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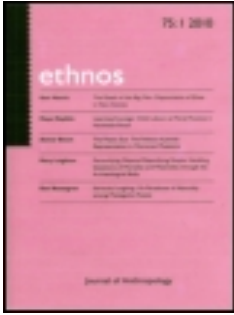

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The Plastic Cassowary: Problematic ‘Pets’ in West Papua

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the ambivalent relations of indigenous Marind to domesticated animals in Merauke District, West Papua. Marind pity village animals because they lose their ‘wildness’ and behave like human settlers, whom Marind consider alien because of their ‘modern’ lifestyle and non-Papuan origins. These transformations evoke to Marind their own experiences of political oppression and ethnic domination as coerced subjects of the Indonesian state. However, domesticates also appear to enjoy living in the village and refuse to return to the wild. Similarly, many Marind are drawn by the promises of modernity and have given up hope for political freedom. Furthermore, Marind themselves replicate the oppressive role of the state over their lives by subjecting animals to human control. In this light, domesticates as ‘matter out of place’ in the village environment provoke pity and anxiety because they offer an all too faithful reflection of the ambiguous condition of their keepers.

KEYWORDS West Papua; Marind; wildness; plastic; matter out of place

The village of Khalaoyam in the Merauke District of Indonesian-controlled West Papua was home to a juvenile cassowary.[1] In August 2015, a group of indigenous Marind women discovered the remnant of its nest with three eggs inside in a newly dug irrigation ditch amid the smouldering remains of a forest that had been burned to make way for an 18,000-hectare monocrop oil palm plantation. Certain the hatchlings would die with no father cassowary to nest or egg-brood, the women carried the eggs to the village and incubated them in a large vat of raw rice. Two of the eggs rotted away, but one held on. Seven weeks later, a tiny, scraggly chick squirmed out of the pale blue-green shell. The villagers named him Ruben.

Ruben was a shy creature, gangly on his skinny legs (see Figure 1). He had a brown and cream striped plumage, a tiny beige wattle that always seemed something of a nuisance, and a barely noticeable casque under the tufts of light feathers crowning his angular head. The young bird roamed the village, his fragile whistle wafting in the mid-afternoon air as the melodic backdrop to villagers’ conversations. Community members created a resting place for him in the backyard of the church, where the

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Figure 1. Ruben the 'plastic' cassowary. Credits: Sophie Chao.

Dayak priest (from Kalimantan) kept chickens. At first, the community tried feeding Ruben forest foods, such as fallen fruit, small invertebrates, and soil, which cassowaries consume when fruit is rare. When Ruben refused to eat, the villagers tried feeding him sago, their staple starch. Eventually, they realised the cassowary would only accept purchased foods such as raw rice, biscuits, and instant noodles. Community members frequently coaxed Ruben to the edge of the forest, hoping he would return to the wild – back to his kin and home. But the bird always retreated to the yard or crouched behind the stone well, his feathers ruffled and his meagre frame trembling slightly.

The chickens often chased angrily after Ruben when he tried to eat the food scattered by villagers. The church cockerel would peck him viciously when he got too close to the hens, or sometimes for no apparent reason. Every day, I fed Ruben leftovers and bathed him in a plastic bucket. I found him rather sweet in his gawkiness and felt sorry for the many attacks he suffered in the yard. I considered him a pet-like creature because he was domesticated and made dependent on humans. I believed Ruben deserved

Figure 2. Deforestation and oil palm expansion in Merauke. Credits: Sophie Chao.

particular care for he had lost his forest and kin to the rampant devastation wrought by oil palm expansion. Seeing my interlocutors face similar threats to their livelihoods and lands, I assumed they felt the same way.

One evening, I was sitting in the back porch of the church with a group of men and women after a hearty meal of sago jelly and fish soup. Everyone was relaxed, smoking clove cigarettes and chatting animatedly. During a momentary lull in the conversation, Ruben's shy whistle echoed through the night. I smiled and commented on how sweet his song was, and how lucky we were to have such a cute pet among us. I glanced around at my friends and, to my surprise, faces that only an instant ago had been happy and smiling were now sombre. Elena, an old woman employed by the priest to tend the chickens, sighed deeply, her eyes moist, and said:

> This is no song, sister. This is a weeping. This is the cry of the cassowary. Can you not hear the sadness, child? Does it not rip through your heart with the speed of a hardwood ngef (*Arenga pinnata*) arrow? We hear only a weeping, a lament. We feel the grief of the khei (cassowary) as it seeps through our skin and bone. We hear death and mourning in its call. No longer wild (*liar*) or free (*bebas*), the cassowary has become *plastik* (plastic).[2]

Sitting beside her, old Marcus began to sing softly, swaying side to side, his head bent low:

Without a father, you were born
Without a forest, you were found
Khei, khei, whither your kinsmen, whither your home?

Khei, khei, your call, once proud and glorious
Its rumble was the earth shaking
Today, you are an orphan
For food you beg, for water you beg
Khei, when shall you sing again?
When will you roam the forest free again?
When will your call boom across the land?

Figure 3. Ruben incubating in a vat of raw rice. Credits: Sophie Chao.

When will your solitary journeys resume?
Wild, you were, strong you were
Khei, khei, orphan of the land you are
Without kin, and without home you are
Now, you eat raskin (Welfare Rice)[3] *and Indomie* (instant noodles)
You take baths and know the sound of HP (mobile phones)
Like us, you turn 'plastik'
Like us, you have become modern
A 'pendatang' (settler) *far from home*
Khei, your cry fills my old bones with grief
Khei, who will you flee to next?

