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ABSTRACT

In this article I interrogate how dwellings constitute a *force* in ordinary urban environments in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I argue that such forces are activated relationally via the demand for interpretation that structures elicit from the human beings who build, inhabit, and circulate within and between them. Following Miguel Tamen, I regard the act of *interpretation* as a process of person-making. This claim resembles Ingold's revised concept of animism, although this article ultimately resists the use of this concept, as it appears to confuse *personhood* with *life*. Rather, the force that dwellings possess in urban environments such as Kuala Lumpur is located in the fact that they are often perceived as non-human, non-living persons capable of exerting certain forms of force proper to them within these environments. Thus, I argue that a critical element of how KL residents forge an emplacement within, and belief in, their ordinary life worlds was the necessity to interpret the character of their dwellings which were, in turn, acts that attributed to the built environment certain elements we would typically associate with persons. In sum, this article is a reflection on the personhood of things, the various intensities of force that such thing-persons exert on human forms of living, and the outcomes that result when this ability to act disrupts or contradicts the interpretative frameworks that made them agents-of-sorts in the first place.

Vertigo

Nothing ever holds still in Kuala Lumpur. The effect of this fact is that one gets the sense that everything in the city, including the built environment itself, can potentially act as an *agent*. This is not particularly distinct from the accounts any urban dweller in Southeast Asia will give when asked to describe their form of living. What is remarkable about Kuala Lumpur is the sheer unexpectedness, the seemingly malevolent and intentional arrhythmia, of ordinary urban life and the fact that that the problem is not simply an inability to move but the anxiety that *everything* can move and *is moving*.

Any researcher willing to sink into an ordinary life marked in this way will not be immune to the deranging effects of this vertigo. This admission should not be read as a confession; it is rather an *empirical finding*. The focus of my long-term research in the city has been on the reverberating effects of aggressive, unanticipated changes in urban space on ordinary life. Taking seriously claims that the very buildings of the city often feel like they are literally moving, I have suggested previously that what is at stake is the ability to form some belief in the world that would allow for the navigation of what Deleuze has termed "the immanent plane of existence." Belief in this formulation pertains less to religiosity or intentionality prior to action than to the relations between sense, evidence, and ethical action in ordinary life. Lacking the ability to reliably assimilate what one senses *in* the world with what one knows *about* the world severely risks the coherence of the subject; it is my contention that the material character of everyday urban life in KL often threatens to rupture this very coherence and the forms of life that necessarily emerge out of a subject's relations to other subjects and to the world.[1]

This framework of understanding does not answer every question the evidence raises. Specifically, what about the buildings themselves? What is it about the character, or even behaviour, of physical structures such as houses, blocks of flats, and office buildings that would prove to be unexpected, disorienting, and disturbing to city residents? Related to this, how can actual dwellings provide an avenue of expressing one's anxieties, frustrations, and even pain in a manner that the human beings who inhabit such buildings struggle to find when speaking of themselves or other human persons around them?

To make the question more precise, I ask here how dwellings themselves constitute a *force* in ordinary urban environments. This force is activated relationally via the demand for interpretation that structures elicit from the human beings who build, inhabit, and circulate within and between them. Following Miguel Tamen, I regard the act of interpretation in a very special way in that interpretation stands as a process of person-making. In short, the force that dwellings possess in urban environments such as Kuala Lumpur is located in the fact that they are often perceived as non-human persons capable of exerting certain forms of force proper to them within these environments. This claim should in no way be taken as a finding that my interlocutors "fetishized" buildings or were confused about the ontological status of their dwellings; they knew perfectly well that structures were neither humans nor animals. Rather, I am saying that a critical element of their own emplacement within, and belief in, their ordinary life worlds was the necessity to interpret the character of their dwellings which were, in turn, acts that attributed certain elements we would typically associate with persons. Thus, this article is a reflection on the personhood of things, the various intensities of force that such thing-persons exert on human forms of living, and the outcomes that result when this ability to act disrupts or

