimp and the praying mantises were nutty. A large spider that they called *epe woga*, which had a buttery flavor, was the tastiest of all.

The children of Unipo began routinely taking me on forays to hunt for insects and gather forest products. As we walked they talked about the

diverse routes of their parents—the seasonal migrations that drew them up into the mountains and the periodic opportunities for wage labor that pulled families into the coastal cities. Amid unpredictable economic systems and dramatic ecological changes, Mee children were finding new opportunities for foraging. Along the margins of the freshly logged forest, and in the grass by the side of the road, they found happiness and pleasure with the proliferation of grasshoppers, katydids, and praying mantises.

The road also presented an obstacle to deeply rooted indigenous ways of life. Game animals that were once abundant—like wild pigs, tree kangaroos, and other marsupials—were in decline. Logging operations had driven these animals deep into the forest, the men in the village said. Meat rarely found its way to my plate when I lived in Unipo.

Officially the dirt track running through Unipo had a grand sounding name: the Trans-Papua Highway. Construction of this “highway” began in 1979 to support a World Bank transmigration program, which brought landless peasants from overpopulated islands in western Indonesia to establish homesteads in the territory of indigenous Papuans (Monbiot 1989). The portion of the road through the Siriwo Valley, which connected coastal cities with the highlands, was gradually completed in the 1990s, bringing unofficial transmigrants who set up trade stores, opened restaurants under plastic tarps, and prospected for gold.

The Trans-Papua Highway enabled the Mee to participate in market economies by growing cacao and sugarcane for sale in Nabire, a nearby city on the coast. Selling produce generated cash that was used to buy food—like rice, ramen noodles, and canned meat—as well as newly available technologies like chainsaws, kerosene lamps, antibiotics, and hypodermic needles. Market prices were wildly fluctuating during my time in Unipo, and massive landslides regularly halted vehicle traffic along the road. Amid ongoing destructive processes my Mee friends found moments of happiness by living with the contingency of the world (Ahmed 2010: 31). Happiness, however, is fragile like glass. It can shatter at any moment.

### **Deadly Assemblages**

Three years later, on a return visit to West Papua in 2001, I tried to visit Unipo, but landslides had made the Trans-Papua Highway impassable. From afar I learned that the village had been abandoned. Malaria had swept Unipo, killing half of the residents. Melanie, Agatha, and Betty—my insect collecting companions—were among the dead. I was devastated.

The death of my friends was not an isolated incident, but it is part of a systematic pattern. Elsewhere in Indonesia, public health measures have eliminated malaria. According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta there is no risk of malaria transmission to American travelers in the cities of Jakarta and Ubud or in the resort areas of Bali and Java.<sup>3</sup> Malaria continues, however, to kill scores of people in West Papua every week. I became feverish with the disease twelve times myself over the course of my field research—contracting both the low-grade relapsing strain, *Plasmodium vivax*, and the deadly cerebral malaria strain, *Plasmodium falciparum*. The disease is as common as a cold in West Papua. People who miss work as a result are often the butt of playful jokes in Indonesian: “Were you really sick with *malaria*, or were you staying home because of *mala-rindu*, because you missed your girlfriend?” Amid banal jokes, over the years I have lost many of my university-educated colleagues and collaborators—middle-class people living in urban centers—to malaria.

Infrastructures and modern medical practices protect some people in Indonesia from tropical diseases like malaria, while others die. Powerful ethnic groups of Java and Bali pay for public health measures to protect their kin and kind, while leaving the health system of West Papua chronically underfunded. Michel Foucault (1984: 266) would have understood this situation in terms of biopolitics, as the “outcome of a technology of power centered on life.” “If genocide is the dream of modern powers,” writes Foucault, “it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population” (260). By letting malarial mosquitoes live in some regions, the Indonesian government is in effect making Papuans die.

Alexander Weheliye recently criticized Foucault for lacking a cogent account of race. Racism does not emerge from fixed biological phenotypes, according to Weheliye, but is the state-sanctioned exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities, which produces premature death. As Dorothy Roberts (2011: 51) argues: “Race is not a biological category that is politically charged. It is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one.”