Without a father, you were born
Without a forest, you were found
Khei, khei, whither your kinsmen, whither your home?

Ruben is one of several animals to have found refuge in Marind villages along the Upper Bian River following the razing of the forest to make way for monocrop oil palm plantations (see Figure 2). With some two million hectares of land in Merauke slated for conversion to agribusiness concessions, many more creatures are approaching the settlements in search of shelter and subsistence. As Elena's words and Marcus' song poignantly convey, salvaged animals provoke sadness and pity among their keepers. These creatures and the humans who tend them form shared 'communities of fate' (Rose 2011: 91) in the face of environmental degradation in ways that transcend their differences as species. Yet community members are reluctant to cultivate relations of care with domesticates and find their tame and human-like behaviour unsettling. Villagers actively avoid forming affective attachments with domesticates, frequently mock them and constantly encourage them to return to their native habitats. Unwanted in the settlements yet struggling to survive in the wild, these creatures are spatially caught

between the ‘colliding ecologies’ (Kirsch 1997: 152–153) of plantation, forest and village.

This article explores how oil palm expansion reconfigures human-animal relations in Merauke and the implications of this transformation in light of historically embedded structures of geopolitical and ethnic domination in West Papua. Marind villagers pity domesticates because they have lost their ‘wildness’ (*liar*). Deprived of their freedom and autonomy, these creatures can no longer enter into reciprocal relations with their own and other species in the forest. Instead, domesticates behave like non-Papuan ‘settlers’ (*pendatang*) whom Marind consider alien because of their ‘modern’ way of life, their foreign habits and their Indonesian rather than Papuan origins. The domesticated and alien attributes of village animals echo the condition of their human keepers in ambivalent ways. They remind Marind of their own political captivity to the Indonesian state and their fraught relationship with ‘modernity’ as a deceptive world of proliferating ‘plastic’ things and beings. In this light, Marinds’ efforts to return animals to the forest can be conceived as an attempt to liberate animals from human domination while symbolising the aspiration of West Papuans to emancipate themselves from Indonesian rule and imposed modernities. At the same time, however, domesticates appear to enjoy living in the village and refuse to return to the wild. Similarly, many Marind are drawn by the promissory lure of modernity and appear resigned to their condition as coerced citizens of the Indonesian state. Even those who decry their subjection to state authority realise they themselves replicate the oppressive role of the state by subjecting animals to human control. Layered with politically charged symbolism, village animals become ‘emotional commodities’ (Shir-Vertesh 2012) that offer to their keepers few comforts but many conundrums.

Human-animal relationships have been extensively explored in the anthropology of Melanesian cultures (see Schneider 2013). Many of these societies consider animals as conscious beings endowed with volition and agency. Animals figure prominently in myths and rituals and may share ancestral descent or bodily substance with their human counterparts (e.g. Majnep & Bulmer 1977; West 2006). Their hermeneutic value often arises from their associations with particular genders, categories of persons, spatial forms and behavioural traits (e.g. Herdt 1994; Kirsch 2006). The distinction between wild and domesticated species in particular plays a significant role in configuring animals’ material and symbolic relations with humans in Melanesia. For instance, domesticated species serve important functions within cultural systems of subsistence, gifting and exchange – as food and bride-wealth in the case of pigs and cassowaries, and as hunting aids in the case of dogs (e.g. Glasse & Meggitt 1969; Rappaport 1984). Strong affective attachments may form between these animals and their human carers, with pigs often treated as quasi-humans or pets (for a review, see Dwyer & Minnegal 2005). Wild species on the other hand tend to be associated with the realm of the forest and characterised as powerful and dangerous (e.g. Bulmer 1967; Healey 1985).

Following Feld (1990) and others, I combine structuralist and symbolic theory to explore the condition of domesticates in Merauke as ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2002). I demonstrate how their liminal status arises in relation to distinctions in

Marind cosmology between wilderness and domestication and native and non-native. These emic categories operate across species lines and are imbued with moral and affective valence. I suggest the ambiguous ontology of domesticates is enhanced by their concomitant position at the intersection of other morally charged 'systems of difference' (Descola 2016: 35–38; Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 77) – food and not food, human and animal, forest and village, person and possession, and oppressor and oppressed. At the same time, my analysis departs from traditional structural/symbolic approaches in several respects. Rather than focusing on myth and ritual, I attend to animals' everyday behaviours – and the ambivalent intentions these reveal – to explain the conflicting emotions and interpretations they provoke among their keepers. I also adopt a synchronic approach by situating emergent domesticate-human relations in Merauke in the context of historically entrenched forms of political colonisation and ethnic domination in West Papua. Like animals deprived of their forest habitats and ways of life, Marind suffer imposed civilizational and developmental projects as reluctant members of the Indonesian state. As native species populations dwindle, Marind too become a minority on their own lands due to the ongoing influx of non-Papuan in-migrants. And yet many Marind aspire to the modern way of life promoted by the government and embodied in the settler population they at once resent and envy. Caught between a waning forest-based way of life and visions of modernity that are at once alien and alienating, Marind, like their animal counterparts, are becoming 'matter out of place'.