contradicts the interpretative frameworks that made them agents-of-sorts in the first place.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, my claim that dwellings in Brickfields are endowed with forms of personhood proper to their status as non-human, non-living entities by those who live and work within them is *not* one rooted in classic anthropological traditions of animism. Rather, it possible in Brickfields for things to act like persons *without* the ascribed presence of something "human-like" such as a spirit "within" things such as buildings (although hauntings and possessions are also common). My argument here does broadly resemble Tim Ingold's understanding of personhood as constituted in and through relations, but ultimately seeks to move away from a naturalized, "souled" concept of being as the operative force in forming "persons."[2] As Rane Willerslev has pointed out, Ingold's reliance on Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world" (Dasein) as a way to revise "animism" tends to figure our world of relations and persons as something experienced in an undivided fashion, a "total bodily immersion" able to absorb difference and blur self and world.[3] This allows Ingold to provocatively revise anthropological understandings of non-human personhood, but his retention of the notion of animism comes with the price of continuing to confuse personhood with life. This seems at best a simple reversal of Heidegger's own unequivocal claim that Dasein is essentially *not a living being* but rather constitutes a "being-toward-death", and any emergent specificity that one may associate with personhood derives not from life in all its fullness, but rather from *death*.[4]

Attempting to follow Heidegger reveals just how ambiguous the demand to apprehend the death of a being that is, in fact, not a living being at all really is when attempted in ethnographic contexts. Understandably, Ingold, reverses the polarity of

Heidegger's line of argument back towards life, attempting to outline how one apprehends the world via the perception of embodied ("living") persons (human and non-human) within this field of being. In contrast, while agreeing with Ingold's claim that personhood is realized through relations, I will briefly suggest here that nothing takes place in zones of pure life or pure death and that our attempt to understand of the personhood of things requires neither life nor death *proper*.

Mourning Those Who Pass Away Without Dying

Revisiting ethnographic evidence I gained between 2000 and 2002 in the Brickfields area of Kuala Lumpur, I find numerous instances of residents regarding the dwellings in the neighbourhood as non-human persons. This period was a time of particularly aggressive change to the physical environment in Brickfields as the initial stages of the construction of the KL Sentral train station were nearing completion and construction of the KL Monorail transportation network commenced. One particular incident among many, an instance of *mourning* explicitly non-living beings, serves to concretely illustrate what I mean.

On a hazy Sunday evening in October 2001, I stood at the edge of what remained of Kampung Khatijah, one of the longest standing "kampung" settlements in Brickfields.[5] Being in formal terms an illegal settlement, no official archive of the settlement's history exists, although my own archival research confirmed that Kampung Khatijah was in existence as early as 1955. When I had passed through the kampung on the previous Friday it looked more or less as it had looked for quite some time. Two days later, it was gone.

I should be more precise and say that Kampung Khatijah was in the process of disappearing on that Sunday evening. A clean swipe cut right through the maze of

houses that extended back roughly half a mile to the Klang river. Turning around, I faced the source of the destruction—jammed into what was a little unnamed alley cutting between the main road (Jalan Tun Sambanthan) and Jalan Thambipillay sat a small battalion of heavy equipment, all neatly stencilled "KL Monorail." Walking through what remained of Kampung Khatijah, I found that the residents were methodically working. A few walls somehow remained standing here and there, and the personal possessions of those who yesterday lived in these houses remained scattered among the rubble. Strikingly, they were methodically breaking down the kampung themselves.

