

Specters of excess: Passing and policing in the Malay-speaking archipelago

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Abstract

Positioned at the island interface of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the east Malaysian state of Sabah bears witness to some of the largest clandestine cross-border flows across the globe. This article examines what a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah has called “an insidious problem which has turned out to be an all-consuming nightmare.” It highlights the situated (meta)semiotic work involved in determining and enforcing the state’s seemingly indeterminate and unenforceable borders between citizens and suspected non-citizens, while also showing how inquiries into migrant illegality are ultimately inquiries into “excess.” It demonstrates how experiences of and orientations to excess take expressive shape in migrants and Malaysians’ fashions of speaking and forms of life. It concludes by considering how these transnational dynamics across a sprawling archipelagic region lend a provincializing angle of vision on American(ist) anthropology’s own hemispheric parochialism.

KEYWORDS

migration, indeterminacy, passing, policing, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

A specter of indeterminacy and discourses of indiscernibility haunt and shape public life in the east Malaysian state of Sabah. Here, at the northeast edge of the island of Borneo, amid the borders of Indonesia and the Philippines, Malaysian state agents have “fought with [an] invisible enemy” (Malay, *berperang dengan musuh yang tidak kelihatan*) (Sabah Information Department, 2020). This frustratingly invisible yet omnipresent *musuh* (enemy) plaguing Sabah’s public life has not limited its movements to the east Malaysian state. Rather, its presence is felt well beyond the limits of Malaysia and Island Southeast Asia, extending to every continent across the world.

After a tumultuous state election in September 2020, Sabah became the epicenter of a third wave of COVID-19 infections sweeping across the majority Malay-Muslim Southeast Asian nation-state. One of Malaysia's richest states in terms of natural resources but the poorest in terms of Poverty Line Income (PGK), Sabah's cumulative case count rapidly and exponentially overtook those of Malaysia's 12 other states, leading to intensified epidemiological containment in the form of Movement Control Orders (MCOs). During Malaysia's multiphase national-scale MCO, Sabah deployed more rigorous Enhanced Movement Control Orders (EMCOs) and Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Orders (TEMCOs). These orders' stricter standard operating procedures and testing protocols were cast by health and government officials as commensurate with the level of threat posed by the invisible enemy in Sabah's designated *zon merah* (red zones). These zones—districts like Tawau, Kunak, Sandakan, and Lahad Datu—have been historically and recurrently invoked in a state-level discursive sphere as hosts to another elusive specter. They are zones where, as three Malaysian and Sabah-based international relations scholars write, “numbers of illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries of the Philippines and Indonesia [are] said to have reached an alarming figure” (Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2010, 115, my emphasis).

Addressing public concern amid this third wave, First Deputy Minister of the Interior Dr. Ismail Mohamed Said reported that almost 7000 *Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin* (PATI) or “illegal immigrants” from Indonesia and the Philippines had been deported from Sabah over the course of 2020 (Osman, 2020). National news networks reported on the state and national governments' joint commitment to remediating the “flood of illegal immigrants in Sabah” and the putative threats that it posed to Sabah's body politic (Ibrahim and Razali, 2020). Insofar as this *kebanjiran* (flood) was rhetorically cast as leaving *penularan* (contagion) in its wake, policing Sabah's borders became a matter of public health. And yet, these policing efforts have been beset, as they perennially are, by a suite of practical challenges.

First, Sabah's maritime borders are notoriously porous. The east Malaysian state's borderlands and borderwaters are cross-cut by an imbroglio of clandestine cross-border channels vernacularly referred to by migrants and Malaysians alike as *jalan tikus* (rat trails). The chief representative of the Indonesian Consulate in Sabah's Tawau district once estimated there were 1000 channels, remarking that “there aren't only a thousand roads leading to Rome, but there are also a thousand roads heading to Tawau” (Pro Kaltara, 2015).

Second, despite ongoing and overtly excessive practices of *penahanan* (detention) and *pengusiran* (deportation), Sabah's so-called “illegal immigrants” incessantly leave the state's politicians and policy analysts befuddled, inciting them to ask the same recurring question: “Why do they keep on coming back [and] what are the reasons [for] their returning?” (Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2010, 116). Malaysian news media and Sabah-based analysts have offered tentative answers to these questions through recourse to the push-and-pull talk endemic to classical migration studies. Among the Suluk people of the southern Philippines, it is ongoing civil war at home that pushes them to their east Malaysian neighbor. The Bugis people of Indonesia, on the other hand, are pulled, lured by the promise of *kelebihan*, an other-than-standard variation of standard Malay *kelebihan* glossed by news media and international relation scholars as “more income” but better understood as the nominalized form of Malay adverb and comparative degree operator *lebih* (more). Despite Sabah's best efforts, Suluk and Bugis migrants regularly return to its porous shores, pushed by civil war at home and pulled by the promise of moreness.