As 'mirrors' (Mullin 1999; Valeri 1992) of the Marind lifeworld, domesticates are problematic because they offer an all too faithful reflection of the unsettling transformations taking place among human keepers. Yet no cultural mechanism, ritualistic or other, exists to resolve the liminal status of these newcomers to the village who are no longer fully animal yet also not entirely human (Douglas 1957; Leach 1964; Turner 1967). At once 'near kin and alien colonist' (Haraway 2007), village animals are disconcerting 'tricksters' (Lévi-Strauss 1963b: 224–227) because they embody too much, and yet too little, alterity. And if liminal persons, as Douglas suggests, are not responsible for their marginal condition (2002: 118, 121), the problem with domesticates is that they appear to *enjoy* their anomalous situation – as do some of their human keepers.

The Ethos of Restrained Care

The Upper Bian River is home to some 500 Marind households who derive their subsistence primarily from hunting, fishing and foraging in the forest. Each Marind clan (bawan) is related to plant and animal species whom they call their 'grandparents' (amai) or 'siblings' (namek). Numerous myths and rituals commemorate the shared descent of these animals and their human kin from dema, or ancestral spirits (van Baal 1966). Human-animal dynamics in the forest are anchored in principles of exchange and care, or relations of 'reciprocal capture', a term developed by Isabelle Stengers to describe dialectical processes of identity construction in which each agent has an interest in seeing the other maintain its existence (2010: 35–36). Animals

grow and reproduce to provide food and other resources to their human kin. In return, humans must exercise respect and perform rituals as they encounter animals in the forest, recall their stories, hunt, gather and consume them. These mutual relations enable humans and animals to 'share skin and wetness', a Marind expression referring to the exchange of bodily fluids – blood, saliva, sweat, grease and water – between living beings who share the same skin based on their common ancestral descent.

Marind consider animals as sentient beings endowed with a soul and with physical affordances specific to their species. These capacities include, for instance, the mighty tusks of the wild boar, the piercing eyesight of the bird-of-paradise, the stealth of the snake, the agility of the tree-kangaroo and the lightness of the heron. When in their natural state of 'wildness' (*liar*), animals can harness their species-specific abilities to roam the forest, interact with their kin, hunt, forage and reproduce. For instance, cassowaries use their mighty speed to travel the forest in search of fruit. The sinewy limbs of crocodiles enable them to meander effortlessly down the serpentine flow of the Bian River while the dexterity of possums allows them to find shelter in the dense canopy where they mate and nurture their young. Being 'wild' thus entails being 'free' (*bebas*) to live out one's species-specific aptitudes and Marind use both terms interchangeably to describe animals in the forest.

Creating relations with animals entails exchanges of substance and sustenance but also respect for their wildness, or what I describe as an ethos of 'restrained care'. To this end, Marind actively refrain from overly influencing or controlling the movements, growth and reproduction of forest species. Instead, they engage in acts of 'minimal manipulation' (Groube 1989) that make the environment more conducive to plants and animal thriving. For instance, villagers clear pathways for pigs to travel to water catchments, leave fruit behind when foraging for cassowaries to feed on and avoid disturbing the canopy during birds' mating season. These minimal manipulations produce what Rival describes as a realm of 'natural abundance' achieved through a range of indirect human actions 'delicately inserted within a wider web of past and non-human activities' (2016: 209, 222). The 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2011) characterising human-animal relatedness thus goes hand in hand with respect for their different *modalities* of being – human, pig, cassowary or other. In this light, being 'wild' means being able to live autonomously yet in relation to others as part of multispecies social and ecological networks (Collard 2014: 154). It is what enables organisms to form relations with their own and other species as 'inter-agentive' (Ingold 2000: 47) members of a shared community of life.

In line with the ethos of restrained care, Marind rarely rear animals (or cultivate plants) because this involves overly manipulating their growth or, in the words of village elder Paulinus, 'it takes away their freedom'. For instance, villagers of the Upper Bian River practice very limited pig-rearing compared to coastal Marind and other societies in New Guinea (for a review, see Hide 2003). Pigs are captured in the forest primarily for the purposes of rituals and are castrated rather than bred to increase their size and weight (van Baal 1966: 4–7, 407–408; see also Gell 1975). As pigs belong to the wild, the number of individual pigs kept in the village and the amount of time they spend there are subject to stringent customary laws. Furthermore, numerous rituals

must be undertaken before and after their slaughter to avoid violent retribution from their wild porcine kin. Other domesticates include dogs that serve as hunting aids and chickens kept by the local priest for consumption during church events. Chickens do not figure in Marind cosmology and are considered 'settlers' because they come from Java and have never lived in the forest. Dogs are said to belong in the village and are petted by adults and children alike. However, they are not owned by specific individuals or families and emotional attachments with them are sustained only so long as they perform their role in hunting activities (cf. Valeri 1992: 156–157). Marind affirm that domesticated pigs, dogs and chickens merit practical forms of care (for instance, feeding, petting and housing them) only when and because they serve a specific *function* – as food for special events or as hunting companions. Overly strong emotional attachments to domesticates, however, are discouraged because they provoke grief and objection on the part of animal keepers when pigs and chickens eventually must be slaughtered or exchanged, or when dogs must be punished for failing to make themselves useful during hunts. In sum, affective ties with village animals are tolerated only to the extent that they do not hinder the uses to which animals are put.