I asked what had happened. I find I am talking to Siva and Abdul, who were until earlier that day next-door neighbours in the kampung. They were willing to talk, although Abdul drifted away after a while. My conversation with Siva was clipped, fast – he worked on dismantling his house as we talked and he clearly did not have a lot of time. Properly recording what I was seeing and hearing was hardly my primary concern in the midst of this stunned, painful confusion, but I did hastily note some of the specific terms Siva used in trying to give some coherence to what had happened and what he was doing at that moment. His voicing of words like "touch" and "kill" were significant, as in Kampung Khatijah residents wanted to prevent the KL Monorail workers from "touching" their homes, from adding insult to injury after having already "cut" through the settlement. Faced with no other choice, the displaced residents elected to dismantle what remained themselves. Siva would not allow them to "kill" his home; he would do it himself, just as Abdul was and other neighbours were also doing to their own little dwellings. The care residents took in separating boards, bringing down walls, and levelling out brick foundations resembled how one would touch an injured or dying person. Having no warning and no response at the

level of law, politics, or justice to offer, Kampung Khatijah's displaced residents could only demand that the KL Monorail workers and the police simply *stop touching* their dwellings. Like witnesses to an execution, these agents of the state stood aside and allowed this last request.6

Taken in isolation, these actions and statements could easily be categorised as improvised reactions borne out of shock and confusion in the face of the stunning liquidation of the kampung – hardly the basis for any wider claim. And yet, this event continued to elicit similar reactions from Brickfields residents in the months and even years following the event. In effect, an open expression of mourning the violence inflicted on the kampung brought into relief a series of other possible interpretive acts rendering the built environment as an ensemble of persons. It was not uncommon for some recollection of Kampung Khatijah to emerge intermingled with a person's own fears of disappearance, anger over the violation of the neighbourhood, and an articulated sense that proper care of the neighbourhood included the proper treatment of the dwellings that constituted its physical form. Very often, these articulated sentiments were extended to the sympathetic reference to one's own body, particularly in reference to one's own *pain*. Over time, it became clear that even the buildings themselves often did not "behave" in anticipated ways – this was particularly true of the rather large numbers of blind and partially-sighted people in the neighbourhood, whose very mobility and emplacement in the space required predictability from the built environment. As one partially-sighted Brickfields resident exclaimed, "the buildings are moving!" He caught himself, sensing that what he had just said might be taken as absurd, and amended his statement by adding, "The buildings *seem* to be moving." Even noting the qualification, the interpretive frame of the judgement remained the same.7

Can a building "misbehave" and unexpectedly move around? Can a dwelling be "killed"? Can the sight of a demolished building elicit something akin to sympathetic pain from human witnesses? I am arguing that, for my interlocutors in Brickfields, the answers to all of these questions was "yes", although this answer seems to call for the very notion of animism that I previously marked out for criticism. How can one "kill" or "mourn" a non-living thing without regarding it as something alive? Clearly, Brickfields residents deployed such terms to give expression to a relationship, yet at no time were "actually" seeking to convince me or anyone else that they were referring to living things. Like Ingold and others, I resist the simple solution of bracketing this form of expression as metaphor, a joke, or some sort of false consciousness. And yet, if they are not talking about "life", what are they talking about? To attempt an answer, I will briefly illuminate how concepts of *force*, *interpretation*, and *personhood* come together within the urban context I am describing here.

Force, Power, and the Personhood of Things

Nearly all recently published works in the social sciences devoted to understanding the character of ordinary life make some reference to *force*. The sheer ubiquity of this idea often leads to some opacity as to what it precisely refers to. Given this ubiquity, however, it is worthwhile to occasionally return to a seemingly obvious question: what do we mean by "force" when referring to the city and its forms of living?

It is very common to conflate force with *power*. Michel Foucault's understanding of power seems to invite this conflation, as Foucault clearly associates "force relations" with power:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.[8]

Foucault further claims, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."[9] In light of such a definition, one can hardly be faulted too harshly for slipping into the habit of using "power" and "force" as synonyms.

