

Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”

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Longing, Loss, and Regret Beyond the Borders of a Malaysian Oil Palm Plantation

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Walking in the forest with Na? Tapih, and Na? Ktlət,¹ both Batek women in their 50s, we paused to sit. Na? Tapih noticed tiny shoots of edible *knsey* tubers (*Disocorea* sp.) on the ground by her feet, and Na? Ktlət evocatively recalled how when they were children *?ipah layel gwēl* “we went around looking for them, with the appearance of many meandering things”. They expressed *ha?ip* “longing, love, yearning, absence, nostalgia” for this fleeting image, and consequently for times they had spent in the forest as children, and for the taste of tubers, foods of “the old people from before”. *Ha?ip* evokes a sense of bittersweet, meandering cyclical loss and return, childhood and aging, botanical growth and harvest. It creates a sense of motion through both life and the forest² that suffuses Batek affective relations to time and place (Chao 2021; Kimmerer 2020; Rudge 2023).

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout. All terms in *italics* are Batek terms, and those underlined are Malay, translated by the author.

² “Many things meandering” being a stark contrast to the lines drawn on the ground by Marius ([see Chao in this collection](#)).



Image 1: The *klep* of *knsey* tubers (photo by author)

But the threat of destruction produced by long-established plantation-conservation frontier zones interrupts these cycles, even without (more) trees needing to fall. Plantation methodologies might thus usefully attend not only to how plantations feel ([see Chao in this collection](#)), but also to affects produced by the sticky spaces of their frontiers. Such spaces demonstrate how plantations have affective resonances not only within their borders, but also in forests that may appear, at first glance, to still stand as they always have.



Image 2: The plantation frontier

Over the past 50 years, Batek have seen much of the forest in which they playfully meandered as children razed to make way for oil palm plantations, upon which many people also now labor. The forest we were in that day is a slice of forest reserve that borders Taman Negara, the 4,343km² national park that was set up by the British colonial administration in 1939. Though they have no ownership rights, Batek were allowed to remain in the national park as they were deemed “wild people” by the colonial administration (Lye 2011). The area covered by the park, however, mapped only partially onto Batek’s much larger ancestral homelands, and after Independence, foreign investment saw development projects that destroyed swathes of Batek forests up to the park’s borders. Batek were never consulted, just like when the park was constructed. Their forests were deemed *terra nullius* for the desires of others.



Image 3: An old “forest reserve” sign on a fallen tree

A shrunken forest intensifies conflicts with tourism, poachers, conservationists, NGOs, and elephants. These make living and moving in the national park in small groups—as people did until the mid-1990s—more dangerous. Most therefore now live in larger, permanent settlements on the edges of forest and plantation, such as the one where this ethnography took place,³ where the Batek village sits at the juncture between plantation and a slice of forest reserve linking the village with the main national park. On this frontier, though deforestation has slowed—the threat of more looms ever-present in people’s minds—shaping the specificities of how people experience the forests that *do* remain. Batek often express an uncanny sense of *anticipatory* loss in which *ha?ip* may one day turn to fear and regret. Loss, then, begets further loss ([see Chao in this collection](#)), which for Batek centers on fear of the removal of the very possibility of *ha?ip* for future generations, as cyclical meandering gives way to the monotony of labor and shifting visions of the future.

³ Fieldwork took place for four months over a year between 2022 and 2023. This built on over 20 months of prior fieldwork in this and neighboring Batek villages and forest locations between 2014 and 2018.

In the forest, fruits, like the tubers Na? Tapih and Na? Ktlət spoke of, offer a link to the “old Batek from before” through *ha?ip*. Batek must make the fruit season feel pleasurable *ha?ip* by wearing fragrant flowers and leaves, singing beautiful songs, and weaving mats from pandanus, demonstrating that Batek are remembering the “old laws”. These are ways that humans flourish too: Na? ?Aliw told me her husband fell for her because of the smell of the flower crown she had made; “He wasn’t able to *not* have me anymore.” *Ha?ip* cements intimate relations among people and with the forest through a sense of the past and the “old Batek from before”. The forest becomes a living archive of cyclical *ha?ip*, in which Indigenous Batek historicities complicate notions of the past as separate from the present (Deloria 2002; Rudge 2023).