No Longer Wild

Ruben and other animals who have made their home in villages along the Upper Bian River belong to species not traditionally domesticated by Marind. In Bayau village, for instance, I encountered a pair of New Guinea crocodiles confined in an unused outdoor water trough, and a lame deer tied to the foot of a mango tree. In Mirav, a bright-eyed spotted possum was housed in a makeshift cage hanging precariously from a gnarled jackfruit tree. In Khalaoyam, Ruben the cassowary lived with three young tree kangaroos, who always wandered around the village together. Unlike pigs, many of these animals are not actively sought out by community members but rather approach the village seemingly of their own accord and in unpredictable numbers. For instance, the deer entered Bayau one morning after a nearby plantation operator started burning the forest to make way for oil palm. The crocodiles crawled into the village square when toxic effluents were released into the river by an adjacent palm oil mill. Khalaoyam women affirmed they rescued Ruben only because leaving him in the forest meant certain death. Paulinus, a young man from Khalaoyam, explained the position of Marind vis à vis village animals as follows:

> We are forced to care for animals that come to our village. We must save them from the forest, because the forest is disappearing. We have no choice. If they go into the plantations, they will die of hunger. But Ruben and the others – they don't belong in the village.

For Paulinus and many others, creatures who take up residence in the village impose themselves in a space they do not belong to. Far from claiming to 'own' these animals, community members emphasise that animals come to *them* for help and that Marind have 'no choice' but to accept them. Villagers often say they do not know how to interpret these animals' behaviour or deal with their needs, which they often ignore. They also actively discourage physical interactions and expression of

emotional attachment towards village animals. For instance, adults admonish children for playing with, cuddling or stroking the deer and possum. They avoid the tree kangaroos unless they have to feed them. Paulinus and his relatives often kicked Ruben away when he approached them for protection from the cockerel's attacks. These animals, my interlocutors affirm, do not merit care in the way domesticated pigs and dogs do because they serve no practical function. They cannot be eaten because they were not hunted and therefore the rituals required to consume them have not been carried out. Furthermore, these critters display strangely un-animal like behaviours. For instance, they take baths, eat biscuits and in Ruben's case, even weep. The similarities Marind identify between the comportment of animals and those of humans make the idea of eating them incongruous and repulsive (cf. Valeri 1992). As Geraldina, a young woman from Mirav put it, 'These animals no longer have animal skin or wetness. We cannot eat them because we would not know what we were eating. A possum? A human? It is not clear'. At the same time, many villagers worried that keeping animals in the village would adversely affect their hunting and foraging activities. For instance, Khalaoyam men feared Ruben's wild kin would seek retribution by them in the forest. They consequently refrained from hunting cassowary for several months following Ruben's hatching. Similar avoidances were upheld by villagers in Bayau and Mirav where crocodiles, deer and possum are kept.

If, as Geraldina suggests, domesticates are not food, then neither are they friends. Marind do not consider village animals as pets and no Marind equivalent exists for the English word 'pet'. Instead, Marind refer to these creatures as *pendatang* (settlers), 'orphans' or animals that are 'no longer wild', 'no longer free' and have 'become plastic'. When I explained to Elena and Marcus the Western notion of pets as friendly domestic companions, they were perplexed and found the idea of taming animals 'strange'. Creatures like Ruben, my host sister Elizabeth told me, are 'confusing'– they are a 'problem'. Ruben was a particular 'problem' as Khalaoyam villagers feared he would become increasingly violent as he matured. Marind do not traditionally rear cassowaries – as do other New Guinean societies (e.g. Dwyer & Minnegal 1992) – because they are associated with the 'deep forest' (*hutan dalam*) and considered dangerous (cf. Bulmer 1967; Healey 1985). The bird's large size and lethal kick make it difficult to tame, and indeed to hunt. Unlike pigs and dogs, cassowaries are unpredictable in their behaviour, do not respond well to human care and cannot wander the village freely. They do not breed in captivity and die young. These elements suggest to Marind that cassowaries are best left in the forest where they rightfully belong.

The discomfort of Marind around domesticates arises from the way these creatures' comportment – and the relations they demand of humans – disrupt the ethos of 'restrained care' animating interspecies relations in the forest. Animals lose their autonomous agency and species-specific capacities when they become dependent on the humans who surround and control them. They begin to eat and behave like humans and acquire human names – Ruben the cassowary, Mina the deer and Theo the possum, for instance. Alienated from their kin and home, these critters make their 'domus', or home – the etymological root of 'domestication' – in the village and find shelter in man-made instant noodle boxes, courtyards, wooden boxes, water troughs

and wells. Their bodies are frail and weak because they no longer hunt, forage or eat forest foods, and must instead beg humans for food and water. For instance, community members commented that the glossy fur of the deer had turned dull and patchy since it took up residence in Bayau. The possum's eyesight had become so poor it barely reacted to the movements of humans around it. The tree kangaroos that once leaped across the canopy now hopped with a slight limp along dusty village paths. As Elena and Marcus lament, Ruben may never roam the forest free again. Instead, he knows only the taste of rice and instant noodles. Unlike his kin in the wild, whose resounding call booms across the forest, Ruben is skinny and awkward. He forgets how to sing and instead begins to weep like a human. These transformations are not celebrated by Marind as an achievement of human mastery over nature nor seen to benefit the animals themselves. The 'trouble with domestication', to invert Cronon's phrase (1996), is that it violates the ontic alterity of forest beings. Relations of 'reciprocal capture' are superseded by relations of one-sided *captivity* as animals become physically trapped in the space of the human village and ontically trapped in the habitus of human-like domesticates.