A careful reading of Foucault's definition of power, however, reveals a clear distinction between this concept and *force*. In writing that power is "the *multiplicity* of force relations immanent in their sphere" (my emphasis this time), Foucault clearly marks a difference between force and power that is important to note. Following Nietzsche, Foucault characterizes force as foundational to power, but not synonymous with it; this difference is crucial to bear in mind as we come to consider who or what constitutes a person within such spheres.

Linking the concept of "person" to force and, by extension, to dwelling, leads us to the aporia between "life" and "non-life." – this is consistent with recent ethnographic characterizations of everyday life in the city.[10] Taking up the aporia of non-human persons thus expresses a particular understanding of the concept of person that resonates with theorists such as Bruno Latour and Miguel Tamen.

Tamen suggests that any concept of "the person" must be understood in relation to acts of *interpretation*. He writes, "'interpretation,' minimally defined as the attribution of language and intentions, is simply shorthand for the process of person-making."[11] Tamen agrees that such acts of person-making are inextricably social,

noting that "something becomes interpretable, and describable in an intentional way, only in the context of what I have been calling a society of friends."12 By "friends" Tamen means that a "community of agreement" that allows for understanding (or misunderstanding) must exist in order for any interpretative act to take place and, in turn, for persons of any sort to exist at all.13 Understood in this way, there are no *a priori* "persons" out there in the world and humans do not by definition automatically qualify as persons or monopolize the category by virtue of their "nature." Tamen elaborates this claim when he writes that "there are no interpretable objects, only what counts as an interpretable object or, better, groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable and who, accordingly, deal with certain objects in recognizable ways."14 Even the notion that something is "natural" or exists "beyond interpretation" indicates that ultimately a person is both "made and not made" through acts of attribution, description, and interpretation. On this score, Tamen is broadly consistent with Nietzsche in that the will to power interprets for the reason that "[m]ere variations of power could not feel themselves to be such: there must be present something that wants to grow and interprets the value of whatever else wants to grow."15

Tamen's concept of person-making allows us to understand better how non-human "actors" concretely have the kind of agency that is a central element in Latour's thought.16 The argument is compelling, as Tamen eludes the comforting trap of placing such interpretive acts on the register of false consciousness or error. Indeed, we are just as able to grasp our own mode of interpreting things as persons (the status of corporations as juridical *persons* in many industrialized Western countries comes to mind here) as those interpretive acts by others that animate or bestow some form of "rights" upon things or creatures we take for granted as lacking

any standing as subjects. Indeed, the entire anthropological notion of animism is turned inside out in a productively critical manner.[17]

Yet there are still complexities that remain, particularly given that "life" and "consciousness" are not, strictly speaking, the natural partners of the active force that characterizes interpretation for Tamen or the will to power for Nietzsche.[18] We puzzle over the notion that mere things seem to possess an impossible life, not stopping to ask if our firm belief that we are "alive" or that we are "conscious" makes us any more or less a person in any taken-for-granted sense. This is clear in the way that Brickfields residents expressed who (or what) seemed to count as a person. Their expressions play with our own misrecognition of life in personhood, confronting us with actors that could not possibly be "alive" in the human sense and yet are regarded in ways that, at times, seems to indicate precisely that. In times of crisis such as the one in Kampung Khatijah described earlier, the words within these expressions simply seem to fail, pushed (as death will) beyond their capacity for trustworthy signification. A word like "kill" would seem to assign a life to the person being referred to – in Brickfields there is clearly no life assigned to such persons, yet they are killed all the same.

It is thus clear that the personhood of things is not, strictly speaking for my interlocutors in Brickfields, about life; rather, it regards how seemingly neutral things can take the form of a person and, as a result, possess force within its milieu that cannot be understood or explained with recourse to analogy or metaphor. Force here is here shifted from being understood as a causal factor to a quality or intensity.[19] Or, more directly, the very interpretive act of attributing personhood to objects accounts for the *force* that they possess and the necessity of a belief in the world that makes

relationally emplacing oneself in relation to others (human and non-human) within this world possible.