Third, as Malay-speaking Muslims and fellow travelers in transborder “social networks” (*jaringan sosial*) and diasporic “kinship networks” (*jaringan keluarga*), Bugis immigrants from Indonesia and Suluk immigrants from the Philippines readily assimilate aside their Malay-, Bugis-, and Suluk-speaking co-ethnoreligious Malaysian counterparts. They have, as one Sabahan author has written, “become ‘invisible’ among Sabahans” (Tangit, 2018, 245). In the words of one best-selling Malaysian author, “Muslim foreigners, most of them

Sulus [sic] from the Philippines and Bugis from Indonesia ... can easily assimilate into the Sabah environment and look like they originated from there" (Kee, 2014, 154). Clearly, "contagions of imitation" (De Tarde, 1903, xviii; see also Lempert, 2014) also pose imminent and immanent threats to Sabah's body politic.

In this article, I explore everyday inquiries into migrant "illegality" in the east Malaysian state of Sabah, with special reference to Bugis transnational communities of practice. Believing that inquiry entails the "determination of an indeterminate situation" (Dewey, [1938] 2018, 34), and that the problems arising from inquiry are phases of "tensional activity" ([1938] 2018, 34; see also Savransky, 2021), I take ethnographically seriously what the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah has called "an insidious problem which has turned out to be an all-consuming nightmare" (Shim et al., 2014, 1). I highlight the situated (meta)semiotic work involved in determining and enforcing Sabah's seemingly indeterminate and unenforceable borders, while showing how inquiries into illegality are ultimately inquiries into excess.¹ I thematize the ethnographic material presented here under two rubrics keying to two inter-animating phenomena: passing and policing.

Regarding the first of these phenomena, passing, I follow John L. Jackson Jr. and Martha S. Jones's "more expansive definition" of passing as "includ[ing] the intersubjective angst and uncertainty at the center of all canonical forms of storytelling, including the stories we tell ourselves about who and what we think we are" (Jackson and Jones, 2005, 9). Passing, the authors continue, "is an attempt to shore-up social intelligibility (for an externalized or internalized audience of judges) through particular empirical details, and any representation or understanding of self is predicated on just such operationalized variables" (Jackson and Jones, 2005, 11; see also Garfinkel, [1967] 2013; Ke-Schutte, 2023; Makoni, 2020; Telep, 2021, 2022; Yeh, 2018). Regarding the second of these phenomena, policing, I follow Jacques Rancière's understanding of the police not as a constituted, uniformed body of enforcers but as "an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a *distribution of the sensible* [*partage du sensible*] or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions" (2004, 3, my emphasis). The "function" of such a system, following Michel Foucault (1977, cited in Lepecki, 2013, 19), "is not of applying the law, but of obtaining a normal behavior," or, following Mark Neocleous (2000), is the fabrication of social order. Finally, agreeing with Zane Goebel that "all social practice is discursively policed" (2019, 17), and that policing is made tractable in "contact discourse" or discourses about "contact with those who are not exact copies of ourselves with exactly the same communicative repertoires" (2019, 2), I follow how the fabrication of social order unfolds in fashions of speaking (see Babcock, 2022; Carruthers, 2019).

After a brief, contextualizing overview of Sabah's doubly insular status in Malaysia and Malaysian studies, I explore east Sabah's unique position as both destination and crossroads at the center of an archipelagic region that has traveled under many names, its geographical delimitation a function of "historically contingent frames for the conception of regionness and its spheres of interactions" (Tajudeen, 2020, 104): "the Malay Archipelago," "Maritime" or "Island Southeast Asia," *Nusantara* ("archipelago," though in Malaysia the term definitionally refers to the Malay-speaking world and in Indonesia to the sovereign territory of the Indonesian nation-state), *Bilad Al-Jawa* (the Land of Java), and *Alam Melayu* (the Malay World). At this island region's transnational edges, I draw attention to Indigenous Sabahans' expressed anxieties about an "uncontrolled influx of Muslim foreigners" (Kitingan, 2015, quoted in *Borneo Post*, 2015) as they relate to a transnational *wacana dominan* 'kesamaan' or "dominant discourse [of] sameness" (Dollah et al., 2018, 13) connecting Bugis Malaysians and Bugis Indonesians. I suggest this discourse is one predicated on intersectional affinities and "intersectionally raciolinguistic" senses of belonging (Ke-Schutte and Babcock, 2023).