Marind often compare the loss of wildness of forest creatures to the freedoms denied to West Papuans under Indonesian rule. As Gerfacius, an elder from Bayau, put it, 'Ruben and Marind – we are the same. We are all victims of the government'. Like animals constrained to live in the village under the control of humans, West Papuans were forcefully incorporated into the Indonesian state following the controversial Act of Free Choice of 1969 and have had little say in the numerous top-down projects undermining their livelihoods, culture and environment (Pouwer 1999; Slama & Munro 2015: 17). Much like Ruben is reduced to begging for food and water from his keepers, rural Marind are increasingly dependent on financial aid and food handouts from the government. The threat of extinction of forest organisms also resonates with widespread beliefs among Marind that the Indonesian government is on a genocidal mission to eliminate Papuans through population dilution, forced sterilisation and cultural assimilation (see Butt 2005; Kirksey 2017; Kirsch 2002). With state-endorsed agribusiness expansion underway, both humans and animals face the dire prospect of a rapidly disappearing forest to live in and from.

Village animals thus constitute 'tragic icon[s] of a vanished world of self-determination' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 47–55) that evoke to Marind the violation of their rights to sovereignty as coerced subjects of political 'taming' on the part of a paternalistic state (see Kirksey 2012; Kirsch 2010). Analogous victims of colonisation, animals and humans together partake in interspecies *memoria passionis*, a term used by West Papuans to denote their collective history of suffering under Indonesian rule (Hernawan & van den Broek 1999). In this light, Ruben's wounding cry can be conceived as a lament for the wildness lost by animals *and* a poignant evocation of the fate of their keepers, whose rights and freedoms are thwarted by a state determined to control their future. In sharing the bird's grief, Elena and her companions were mourning not just *for* domesticates, but *with* them (van Dooren 2014: 134). Marinds' refusal to pet village creatures and their persistent efforts to return them to the wild consequently take on deep-seated symbolic meaning for both animals and their keepers. These practices seek to reverse the troubling transformation of animals from

autonomous agents to captive dependents and concomitantly express in a veiled medium Marinds' own desire for long-denied political and cultural emancipation (cf. Parreñas 2018).

No Longer Native

Barnabus, a teacher at the Khalaoyam primary school, once joked,

> Ruben was born in rice and lives off rice. He is the first 'modern' cassowary to walk Marind soil. He doesn't know how to sing like a cassowary or speak cassowary tongue. Who knows, someday, this *pendatang* (settler) might start teaching us Javanese!

Barnabus' comment suggests the troublingly human-like attributes of village animals are heightened by the particular *kind* of human they resemble – *pendatang*, or 'settlers'. The term *pendatang*, which literally means 'arrival' or 'comer', is used in Indonesia primarily to refer to non-Papuan migrants who have relocated to the lesser-populated regions of the archipelago through state-sponsored programmes or spontaneous migration (see Arndt 1986). Like many West Papuans, Marind resent the presence of settlers and describe their relations with them in terms of mutual dislike and avoidance. *Pendatang* live in settlements established on customary land without the consent of local landowners. They increasingly outnumber Papuans in Merauke District, accounting for over 60% of the population in 2010 (Ananta et al. 2016). Settlers also monopolise formal employment in the villages and own all kiosks and public transport (Butt 2005: 418–421; Slama & Munro 2015: 28). For this reason, many Marind associate settlers with money, capitalism and 'business' (see Stasch 2015) and more specifically with oil palm plantations, which have prompted a renewed influx of migrants into Merauke over the last decade to work as plantation labourers (Elmslie 2017).

Many of interlocutors consider settlers deeply untrustworthy because they work for or collude with the police and military, state organs that routinely harass, intimidate, interrogate and incarcerate Marind community members (see Hernawan 2015; Kirksey 2012: 114–120; Kirsch 2002: 69). Cultural differences also shape Marinds' characterisation of *pendatang*. While Marind are Catholic or Protestant, settlers are primarily Muslim, a creed many like Barnabus associate with Java, the heart of political and economic power in Indonesia, and with Javanese people, who represent Merauke's single largest non-Papuan ethnic group (Ananta et al. 2016). While Marind entertain ancestral relationships with forest species to whom they show respect and care, settlers poach game and fell precious woods without asking permission from Marind clans or undertaking the required rituals. My interlocutors also affirmed that settlers consider them backward because of their forest-based livelihoods, lack of formal education and dark skin (see Kirksey 2017: 200–201; Munro 2015). They pointed to the fact that many *pendatang* avoid coming into physical contact with them because they think Papuans are dirty or infected with HIV. Several villagers have been refused goods and treatment at the local kiosks and clinics for these reasons.

Similarities between non-Papuans settlers and setter-like animals express their common status as aliens. For instance, neither are 'native' (*asli*) to the environments

they inhabit – Indonesian settlers in West Papua and animals in the human world of the village. More and more *pendatang* move to Merauke, and more and more animals are turning into domesticates. Domesticates eat rice, instant noodles and biscuits – commodities sold and consumed primarily by *pendatang*. Ruben himself, as Barnabus jokes, was born in a vat of rice, the staple starch and agricultural crop cultivated by settlers (see Figure 3). His inability to sing like a cassowary suggests to Barnabus that the bird would rather speak Javanese, a language Marind associate with *pendatang*. And just as Indonesian settlers disrupt Marind ecologies and ways of life by appropriating their lands and resources, domesticates invade the village and exhibit un-animal like habits that are deeply 'unsettling' to their keepers. Endowed with a foreign ethnic identity as *pendatang,* domesticates thus constitute living 'vectors' of the social differences and disparities underlying Marinds' antagonistic relations with migrant populations (cf. White 2011: 104–105).