Image 4: A woven bag on a woven mat—the fruit season likes to see it



Image 5: Making hair decorations to please the fruit season



Image 6: *Cawas* flowers—a sign of fruits to come

Today, people speak about the changes brought by the plantation as interrupting these cycles: “I am afraid of the changes ahead”, Na? Ktlet told me. “Old people from before didn’t live in houses like these ... Changes, like our meat, our starchy foods, mean one is lost now ... It’s like how you can’t leave a baby alone in the late afternoon, in case they lose the smell of their mother, becoming lost. *We, now, are lost as well.* We have bad hearts, and when you don’t remember your heart, you can go mad.” This lostness contrasts with the meander of children searching for tuber-shoots—who while they may “have the appearance of many meandering things”, were deeply emplaced in their parents’ heart-based knowledge of the forest. Meandering was not being lost, but a way of embedding oneself, through *ha?ip*, in life’s cycles.



Image 7: *Pales* leaves, used for decorations and medicine

After peering through the school window to watch the children sing Christian songs with the resident missionary, Na? ?Aliw exclaimed how seeing them sing like that she knew they were “lost”. “But we are lost too—so we gave them our children—what else could we do?” Plantation roads bring missionaries, and missionaries “cause the children to forget”, to become “lost”. As for Marind, for Batek too, the plantation undermines people’s ability to orient themselves ([Chao in this collection](#)). Here, this is both in terms of one’s physical position, and in terms of how one envisages life projects in a changing world.

This year, people spoke of how the fruits barely ripened, as the fruit season too is lost. And while the forest remains a place of refuge, sustenance, and memory, it is also increasingly full of signs that unlike tuber shoots on the ground are impossible to interpret. Uncertain news has begun to spread that the reserve that links the Batek village to the national park is to be logged and converted to oil palm. Indecipherable markings have appeared on the trees. Batek speculate about their meanings—will there be a road here? Markings are accompanied by other symbols—inexplicable pools of red sticky substances that indicate blood and death, the sounds

of unfamiliar screaming ghosts, and frequent shivers caused by a lingering fear of what ghosts might bring. Unpleasant smells rise from the earth causing bad luck, and the smell of death and decay upsets the fruit season, preventing the ripening of fruits. The sensory alienation that Marind feel amidst the plantation ([Chao in this collection](#)) is thus felt by Batek even inside the forest, produced by the haunting presence of the frontier.



Image 8: Uncanny markers in the forest



Image 9: Uncanny markers in the forest



Image 10: Uncanny markers in the forest

After we spotted the tuber shoots, we decorated ourselves with fragrant leaves, and sung. Rising out from the trees came the *ccccccy bleeEEEEy* sound of the cicada who had heard our song.

This sound, Na? Tapih and Na? Ktlət said, was the sonic embodiment of our deceased relatives who, hearing us, felt *ha?ip*, and were calling to us from the afterlife. Na? Tapih explained that “when they hear our songs, they turn to face us—but when they see they can’t reach us, they feel *ha?ip*”. This can cause them to come to your dreams, where they may share songs and knowledge. *Ha?ip* between living and dead is thus an inevitable part of life that allows knowledge and memory to be passed on. But “when the forest is all gone, the dead will no longer be able to come to our dreams—they will not be able to find their way”. *Ha?ip* and the transfer of knowledge it permits would no longer be possible—an anticipatory future that to describe, Batek turn to Malay: menyesal, “regret”.



Image 11: A plantation road



Image 12: A forest path

Fear of its inevitable disappearance shapes how people experience what *is* left to them of the forest. When the living and the dead no longer recognize “changing pathways” (Lye 2005),

embodied and affective knowledge as felt through *ha?ip* will be impossible to pass on. Fruits will no longer ripen. No longer will children meander but keep to plantation tracks to avoid snake bites and pesticides. The vital processes that sustain meaningful multispecies lifeworlds can disappear (Chao 2021, 2022), even while “protected” forests still stand, demonstrating the plantation frontier as an “imaginative project” (Tsing 2003: 5103) that reaches ever-forwards in time and space, engendering uncertain futures.

The construction of “frontiers” was central to empire-making, and Pahang was and continues to be constructed *as* a frontier—a supposed *terra nullius* that justified both development and conservation projects (Noor 2011: 64, 146). But if the plantation is a frontier that exists always in relation to the park, what Batek theories show is that a frontier does more than either convert or preserve land. Its affective tentacles reach out beyond its confines, preventing the very possibility of human and non-human flourishing.

Plantation methodologies must, therefore, attend to the affective, still-resonant archives of meandering forest life on plantation-conservation frontiers to understand and counter the violent assertions of emptiness upon which plantation expansions have always relied. Part of this is tracing the ways that how plantations feel also shapes the feeling of the forests that remain standing. Frontier zones prompt a re-theorization of perceptions of neat divisions between conservation and development, and forest and plantation. Attention to the murkiness of the frontier’s affective reach is thus central to understanding the violence that plantations produce.

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