In a second sketch, I show how these fractionally congruent (Agha, 2007; see also Hockett, 1987) collectivities converge among many dimensions of attribution but diverge

among others, where this divergence or fractional “slippage” (Bhabha, 1994, 122) is reflexively characterized as *kelebihang* (excess). Inspired by Angela Reyes’s (2017, 2021) recent work on the postcolonial semiotics of excess among Philippine elites, and merging cognate insights from Malay linguistics and linguistic anthropology (Asmah, 1968; Whorf, 1956), I explore the semiotics of *kelebihang* in Bugis fashions of speaking and forms of life. Believing, with Valentin Vološinov, that “it is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around—*expression organizes experience*” (1986, 85, emphasis in original), I examine how experiences of and orientations to excess are themselves denotatively, interactionally, and aesthetically expressed and configured.

Mindful of the ever-present specter of comparisons (Anderson, 1998; Rizal, [1887] 2006), my conclusion draws out some comparative dynamics, asking, with an eye to Sabah’s “politics of location” (Rich, 2001; see also Al-Bulushi et al., 2020), how the particulars presented here exceed regnant typification schemas, models, discourses, images, habits, or ideologies proffered by American(ist) anthropology. Having drawn attention to bordering practices (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) and contact discourse (Goebel, 2019; see also Goebel et al., 2019) at the porous, archipelagic interface of three island nations in the Malay-speaking archipelago, I ask what provincializing or parochializing angles of vision the present study might offer on American(ist) anthropology’s own hemispheric parochialism.

EXCEEDING CATEGORIES ON THE EDGES OF MALAYSIA

Situated at the border of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Sabah was incorporated alongside Sarawak (its north Bornean neighbor) and island Singapore into federated Malaysia in 1963, joining postcolonial peninsular Malaya, which had gained independence from the United Kingdom six years prior.² Its incorporation into a sovereign and free Malaysia followed almost two decades of rule as a British Crown colony. This in turn followed almost 60 years of rule as a British North Borneo protectorate, before which, beginning in 1881, it was governed and its resources exploited by the North Borneo Chartered Company, whose representatives had purchased land concessions from the Sultan of Sulu (of the Sulu archipelago in today’s southern Philippines) and the Sultan of Brunei.

Immediately after its incorporation into Malaysia, Sabah reached a flashpoint, its east coast becoming embroiled in international politics in the form of the so-called *konfrontasi* (confrontation) spearheaded by postcolonial Indonesia. This unofficial war was brought about by Indonesian President Sukarno’s irredentist opposition to the incorporation of Sarawak and Sabah into a new Malaysia. His remarkable speeches in the decades leading up to *konfrontasi* foretold this opposition, particularly his speech of June 1, 1945, where, speaking in a codified register of Malay dubbed “Indonesian” by the Dutch colony’s proto-nationalists in 1928, he outlined the “five principles” of *Pancasila* that would constitute Indonesia’s philosophical foundation:

If we look at the map of the world, we can point to where the “unities” [*kesatuan*] are. Even a child if he looks at a map of the world, can point out that the Indonesian archipelago [*kepulauan Indonesia*] forms one unity... . Even a child can tell that the islands of Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Celebes [Sulawesi], Halmahera, the Lesser Sunda Islands, the Moluccas and the other islands in between are one unity. (Sukarno, 1961, 10–11)

Sukarno’s archipelagic aspirations reflected an earlier commitment—jointly settled with his soon-to-be Vice President (and later critic) Mohammad Hatta and Malayan anticolonialist Ibrahim bin Yaacob—to the formation of an Indonesia Raya (Greater Indonesia), that is, a

“postcolonial state of Nusantara, comprising the Netherlands Indies and the Federated Malay States” (Evers, 2016, 7). This was not to be, however. *Konfrontasi* failed and Indonesia and east Malaysia went their separate ways. Sabah's east coast, though, would remain a flashpoint in international affairs. Its islands would figure in transnational territorial disputes, its shores invaded in 2013 by self-proclaimed agents and heirs of the Sultan of Sulu, and its notoriously porous borders would become the *gerbang* (gateway) to one of the largest clandestine cross-border flows of migrants in the world (Carruthers, 2017a; Temby, 2018; Warren, 2007).

Research on language and ethno-racial formations along “Sabah's east coast” (*pan-tai timur Sabah*) is simultaneously confronted, if not confounded, by what historical linguist James T. Collins (1989) has called the issue of perspective or what anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2001) has problematized as authority-defined sociopolitical discourses in the Malay-speaking world.³ Writing on the underlying assumptions of Malay language research in contemporary Malaysia, Collins has shown that colonial-era onto-epistemological inheritances have operated like “Habsburg-style boundaries,” effectively “gridlock[ing]” Malay dialectal nomenclature and tying “Malay dialect classification to the premise that existent political borders constitute a basis for categorization” (1989, 243). He identifies “the state-boundary grid” (1989, 239) as one such inheritance giving rise to isomorphically enregistered “state”-“dialect” boundaries codified by the Malaysian Language and Literature Agency in a list of accepted canonical “dialects,” one of which being “Sabah Malay.” These boundaries, Collins claims, have stymied the study of transborder Malay. Just as Malaysia's canonically designated Kelantan Malay spoken at the Malaysia–Thai border has more in common with the Patani Malay spoken in southern Thailand than it does with the “standard” Malay broadcast from the nation's exemplary center, the same may be said of Sabah Malay, which owes many of its phono-lexico-grammatical features to Brunei Malay (Wong, 2000). So, too, the Malay spoken in Sabah's Tawau division at the Malaysia–Indonesia border not only shares much in common with that institutionally codified register of Malay commonly called “Indonesian” (Errington, 2022) but also with “middle Indonesian” (Errington, 2014) varieties of Malay spoken in North Kalimantan, whose features evince influence by Bugis migrants (Soriente, 2020).