At the same time, animals' behaviour gives rise to reflections among community members about their *own* transformations from 'native' to 'settler'. Geronimo, a widower from Mirav, once told me, 'Ruben used to be native. Now, he has turned into a settler. There are few native cassowaries left in the forest. There are few native Marind left in Merauke. All of us are becoming *pendatang*'. Just as Ruben forgets how to sing, children forget how to speak Marind and respond to their parents in Indonesian. These 'settler' children refuse to eat sago and want instant noodles and rice, which make their bodies weak. Like Ruben who was born in a vat of rice, Marind children are born in state clinics rather than in the forest as custom requires. Young Marind who use cosmetics and whitening products lose their authentic Papuan traits of curly hair and dark skin and begin to resemble Javanese settlers. Similarly, community members become *pendatang* when they sell land or seek employment on the plantations because, like village creatures, they forget how to live in the forest with their plant and animal kin. As Geronimo suggests, few organisms today – human or other – can claim to be truly wild and native. 'One day', he speculated, 'we will no longer know wildness. We will no longer know anything but settler life. We will forget what freedom tastes like. The whole world is becoming plastic'.

Geronimo's comment highlights the classificatory 'logic of contrasts' (Descola 2016: 37) that operates in the simultaneous transformation of animals and humans from wild to domesticated *and* from native to alien (see also Lévi-Strauss 1970: 61). These concomitant transformations are associated by Marind with 'modernity', a condition many villagers like Geronimo express through the idiom of 'plastic'. For Marind, 'plastic' things and beings are associated with deception. For instance, 'modern' foods like instant noodles and candy come in glossy plastic packaging but are never satiating. Government and corporate representatives wrapped in fashionable clothes pledge to support community development but fail to deliver on their promises. Marind adopt 'modern' habits and become fixated on material wealth, even as the items they purchase never satisfy them. Marind also associate plastic things and beings with uncontrolled proliferation. For instance, more and more plastic goods enter the villages, more and more *pendatang* move into Merauke, and more and more young Marind turn to a modern way of life. State officials and company

staff intervene incessantly in village affairs to introduce yet more oil palm projects which they promote as key to the modernisation of West Papua and its 'primitive' tribes (Slama & Munro 2015). As Geronimo suggests, Marind communities can do little to stop the flow of 'plastic' things and beings into their world. Plastic, as Roberts puts it, incarnates 'the futility of resistance and the inevitability of accommodation' (2010: 104) to alien yet imposed modernities.

Domesticates represent and participate in a world dominated by 'plastic'. For instance, Marcus sings about Ruben eating 'modern' foods wrapped in plastic like instant noodles and biscuits, bathing in plastic buckets and recognising the sound of 'modern' products like mobile phones. Domesticates are also deceptive. They may look like crocodiles, deer, possums, tree kangaroos or cassowaries in form but they behave like human *pendatang*. Like plastic, domesticates are inedible because they were not hunted and therefore cannot be consumed. Just as the accumulation of plastic defies the logic of decay, regrowth and transformation, humans and tamed creatures no longer participate in the 'cosmic economy of sharing' (Bird-David et al. 1992) that animates the forest realm through life-sustaining exchanges of bodily flesh and fluids. The sterility-inducing effects of plastic also resonate with the fate of village animals who are confined to human settlements and therefore cannot perpetuate their kind in the forest. As deforestation continues, domesticates multiply in the villages. Like plastic wrappers that will not biodegrade, no one knows what to do with these alien beings who refuse to go away.

Oppressors and Oppressed

Evelina, a young woman from Khalaoyam, watched Ruben attentively as he struggled to untangle his bony feet from strands of the instant noodles she had scattered for him. The young bird eventually tripped up and collapsed onto his side. Unfazed by his fall, Ruben began to chew voraciously at the mushy noodles around him. Evelina turned to me and said anxiously:

> Maybe there is no hope for *merdeka* (independence), no matter how hard we struggle. Maybe Ruben will never be able to return to the forest. Maybe some of us have already given up. We try to make Ruben return to the forest and become 'wild' again. But what can we do if Ruben himself does not want to be free?

Marind express pity, sadness and compassion towards animals alienated from their native environments and demoted from wild to domesticated beings whose plight resonates with their own experiences of subjection to state control. Their efforts to return animals to the forest are both an attempt to liberate animals from their dependence on humans and a symbolic enactment of their own unfulfilled 'dreams of sovereignty' (Rutherford 2003: 21). However, animal-human relations in the village also give rise to widespread frustration and anxiety, which I suggest stem from ambivalence surrounding the *intentions* of domesticates and their keepers. On the one hand, Marind say animals are forced to seek human help because their forest is being destroyed. Yet many villagers also note that domesticates seem to relish being in the village and

living a modern, settler way of life. As Evelina suggests, it appears these creatures no longer *want* to be free.

For instance, community members' efforts to coax Ruben back to the wild were met with resistance. He chose human food to cassowary food and flapped around excitedly when it was time for his warm water bath. Rather than retaliating against the attacks of the cockerel with his strong legs, the young bird invariably turned to humans for protection. In Bayau, villagers carefully transported the crocodiles to the river, but the reptiles refused to set foot in the water. Women in Mirav described how the possum seemed to prefer dozing on their lap rather than in the treetops. These behaviours bring villagers to speculate at length over whether animals are truly forced into subjection or whether they in fact enjoy being domesticated. Both possibilities are equally disturbing. Coercion suggests there is no hope for animals to become 'wild' again, while compliance suggests that domesticates are resigned to, or even embrace, their subjection.