In contemporary West Papua, a place where indigenous people are quickly becoming a minority in their own land, light-skinned Indonesian settlers have adapted global racial discourse to turn black people into quasi humans. Carleton Stevens Coon, a professor at Harvard and Penn, published *The Origin of Races* in 1962, speculating that *Homo sapiens* evolved from five separate subspecies in an identifiable sequence: first from Caucasoids, then followed by Mongoloids, Negroids, Capoids (southern Africans),

and finally Australoids (Papuan and Australian aboriginals). Papuans were thus believed to be the closest living relatives to a missing link between apes and humans (cf. Marks 2002: 75–77). Experts who produced pseudoscientific racism are dying a slow death. A retired professor of anthropology at Yale University told me in 2015: “Papuans are not attractive people. They look like Neanderthals.” When I walk on the streets of Indonesian cities like Jakarta, I often hear racial epithets comparing my Papuan friends to nonhuman animals. “We are viewed like we are still evolving according to Darwin’s theory,” in the words of Filep Karma (2014: 8), an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. “We are treated as if we are animals in the process of becoming humans. . . . Often Papuans are called ‘monkey!’”<sup>4</sup>

When the human genome was sequenced in the year 2000, molecular biologists announced that there is no biological basis for race (Roberts 2011). Nonetheless, black people continue to be barred “from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west,” by sciences, languages, infrastructures, practices, and discourses (Weheliye 2014: 3). Racializing assemblages are elusive. They connect “bodies, forces, velocities, intensities, institutions, interests, ideologies, and desires” (12). In West Papua racial assemblages have produced starkly uneven life chances and vulnerability to premature death (cf. Haritaworn 2015: 212).

### **Black Lives Matter**

Yoteni Agapa, age nineteen, was shot dead on June 25, 2015, during a roadside incident on the Trans-Papua Highway. Black lives matter. But, some black lives matter more than others. Race, nationality, and class all help determine who has full personhood before the law. The shooting of Yoteni Agapa, like so many extrajudicial killings in West Papua before and since, was ignored by Indonesia’s national court system. But Agapa’s death represents more than just one more example of impunity in West Papua. This killing was the result of a direct conflict among competing modes of life.

The Trans-Papua Highway was repaired in the early 2000s by Indonesian government officials who hoped to promote the flow of regional commerce and to facilitate the movement of military troops. Sections were paved and trucks began regularly to ply the road—carrying clothes, food, gasoline, and construction materials—supporting the lives of Indonesian settlers in the highlands. Countless Mee people who could not afford to ride in vehicles began regularly to use the road as a walking track (Kirksey and van Bilsen

2002). People from multiple social worlds began to share this common infrastructure, even though the road produced a situation of asymmetrical risk and vulnerability (Bowker and Star 1999; Parreñas 2012). Power functioned predictably as natural resources flowed out of indigenous lands—coffee, cacao, timber products, precious metals. Asymmetries were exacerbated; resentment grew (cf. Kirksey 2012: 210–11).

In spaces by the side of this road, the Mee people continued to search through the ecological wreckage left behind by extractive industries. People continued to live within lively multispecies communities—finding opportunities in the face of palpable economic and social inequality. As powerful assemblages collided with the bodies of indigenous people and their beloved companion species, revolutionary moments began to open that were pregnant with possibility.

The evening of the incident, Yoteni Agapa was hunting by the side of the road near the highland town of Dogiyai with a group of teenaged friends. A dog accompanied the boys. She was a companion animal and a carefully trained member of the hunting team, practiced at flushing animals out of the underbrush and treeing them (cf. Haraway 2003). On this particular hunting trip she flushed five *weta*, a terrestrial marsupial with a long snout and small ears, from the grass growing on the margins of a friend's garden. After bagging these *weta*, Yoteni Agapa and his friends started walking home along the Trans-Papua Highway.

As the boys walked along the dark road on June 25, a night like any other, violence suddenly erupted. As a speeding truck bore down on the group, illuminating the scene with its headlights, the dog suddenly ran into the road. The dog was hit by the truck and killed. Rather than stop and offer compensation, or words of apology, the truck driver sped away. The life world orbiting around a beloved hunting companion had been violently disrupted. Passions flared among Yoteni Agapa and his friends. Since the boys did not have the opportunity to seek redress from the driver, they directed their anger toward the infrastructure of inequality that had produced the violence. Long-standing grievances about social and economic inequality suddenly came to a head. They decided to stop the flow of people and goods along the road. These young men, for a moment, disrupted the intense force and velocity of a powerful infrastructure.

The boys set up a roadblock and began asking passing vehicles for money—demanding \$2 to \$5 from each driver, the price of a meal at a restaurant. After collecting cash from six cars, a black Avanza sport utility vehi-



cle rolled up to their roadblock, at around 10:00 p.m. The SUV arrived from the direction of Waghete, a regional center where there are police and military posts. Yoteni Agapa approached the passenger side of the car, while Melianus Mote, the oldest of the group at twenty-one years, approached the driver's side. Ethnic Indonesians were inside. The other boys—ages fourteen through seventeen—hung back from the car a little bit and watched. They quickly realized that both the driver and the man riding in the passenger seat had guns. As the shooting started the boys scattered and ran.