A third and final assumption identified by Collins brings us closer to home, while offering a provincializing window on matters of theoretical concern in American(ist) linguistic anthropology. As linguistic anthropologists incite closer, subdisciplinary-wide attention to “non-epiphenomenalizing examination[s] of race-language co-naturalizations” (Ke-Schutte and Babcock, 2023) it's worth highlighting that postcolonial Malaysian linguistics' formulation of the object called *bahasa* (language) has *always* been explicitly tied to “meaning making about and through race” (Smalls, 2020, 234), fueled as it has been by a deontic, raciolinguistic imperative. To riff on Jonathan Rosa (2019), in postcolonial Malaysia, if it is to look like a language, it must sound like a race. Research about what counts as Malay language has long been authoritatively tied to assumptions about who counts as a member of the *masyarakat induk Melayu* or the “basic or core Malay community” (Hussein, 1986, 19). Ironically, as linguistic anthropologists decry how “persistent disciplinary stances continue to block” or “disallow recognizability” of “broad engagements with the interventions offered by a raciolinguistic perspective” (Ke-schutte and Babcock, 2023), institutionalized raciolinguistic perspectives in Malaysian postcolonial linguistics have effectively blocked intervening inquiry into the Malay “spoken by non-Malays” (Collins, 1989, 244; see also Hussein, 1986; Wong, 2000, 2012).

This blockage, as Sabahan linguist Jane Wong (2000, 2012) has long pointed out, effectively puts varieties like Sabah Malay under scholarly erasure, its study undermined by the assumption that “any Malay variety spoken by non-Malays, including the non-Malay indigenous people, non-Muslims and the immigrants of Sabah is considered *Bahasa Melayu pasar* or *Bazaar Malay*” (Wong, 2012, 5), a lesser-than “vehicular” variety wanting of native speakers (see Errington, 2022) and racialized mother-tongue sourcing (Babcock, 2022). As Collins simply puts it, “the Malay language is larger than the Malay community” (1989, 245).

Malayness itself, as Shamsul has clearly demonstrated (2001), is an “authority-defined” sociopolitical formation, one shaped by colonial-era investigative modalities (Cohn, 1996) like the census-taking projects whose fashions of raciolinguistic categorization prefigured postcolonial formations of Malayness. As shown by Charles Hirschman (1987), British colonial typologies of ethnolinguistic difference on the peninsula gradually narrowed from an initially bewildering multitude of categories to the four “racial”—or rather, raciolinguistic—categories that endure today in Malaysia and Singapore alike: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Other. In peninsular Malaysia’s *Tanah Melayu* (Land of the Malays), a place where majoritarian Malay *Bumiputera* (native) subjects receive affirmative action benefits, to be Malay ostensibly means being “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom” (Malaysian Federal Constitution, Reprint as of 1 November 2010, 130).

Though peninsular Malaysians and scholars of Malaysia tend to use these four categories—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Other—as text-defaults for the description and reanalysis of race in Malaysia, the situation in Sabah is categorically (and categorially) different (Tangit, 2018). In the peninsula, Sabahans of Bugis or Suluk *keturunan* (descent) are readily identified as hyponymic members of a hypernymic *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race). In Sabah, however, whether on birth certificates or other modes of identifying documentation, they are *dikategorikan* or “categorized” as “Bugis” or “Suluk,” two categories that, in Sabah at least, are inconsistently identified as labels for *bumiputera* (lit., “sons of the soil” or Malay-speaking Muslim indigenous groups privy to affirmative action benefits), *orang* (“people”), *bangsa* (“people” or “race”), *keturunan* (“descent”), *suku kaum* or *etnik* (“ethnic group”), or sometimes, *pendatang* (“immigrants”). The last of these aligns these Malaysians with Bugis Indonesians and Suluk Filipinos who infamously constitute the most populous *pendatang* in a Malaysian state where “every third person ... is a foreigner” (Patrick, 2018, cited in Somiah and Domingo, 2021, 3; see also Tangit, 2018) (see Figure 1).

This fact, as we’ll see, presents certain challenges to ongoing efforts aimed at resolving what lawmakers have called Sabah’s most pressing problem, namely, “the lingering problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah” (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2014, 1).