Once again, both interpretations have ominous implications for Marind in the context of West Papua's struggle for independence. Up to the year 2000, Marind were actively involved in the pursuit of Papuan autonomy, including as members of OPM, or the Free Papua Movement (Osborne 1985). This culminated with the 'Bleeding of Merauke', a violent attack by the military on civilians in Merauke city (the capital of Merauke District) on 3 December 2000, during which 20 people were killed or severely wounded. Since then, Marind engagement in political activism has dwindled and OPM presence in the region is practically non-existent. Village elders often contrasted the political apathy of Marind today with the resilient resistance movements of Highland Papuans and attributed this to young Marinds' desire for material wealth over political autonomy. As Pius, an elder from Bayau, complained:

> The young generations are too lazy to fight for *merdeka*. They just want money and mobile phones. And those are easier to obtain than *merdeka*. *Merdeka* is not like rice or instant noodles. You cannot buy *merdeka*. You must bleed for it. But now, Marind don't fight for more freedom. They fight for more money.

Pius and Evelina's statements communicate a sense of futility or hopelessness for West Papuan autonomy and self-determination. Just like village animals who refuse to return to the forest, many Marind have given up the fight for political freedom and have resigned to their ensnarement within the Indonesian state – much like Ruben surrenders to the mess of instant noodles trapping his bony legs. In suggesting that villagers have succumbed to the lure of money and material comfort, Pius also highlights Marinds' ambivalent relationship to 'modernity' as a way of life at once fetishised and reviled (Rutherford 2003; Slama & Munro 2015: 13; Stasch 2016).

On the one hand, community members condemn modernisation projects and their 'plastic' manifestations because they create an impression of abundance that is illusory and short-lived. Yet just as village animals appear to enjoy 'modern' experiences like taking baths and the sound of mobile phone ringtones, modern life is an ambivalent object of longing for many community members. For instance, my interlocutors told me they envy 'modern' *pendatang* for their cars, their relative wealth and their

knowledge of the world outside of Merauke. Many community members are tempted by the prospect of cash income from employment in the plantations which will allow them to send their children to better schools in Jayapura (the capital of Papua Province) or Jakarta. Like Ruben who appears to enjoy devouring the instant noodles emmeshing his feet, Marind are drawn to foreign and often plastic-wrapped products entering the villages – instant soft drink mixes, washing powder and Tiger Balm. Modern things and practices become a particularly potent source of agency and object of desire (Rutherford 2003: 19) for young Marind who want to leave the villages and 'progress'. As Rosalina, a girl in her twenties who hoped someday to train as a nurse, told me:

> I want progress. I want to keep up with the rest of the world. We cannot be left behind. Look – even Ruben knows what a mobile phone is, and what it sounds like, even though he is just a cassowary. Even Ruben must become a modern settler to survive.

At the same time, many of my interlocutors point out that animals' attempts to behave in 'modern' ways are fraught with failure and violence. For instance, community members frequently noted how Ruben seemed unable to integrate into the avian community of the yard. Watching the bird suffer yet another vicious pecking by the church cockerel, Darius, a Khalaoyam elder, said sadly:

Ruben wants to be like other *pendatang*. He tries to eat and walk like them. But still he is not accepted, and they won't share their food with him. Ruben will never be a real *pendatang*, no matter how much rice he eats. He was born to be in the forest – not the village. He tries so hard to be like the chickens, who are real *pendatang* because they come from outside Papua and have never lived in the wild. But Ruben is different. He should be in the forest. Ruben is a nuisance to them. And he is a nuisance to us, too.

Darius' words point to the ambiguous merging of settler and Papuan positions in the figure of the domesticate. On the one hand, animals like Ruben are a 'nuisance' to Marind because, like settlers, they impose themselves in a space they do not belong to and behave in an alien, 'modern' manner. Yet Marind also empathise with animals forcefully displaced from the forest in light of their own experiences of dispossession and minoritisation as a result of migrant influx. As suggested above, the contradictory amalgamation of Papuan and settler identities is also problematised by the fact that many Marind *aspire* to a settler-like way of life – even as it remains largely beyond their reach. Indeed, like the violent rebuff that Ruben suffers in attempting to bond with the chickens and cockerel, Marind too face rejection in their attempts to 'survive', in Rosalina's words, by participating in projects or activities associated with 'modernity' (see Munro 2013). For instance, their efforts to interact with *pendatang* face limited success because *pendatang* deem them primitive and uneducated. Marind who attempt to participate in formal employment suffer entrenched racial stigma and cultural discrimination (see Slama & Munro 2015; Stasch 2015). Indigenous landowners surrender their territories in the hope of social welfare schemes and compensation that turn out short-lived or unfulfilled. Like Ruben, who was born in a vat of broken, subsidised rice – known locally and officially as 'poor peoples' rice' – Marind face rampant poverty and food insecurity in remote villages where government funds

rarely materialise. Just as the chickens Darius observed refuse to make a mess-mate of Ruben, Marind remain excluded from the sites and circuits of wealth and opportunity promised by 'modernity' and its deceptively 'plastic' promises.

A final layer of ambivalence arises in relation to Marind as animal-keepers and as subjects of the state. Okto, a young man from Khalaoyam, compared these two roles as follows:

> We control Ruben – what he eats, where he goes, where he sleeps. So, when we control Ruben, we become like the government. We don't like the government. It does not belong here. But at the same time, we control animals, just like the government controls us.