"All reality is already quantity of force." Deleuze made this statement in reference to Nietzsche's understanding of force, which will also help us here.[20] Nietzsche understood the body as the quintessential outcome of the multiple, plastic forces at play in the constitution of this reality.[21] Deleuze thus summarizes Nietzsche's position as follows:

> Every force is related to others and it either obeys or commands. What defines a body is this relation between dominant and dominated forces. Every relationship of forces constitutes a body – whether it is chemical, biological, social or political. Any two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship. This is why the body is always the fruit of chance, in the Nietzschean sense, and appears as the most 'astonishing' thing, much more astonishing, in fact, than consciousness and spirit.[22]

Thus there is no *a priori privilege* granted to any particular kind of body over another; this would include the privilege of being a *living* body. Rather, the body, *any body*, is constituted through the hierarchy of forces that emerge through the relations of force with force, emergent via the particular relation between active (dominant) and reactive (subordinate) forces.[23] It is therefore not at all unusual that Brickfields residents would primarily experience the disorder generated out of the constant transformation of the physical environment in a somatic fashion, as their own bodies are constituted and felt through relations of force with other bodies. Interpreting the structures around them as persons, an unusual form of sympathy comes to exist for the dwellings themselves, as the interpretive act that made them persons comes with a body of sorts that, in turn, allows residents to situate themselves within the world. This in no way presumes a unity of self and world that "absorbs" the subject and eradicates difference. Rather, when the bodies around them are attacked, disappear, or are replaced by unpredictable strangers, the effects of these actions are felt by

Brickfields residents as forces that challenge or reorder their sympathetic, hierarchical reality. In other words, they truly do experience *vertigo*.

Conclusion: The world(s) within Kuala Lumpur

Numerous recent ethnographic studies of Kuala Lumpur bear out the social consequences of living in a state of vertigo.24 These studies consistently describe Kuala Lumpur as "fragmentary," "dystopic," "out of sync" and shot through with "invisible" social forces that serve to both destabilize established forms of living and pave the way for new ones to emerge.25 The speed and intensity of urban life that such adjectives imply are quite real for ordinary residents of the city and the emergence of a milieu marked, as Ross King notes, by "contradictions, inconsistencies, and resentments," is hardly accidental.26 What is striking about King's description is the implication that there is a multiplicity of "worlds," often associated with dissidents and minorities, which emerge within the obsessively singular social vision of the late-Mahathir era in Malaysia.27 These worlds continue to be generated out of the very dogmatism that characterizes the Malaysian government's approach to urban development.28 Strikingly, it is very often the case that one can simultaneously sense the existence and movement of these worlds without being able to see, describe, or anticipate them in any concrete or consistent way. In other words, they are sensible but *invisible*. Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart's description of "the invisible city" within Kinshasa could just as easily apply to Kuala Lumpur:

> The invisible was in the invisible, and vice versa, not as a matter of artifice, but as one and the same and as external reality simultaneously – as the image of the thing and the imagined thing, at the same time.29

In other words, we have a *picture* of what the world consists of prior to our sensory or conscious apprehension of it. This picture is often glossed as "the supernatural" and de Boeck and Plissart are concerned in this passage with the phenomenon of child witchcraft that was pervasive at the time of their fieldwork in Kinshasa. While the supernatural worlds that would give rise to such figures are central to any understanding of Kuala Lumpur as well, this is however not the invisible world that I am describing here. Rather, our situation is both much more mundane and, in its own way, as difficult to precisely apprehend or believe as witchcraft is.