PASSING: SHORING-UP “SAMENESS” IN SABAH’S SEAM-SPACE

High-ranking Malaysian government officials ranging from former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (2020–2021) to former Defense Minister (2020–2021) and Prime Minister (2021–2022) Ismail Sabri Yaacob, to current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (2022–) have drawn attention to the “alarming” statistical and characterological figure of the so-called “illegal immigrant.” This sense of alarm was immortalized in a report released in 2014 by a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah:

Sabah is often referred to as the “Land below the Wind,” a kind of paradise on earth. It is endowed with great beauty, both in terms of land and people. It is rich in natural resources. Tourists flock to see its natural wonders and heritage. They are in awe of its multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious settings. Under those circumstances, Sabahans should have good reasons to feel contented. And yet, underlying all of these, there is at least from one perspective, a sense of gloom. For decades, Sabahans have been plagued and haunted by an insidious problem which has turned out to be an all-consuming nightmare. It is endemic. It has grown into a crisis of humongous proportions... [A] former Chief Minister

MALAYSIA**BUMIPUTERA**

MELAYU

ORANG ASLI

BUKAN BUMIPUTERA [NON-BUMIPUTERA]

CINA

INDIA

LAIN-LAIN

SABAH**BUMIPUTERA ANAK NEGERI SABAH [BUMIPUTERA OF THE STATE OF SABAH]**

KADAZANDUSUN ATAU DUSUN ATAU KADAZAN (78 SUB ETNIK)

ORANG SUNGAI ATAU ORANG SUNGOI (34 SUB-ETNIK)

BAJAU ATAU SAMA ATAU BAJAUSAMA (25 SUB-ETNIK)

MURUT (18 SUB-ETNIK)

SULUK (11 SUB-ETNIK)

IDAHAN (6 SUB-ETNIK)

TIDUNG / TIDONG (5 SUB-ETNIK)

BRUNEI ATAU MELAYU BRUNEI (1 SUB-ETNIK)

LUNDAYAH/LUNDAYEH (1 SUB ETNIK)

RUNGUS

MOLBOG / BABALAK

BISAYA

BULONGAN

IRANUN

KEDAYAN ATAU KADAYAN

SUBPAN

BUMIPUTERA LAIN [OTHER BUMIPUTERA]

BUGIS (22 SUB ETNIK)

JAWA (2 SUB ETNIK)

BUTUN/BUTON (2 SUB ETNIK)

SINO KADAZANDUSUN

BANJAR

COCOS

DAYA

IBAN

MELAYU SEMENANJUNG

BUKAN BUMIPUTERA [NON-BUMIPUTERA]

CINA (6 SUB ETNIK)

TIMOR/TIMUR (5 SUB ETNIK)

ARAB

INDIA

INDONESIA

FILIPINO

PAKISTAN

FIGURE 1 “Authority-defined” (Shamsul, 2001) categories of *bumiputera* (lit., “sons of the soil”) indigenous and ethno-racial personhood in Malaysia and Sabah. The contrast in enumerated categories is reproduced here for dramatic effect. The “Sabah” column, directly reproduced from *Lembaga Kebudayaan Negeri Sabah*, features so-called “sub-etnik” enumerations that are absent any additional specification. For a detailed examination of Malaysia’s lain-lain or “others” category, see Ravendran (2021), and on “Sabah’s ethnic landscape,” see Tangit (2018).

of Sabah has described it in medical terms as having reached “ICU stage.” It is of course the lingering problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah.

(Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2014, 1)

Six years after the inquiry's findings, during Sabah's third wave of COVID-19 cases, then-Defense Minister Ismail causally linked intractable dynamics of clandestine cross-border movement with Sabah's ongoing health crisis. He outlined the aims of a national-scale operation dubbed *Operasi Benteng*: “[To] strictly control the country's borders in an integrated manner from undocumented foreigners illegally slipping in to curb cross-border crime in addition to curb the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic” (*Ops Benteng*, cited in Carruthers, 2020). Redolent of the unsettlingly familiar if not fully predictable “border wall talk” typical of xenophobic and securitarian state regimes worldwide, the attributive noun *Benteng* in the noun phrase *Operasi Benteng* refers to a “stone wall for defending a city from enemy attack,” or “a place strengthened by a stone wall,” though the item here more broadly refers to “defense” (Kamus Dewan Perdana, 2020, 262).

The more recent aims of *Operasi Benteng* comport with more longstanding security concerns at the maritime edges of the east Malaysian state, particularly on Sebatik Island. Located off the northeast coast of Borneo—Asia's largest island—the comparatively tiny Sebatik is bisected by the Indonesia–Malaysia border at exactly 4° 10' latitude north, its northern half falling in Malaysian Sabah's Tawau division, and its southern half in Indonesia's North Kalimantan province. The curious case of the border that cleanly cuts across Sebatik's “geo- body” (Winichakul, 1994) is an arbitrary artifact of colonial-era British-Dutch cartographic politics. Today, however, the 39-kilometer border is unfenced and relatively unpatrolled. Malaysians and Indonesians “pass” (*limpas*) as they please, some coming and going from homes that sit stubbornly atop the island's invisible international border.