Okto's statement can be understood in terms of a relation between oppressed and oppressor. On the one hand, Marind and domesticates are 'victims', as Gerfacius put it, in the face of ecological and cultural transformations imposed by the state in the role of oppressor. These shared experiences of subjugation give rise to empathetic sentiments of pity and compassion among animal keepers. At the same time, as Darius suggests, domesticates are a 'nuisance' because they impose themselves in the village and force Marind to control them in ways that violate the ethos of restrained care enabling animals to retain their wildness. From this perspective, Marind and domesticates no longer stand together as the oppressed in the face of the state as oppressor. Rather, they stand in disturbing *opposition* to each other in a relation of asymmetrical domination. This dynamic in turn produces an ominous equivalence between Marind and the state. By 'controlling' the lives of animals, as Okto put it, Marind end up replicating in disquieting ways the role of the state in their own political disempowerment. In sum, domesticate-human relations are profoundly disconcerting because they position Marind simultaneously within two opposed categories – the oppressors *and* the oppressed.

Hopes of Freedom

The advent of post-structuralism has seen a broad eschewal of universalist distinctions between the wild and the domesticated, nature and culture, and body and mind, among others. However, wild/domesticated and native/non-native differences are central to understanding the ambivalent ontology of domesticates and their keepers in Merauke. The analysis presented in this article thus lends support to Descola's view that anthropologists should attend to how the *content*, rather than the form, of seemingly familiar binaries, differs across cultures (2013: 121). It also invites greater attention to how ecological and cultural transformations reconfigure the content and moral valence of pre-existing classificatory schemes (Cassidy & Mullin 2007; Shanklin 1985). In Merauke, 'plastic' animals are the unfortunate by-products of historically entrenched colonialist ecologies and emergent capitalist assemblages. These creatures matter precisely because they constitute a problematic breach of the categorial order that distinguishes species and shapes their relations with humans. By ignoring, condemning and mocking village animals, Marind distance themselves literally and figuratively from beings that are 'matter out of place' while simultaneously affirming the categories to which they do not conform (Douglas 2002: 48–49).

These tactics of avoidance however are complicated by transformations Marind perceive among their own kind and uncertainty over whether these transformations are imposed or embraced. Animals who refuse to return to the forest become disquieting symbols of resignation to the hegemony of powerful others. Their desire to stay in the village suggests a willingness to adopt alien habits dictated by encroaching settlers and an occupying state. The ambiguous intentions of village animals thus reflect in troubling ways the ethical and existential quandaries faced by West Papuans themselves as they attempt to 'exceed the conditions of their exploitation' (Kirksey 2012: 2). Conflicting emotions, speculations and interpretations coalesce around these anomalous beings who reveal troubling truths about their keepers' desires, destinies and dilemmas. Neither 'good to eat' (Harris 1998) nor 'good to live with' (Haraway 2008), 'plastic' animals remain nonetheless 'good to think with' (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 204–208).

One year after I last saw Ruben, I received a flurry of Whatsapp and Facebook messages from Khalaoyam community members who were visiting Merauke city. 'Ruben has left the village', they told me. When I returned to the field one month later, Ruben's disappearance was still the object of much speculation. Some said Ruben had returned to the forest of his own free will. Others believed Ruben's cassowary kin had finally come to rescue him. If so, this meant Ruben had managed to retain his native and wild cassowary self, retrieve his place in the community of his own species, and finally found his freedom in the forest. Others were less optimistic about Ruben's fate, suggesting he had been captured by *pendatang* on the prowl for wildlife to sell or eat. Perhaps Ruben had entered the oil palm plantations where he would starve to death. Maybe he was in one of the neighbouring military garrisons where soldiers were known to keep dogs and cats. My interlocutors imagined Ruben wandering around the barricades or roaming the forest. Others envisioned Ruben's feathers sold as key-rings in Merauke city's tourist shops, or his body displayed as a stuffed mount in a museum in Jayapura, or even Jakarta. I asked Marcus, who had sung about Ruben's tragic fate over a year ago, what he thought had happened to the 'plastic cassowary'. He responded:

> Maybe Ruben has gone back to the forest. Maybe he is 'wild' again. Maybe he has decided he does not want to be 'plastic'. I don't know. People say he has found his freedom. I hope this is true. I *must* hope.

Kirksey (2012) describes the West Papuan independence movement as a pursuit of 'freedom in entangled worlds' in which activists collaborated with changing figures of hope in the anticipation of dramatic transformations on the horizon. In Merauke, the entanglements of animal and human worlds and their complex relations of captivity and domination, resonates with the political subjection and quest for autonomy of West Papuans. For those who believe that Ruben has died or been killed, the cassowary's disappearance was a sombre omen of the fate of West Papuans as they face ongoing political oppression, cultural assimilation and environmental crisis. For others, Ruben's disappearance materialised the dramatic transformation they had so long encouraged – the recovery of his freedom. Ruben was no longer a symbol of submission but a figure of hope. Some like Marcus were ambivalent about Ruben's fate. However, they

must sustain the *possibility* that Ruben regained his freedom for it conjures the possibility of freedom for West Papuans, somewhere on the horizon of hope.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms for people and places are used throughout this article. 'Merauke' refers to the District of Merauke (*kabupaten Merauke)* and 'Merauke city' to the District's capital city (*kota Merauke*).
2. Terms in Indonesian are italicised and terms in Marind are underlined.
3. *Raskin* is an abbreviation of *beras miskin* or 'poor peoples' rice'. The term is used locally to refer to subsidised rice for low-income households and is also the official designation from the government programmes distributing it.

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