Yoteni Agapa was shot in the chest twice as he stood beside the car. As he tried to run, the gunman pursued him—shooting him two more times in his right arm. Yoteni managed to stagger away from the car but fell in the middle of the road, about twenty yards away. A group of men came out of the car and began to kick Yoteni's body, stabbing it with bayonets. As they mutilated the body, the holes made by the bullets became larger and less easy to discern. Later, Yoteni's family removed two bullet slugs—one a golden color, the other silver—from his dead body.

Melianus Mote, the young man who was standing by the driver's door, ran as soon as Agapa was shot. As he was bolting, he felt something hot and wet on his upper right arm. Later, after he looked at the wound, he suspected that it was from a bayonet. He told human rights investigators that the driver stabbed him as he was trying to run. The other eight boys managed to escape by jumping in Bakobado River. Police investigators later found twelve bullet casings at the crime scene. The caliber of the bullets was 5.56 mm, which is standard issue for a variety of different Indonesian security forces. After conducting a preliminary investigation, police simply declared that the shooting was conducted by a group of "unknown men." Local human rights investigators alleged that the shooters were Indonesian military troops belonging to the Kostrad Raider 303 detachment that operated a checkpoint nearby. But, no formal legal proceedings ensued.

When whites or Indonesians are murdered in West Papua, the rule of law is applied.<sup>5</sup> But, when black Papuans lose their lives, the cases are systematically ignored by local courts. On September 1, 2015, I joined a coalition of local human rights organizations in West Papua to make a formal submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions. We wrote to report the death of Yoteni Agapa as a result of a killing by security forces of the state, or death squads cooperating with or tolerated by the state. The United Nations acknowledged our submission and power continued to function predictably.

## Conclusion

“Justice is an experience of the impossible,” according to Jacques Derrida (1992: 16). Law (*droit*) is the application of the rules, while “justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable” (16). As state security forces repeatedly break the rules in many jurisdictions around the globe, violating domestic laws protecting citizens from arbitrary killings and international human rights treaties, there is a growing movement to pursue justice by other means. As the Angel of History continues to be blown backward by the winds of progress (Benjamin 1968), past countless bodies of people and companion animals who never appeared “before the law,” a multitude is starting to anticipate “a law not yet existing, a law yet to come” (Derrida 1992: 36). In searching for the elusive promise of justice, Derrida (1994: 82) turned away from what he regarded as the “primitive conceptual phantasm” of community, the topos of territory, native soil, sovereignty, and borders. Rather than pin his hopes on revolutionary events, or historical figures, Derrida waited for nothing—in an abyssal desert—expecting the unexpected (28).

Waiting for nothing in particular resigns the future to fate. As deadly assemblages forestall justice in diverse corners of the globe, it is more important than ever to ground collective hopes. In an era when any claim to sovereignty is quickly undermined by the proliferation of global assemblages, it is important to practice cyborg politics: taking “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” and making arguments “for responsibility in their construction” (Haraway 1985). As capitalism becomes increasingly nomadic—flitting about with unprecedented speed and intensity, scouring the earth for new resources to exploit (Stengers 2011)—counterhegemonic justice might be best achieved by shutting down flows of commodities, life-giving resources destined for others.

Yoteni Agapa and his friends experienced a moment of justice when they set up a blockade on the Trans-Papua Highway. Recognizing that the driver who killed their dog would never appear before the law, they calculated within the incalculable—forging their own temporary space of sovereignty. Public health officials and technocrats who created the village of Unipo will also never appear before the law to be held accountable for the deaths of Melanie, Agatha, and Betty. The restless spirits of these children are joining legions of others as coalitions of unlikely allies come together in the pursuit of justice beyond existing laws, institutions, and sovereign structures. Struggles grounded in the topos of territory are pushing back against powerful assemblages and infrastructures, creating the conditions for continued life in multispecies communities.

## Notes

- 1 Within Linnean taxonomy these insects were in the Melanoplinae subfamily and Tettigoniidae family of the order Orthoptera.
- 2 Later I collected two cicada species in Unipo that were identified by Hans Duffels and Arnold Boer as *Cosmopsaltria doryca* Boisduval and *Baeturia bicolorata* Blote. These species are likely not toxic, since *Cosmopsaltria* species are eaten in the highlands (Duffels and van Mastrigt 1991), and *B. bicolorata* is eaten in Papua New Guinea (Arnold de Boer, pers. comm., 1999).
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Health Information for Travelers to Indonesia: Clinician View,” [wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/clinician/none/Indonesia](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/clinician/none/Indonesia) (accessed July 22, 2016).
- 4 My translation.
- 5 For example, a major international investigation was launched in 2002 following the murder of two white people in West Papua—contract employees of the massive US gold mine Freeport McMoRan. Seven people were given jail sentences for this crime. The masterminds who killed white people in this particular crime, members of the Indonesian security forces, were never brought before a court of law. The seven men who were charged with the crime were black Papuans, some of whom had no connection to the crime (Kirksey 2012: 169–70).

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