Sebatik's unique position at the watery interface of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines has long garnered notoriety. As one analyst (Temby, 2018) explains, the island's tri- border area is “a fluid space at the center of the Malay Archipelago that allows international travel in 360 degrees” and, as such, affords “terrorist arbitrage” (Temby, 2018), among Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah, and other insurgent groups. Sabah-based Malaysian researchers Wan Hassan Wan Shawaluddin, Amrullah Maraining, and Ramli Dollah (2020) have argued that in addition to Sebatik's geographic position, factors like corruption in governance, security oversights on the part of Malaysian state forces, and *jarangan sosial* (social networks) have given rise to a far-flung illicit logistical network traversing the region's borderlands and borderwaters. Aside from enabling an infrastructure of clandestine cross-border migration that has long shaped the rhythms and realities of sociopolitical life in east and greater Sabah, this network also undergirds burgeoning illicit economies of drugs and weapons smuggling and human trafficking. In these various ways, this logistics space sitting at the watery center of the Malay Archipelago constitutes what geographer Deborah Cowen (2014, 2010) has called a “seam space,” a zone of excessive indeterminacy transcending “the legal, spatial, and ontological limits of national sovereignty” traditionally delimited by the geopolitical “borderline” (2014, 81). Emerging in the wake of the post-9/11 security state, seam spaces are “transitional zones of authority between inside and outside, opening and closing, where borders are blurred, and porosity policed” (Ramos, 2021, 212).

It is against this backdrop that one Malaysian English-language newspaper reported on a proposal by a Malaysian politician on the Malaysian side of Sebatik, comparing the problems posed by the island's—and greater Sabah's—porous borders with the “national security” agenda items of then-US President-elect Donald Trump (*Daily Express*, 2016). “Just like United States President-elect Donald Trump who envisions building a wall among the Mexican border to keep illegals and would-be criminals out,” the English daily continued, “Sebatik Assemblyman Datuk Abdul Muis Picho thinks only something similar would tackle the problems once and for all” (*Daily Express*, 2016).

The comparison between Mexico–US and Indonesia–Malaysia cross-border migration is one frequently made by international analysts and everyday Sabahans alike. Among analysts, the dimensions undergirding the comparison are direction and magnitude of flow.

Twenty years ago, political scientist Joseph Liow (2003) wrote that the “undocumented migration flow of Indonesians into Malaysia is arguably the second largest flow of illegal immigrants after the movements across the U.S.-Mexico border” (Liow, 2003, 44). This point was later echoed by demographer and migration studies scholar Graeme Hugo (2007), who identified the clandestine cross-border movement of Indonesians into Malaysia as “the world’s second largest, long-term undocumented migration flow, overshadowed only by the traffic between Mexico and the United States” (Hugo, 2007).

Sabah-based social scientists have long taken seriously the relation between these recurring patterns and magnitudes of flow and attendant processes of “physical” (*fizikal*) and “non-physical” (*bukan-fizikal*) boundary formation. Writing on the “non-physical elements of boundary formation” (*elemen bukan-fizikal dalam pembentukan sempadan*) that accompany national bordering projects worldwide, Universiti Malaysia Sabah international relations scholars Dollah, Marsitah Mohd Radzi, Wan Shawaluddin, and Maraining remind us that “physical forms that divide borders and territories such as barbed wire, observation towers or walls, mountains, rivers, maps, trees or boundary stones or aerial mapping and GPS are often used to distinguish between citizens/immigrants, good/bad, safe/dangerous, and hierarchy/anarchy” (2015, 15). These co-constitutive either/or, with-us-or-against-us categorical contrasts are widely enregistered features of securitarian political discourse (Lazaridis, 2016; see also Gal and Irvine, 2019). Yet, and as Dollah et al. (2015) and other Sabah-based researchers have laid increasingly bare, the complex socio-semiotic dynamics unfolding across Sebatik’s seam space are best understood not in terms of a binary either/or but an intersectional both/and.