Descriptions of life in Kuala Lumpur as "hypermodern" and "surreal" often imply that the aggressive form of development pursued in Malaysia in the early years of the twenty-first century produced a narrative of "social fragmentation" in local media representations of Malaysian urban space.30 Such popular narratives often turn on the ascription of "agency" or even "life" to the forms of technology that make such development possible.31 This agency of things has not gone unnoticed by scholars of the region, particularly those focused on neighboring Indonesia, and is typically described as a kind of "technological sublime," with modern technology acting as an active mediator between an archaic or undeveloped past and an imagined "better life" in the future.32 As Nils Bubandt and James Siegel have both noted, in such a situation it is not difficult to make the leap from technology as such as an engine of progress to specific technologies operating within an older, occult matrix of action.33

While this line of argument is valid in giving some sense of the relations between technologies and supernatural, invisible worlds, I have argued something quite different here when I claim that dwellings are endowed with forms of personhood by those who live and work within them. The need to bestow some form of personhood on dwellings serves to, at least in part, explain the vertigo and distress

of my interlocutors in Kuala Lumpur. Attributing this distress to "animism" or "anthropomorphism" in the service of explaining why urban dwellers in Kuala Lumpur protect their dwellings from unwarranted touches, grieve for them when they are eradicated, miss them when they are gone, and fervently wish that they would stop moving around, only serves to distance their interpretations from our own acts of person (and, by extension, world) making. Yet under certain conditions, *all of us* not only attribute personhood to things, and we *must* do so in order to simply dwell in the world. Brickfields presents its own specificity that should not be carelessly generalized; but even in taking this caution, we should be able to sympathetically see our own predicaments as bearing a close kinship to theirs. To gain an understanding of *dwelling* as a condition or intensity, and *dwellings* generally, we must grasp the complex interplay between acts of interpretation that bestow elements of a (non-living) *personhood* on things and the *force* enabling, and enabled by, such acts in urban contexts. If we can accept that non-living dwellings can also be persons, then we must be prepared to accept what they express, joining our friends and interlocutors in acts of engagement that already characterize an important part of what it means to *dwell* in contemporary cities the world over.

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1 Baxstrom, *Houses in Motion*, 1-24.

2 Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 169.

3 Willerslev, "Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously?", 48-50.

4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 304-311. See also Marrati, *Genesis and Trace*, 142-154.

5 *Kampung* literally mean "village" in Bahasa Malaysia. In this particular usage it refers to long-established, but formally illegal, "squatter" settlements.

6 I offer a more extended analysis of this incident in *Houses in Motion*, 108-112.

7 Baxstrom, *Houses in Motion*, 85-129.

8 Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 92-93.

9 Ibid, 93.

10 Baxstrom, "Knowing Primitives, Witches, and the Spirits"; Lepawsky and Jubilado, "Globalising Kuala Lumpur and rationalising the street."

11 Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, 7.

12 Ibid, 3.

13 Ibid, 87-98. See also Latour, *Politics of Nature*; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

14 Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, 3.

15 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §643, 342.

16 Latour, *The Politics of Nature*, 53-90.

17 Ingold, "Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought"; see also Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Nash, *The Rights of Nature*; Serres, *The Natural Contract*; Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?*.

18 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §354, 212-213.

19 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §664, 350.

20 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 40.

21 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §659, 347-348.

22 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 40.

23 Starobinski, *Action and Reaction*.

24 Baxstrom, *Houses in Motion*; King, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya;* Willford, *Cage of Freedom*; Yeoh, "Limiting Cosmopolitanism."

25 Yeoh, "The World Class City and Subaltern Kuala Lumpur," 2.

26 King, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya*, xxiv.

27 Mahathir Mohammad served as Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 until 2003.

28 Baxstrom, "Even Governmentality Begins as an Image; Baxstrom, "Living on the Horizon of the Everyday Present."

29 de Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 155.

30 Yeoh, "Representation, cultural mediation, and power in Malaysia," 5.

31 Sardar, *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*; see also Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*.

32 Barker "Engineers and Political Dreams"; Mrázek, *The Engineers of Happy Land*. See also Nye, *Electrifying America*, and *American Technological Sublime*.

33 Bubandt, *The Empty Seashell*; Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta*.