Sebatik is a seam space where houses sit astride the Malaysia–Indonesia border, whose inhabitants wake and wander between the two nation-states, sometimes within the confines of their own homes. Sebatik is a maritime crossroads where those passing through sometimes bear (fraudulently obtained) documents identifying themselves as both Indonesian and Malaysian or sometimes pass bearing no documents at all. It is a space of religiously and ethnoracially-inflected social relations, where many of the island’s inhabitants identify as Muslims and both *Ogi* (Bugis) and *Melayu* (Malay). It is a place whose inhabitants speak (or identify themselves as speaking) enregistered Malay varieties (e.g., *Bahasa Melayu*, *Bahasa Indonesia*, *Bahasa Melayu Makassar*, *loghat Sabah*) alongside varieties of Bugis, the *bahasa etnik* (ethnic language) that many call their *bahasa ibunda* (mother tongue). It is a seam space where a both/and sense of indeterminacy is emblemized by a “border line that appears very blurry” (*sempadan yang dilihat sangat kabur*) (Dollah et al., 2015, 11) due to the “tight relations” (*hubungan yang rapat*) and first-person plural inclusive “we-ness” between the island’s transnational residents and passers-through.

Although there are physical borders such as rivers, military posts, and such in Sebatik, borders do not seem to exist among the border communities here, because they are bound by a dominant discourse of “sameness” [*wacana dominan “kesamaan”*] between two social groups (Malaysians-Indonesians). (Dollah et al., 2015, 13)

This dominant discourse of intersubjectively shared *kesamaan* is widely used to describe Sebatik and wider Sabah, mediating not only an interactionally grounded ethic of mutuality in a cross-border community of practice, or the *jaringan sosial* or transnational “social networks” on either side of the state’s blurry and indeterminate borderline, but also Muslim Malay-speaking migrants’ abilities to pass as Malaysians.

Passing poses certain practical challenges to a Malaysian state keen on “cleansing” (*membersihkan*) itself of so-called “illegal immigrants.” Since the 1970s, non-Muslim and Indigenous Sabahans have cast a wary eye on their state’s suspicious population growth and demographic

shifts. Describing what is commonly called the “IC Project,” citizens' groups assert that political operatives have fraudulently franchised non-citizen “Muslim foreigners” from Indonesia and the Philippines, issuing hundreds of thousands of national identity cards (ICs) in exchange for votes for Malay-Muslim coalitions. These clandestine efforts purportedly began alongside concurrent efforts to Islamize non-Muslim Indigenous groups, “with the hope that the Muslim population of Sabah would increase” (Wan Shawaluddin and Saffie, 2008, 133). Government investigators derailed a 1999 operation led by high-ranking Bugis members of the race-based, right-wing United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the then-ruling party that had uninterruptedly dominated Malaysian politics since the country's independence in 1957. The operation sought to recruit voters among undocumented “Malays of Bugis origin” (High Court of Sabah and Sarawak, 2001), and its revelation led to the nullification of voting results in one of Sabah's constituencies. In 2001, reports similarly emerged that “local people, who claimed to have encounters with illegal voters, said it was difficult to recognize them especially when they were in an area with a mixed composition of races. Once the illegal voters mingled among the crowd, they could pass off [*sic*] as locals” (Bernama, 2001).

A 2006 editorial letter appearing in progressive news outlet *Malaysiakini* highlighted Sabah's specter of indiscernibility. “There is a widespread perception,” the author wrote, “that Sabah is increasingly falling under the control (in terms of land ownership and licenses for small business) of Muslim Sulus [*sic*] ... and Muslim Bugis.” He continued:

It is hard to distinguish the locals from these Muslim foreigners, and thus, they can easily assimilate into the state's population by purchasing forged Malaysian passport and identity cards. Since these Muslim foreigners are not easy to trace, one cannot be sure if their numbers are effectively strong enough to take control of the state though mass membership [in] the ruling UMNO. But it is a fact that their numbers have swelled over the last twenty-five years. (Malaysiakini, 2006)

These “Muslim foreigners” turned “suffraged noncitizens” (Sadiq, 2008, 159) are conventionally characterized in Sabah and greater Malaysia as *pengundi hantu* (phantom voters), non-citizens offered fraudulent “documentary citizenship” in exchange for votes at the polls. Phantom voters are part of Malaysia's national zeitgeist, and this is especially so in Sabah, where officials searching for phantom voters have been suspected of being phantoms themselves (see Figure 1). Today, phantom voters are but one feature of the uneasy indeterminacy that haunts the eastern maritime edge of the Malaysian state, a place where *kawalan keselamatan* (security control) is perennially increased as part of ongoing efforts to *mempastikan sempadan* or to “determine” and enforce “[the] border” (*Berita Harian*, 2021). Such efforts are stymied in part by a dominant discourse of sameness nurtured in Sabah's transnational seams, a discourse that Bugis migrants and Bugis Malaysians interactionally presume and continuously refashion in the “individualized, familiar, habitual, micro-climactic of daily life” (Jelin, 1987, 11, cited in Errington, 1998, 4; see also Escobar, 1992) (See Figure 2).

This dominant discourse of sameness is not merely an *ethnik* or ethnolinguistic sameness, nor is it just a racial or raciolinguistic one (see Alim et al., 2016; Babcock and Ke-Schutte, 2023; Dick and Wirtz, 2011; Rosa and Flores, 2017; Wong et al., 2021). Lest we forget, the raciolinguistic categories proffered by the peninsula are out of sync with Sabah's institutional and “everyday-defined” (Shamsul, 2001, 365) realities. It is not only a religious sameness, although Islamic devotion is fundamentally part and parcel of these “Muslim foreigners” communities of practice. Nor is it a sameness simply predicated upon binationally-inflected intimacies or shared histories of migration, modes of aspirational mobility, imagined homelands, or patterns of settlement in east Sabah. It is all of these and more, and it is best understood, I argue, in terms of intersectionally elective affinities or *rapports* (see Stengers, 2011). These intersectional affinities are not only interactionally nurtured in the



FIGURE 2 The Spiderman pointing meme with a distinctly Sabahan twist. The scene depicts a voting booth during a Malaysian general election. The caption reads, “The JPN [National Registration Department of Malaysia] will help the SPR [Election Commission of Malaysia] search for phantom voters.” The uniformed phantom on the left asks, “Are these phantoms or people,” to which the phantom voters on the right respond, “We’re all ghosts,” where reduplicated *sama* or “same” serves an associative function, and distinctly Sabahan discourse particle *bah* serves an emphatic one (Source: Mutalib MD, 1999).

intersubjective fold of Sabah's seam space. They reflect and undergird a Bugis diasporic infrastructure, one whose historical reach sprawls across the Malay-speaking archipelago, linking the people and places we today call “Indonesia(ns)” and “Malaysia(ns).” Since the late nineteenth century, this network has logistically connected Bugis communities of practice in the *Tana Ogi* (Bugis homeland) in today's Indonesia's South Sulawesi province and the diasporic destination of contemporary Malaysia's Sabah (Sintang, 2007).

The late Sabah-born author, biting political polemicist, Internal Security Act detainee, and general critic-provocateur to UMNO, Mutalib MD (1999), wrote that this diasporic infrastructure has had an “animating” effect on Bugis collective “consciousness,” particularly among those in and around Sebatik and greater Tawau:

The Bugis, especially in Tawau, even though some have been born here, *are still animated by a heightened ethnic consciousness [tetap menjiwai kesadaran bangsa yang tinggi]* because they are not disconnected from their homeland. They are free to go in and out of Tawau without any hassle (45, my emphasis).

Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians are, it would appear, the “same.” And yet, a high-flying reminder from Charles F. Hockett (1987) helpfully suggests otherwise:

We usually think of the relation of sameness as reflexive, symmetric, and transitive... . So understood, the notion yields razor-sharp classifications: given any one thing, anything else in the universe is either the same as or different from it, with no middle ground. That is all very neat and works just dandy in mathematics and for artificial systems... . But for more empirical applications, as in linguistics, a modified relation may be more useful: an “almost same,” or perhaps a “very similar,” with a little leakage in it... . Actually, “almost same,” so described, is what we usually mean in our everyday affairs when we just say “same.” (98)

Across my fieldwork in Tawau, I was recurrently reminded by undocumented migrants and Malaysians, police and intelligence officers, leaders in UMNO, and palm oil laborers that Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians are *sama tapi tidak sama* (“the same but not the same”), *sama tapi berbeza* (“the same, but different”), or *hampir sama* (“almost the same”) (Carruthers, 2019). They are, to move beyond a dominant discourse of sameness, fractionally congruent (Agha, 2007) collectivities, ones whose fractional “slippage” (Bhabha, 1994, 122) is, as we’ll see, construed as *kelebihan* (excess).

POLICING: (CON)FIGURATIONS OF KELEBIHAN(G)

Famed as much for their socioeconomic aspirations as they are for their assimilatory prowess, as much for their inter-island mobilities as they are for their inter-archipelagic presence, Indonesia’s Bugis people are renowned for their far-flung cross-border movement across maritime Southeast Asia. Ever animated (if not agitated) by a certain “restless discontent, an unwillingness to make do with what is seen to be second best” (Lineton, 1975, 38), they are a people in motion—members of a “centrifugal society” admitting of an “outward impulse” (Lineton, 1975, 11)—whose modern ranks include labor migrants and migration brokers, scholars and sailors, tourists and traders, pilgrims and politicians, Indonesian presidents and vice presidents, Malaysian prime ministers, and many other figures of Southeast Asian modernity (Barker et al., 2014) or “social-characterological types” (Agha, 2005, 45; see also Bakhtin, 2010) (See Figure 3).

When Bugis migrants move, they do not characterize their movement as a flight from the proximate and precipitating factors that conventionally concern scholars of migration: runaway climate change and economic collapse, war and political violence, or accelerating dispossession and precariousness. Instead, Bugis discursively formulate their movement through recourse to a particular and other-than-standard Malay expression: they migrate in search of *kelebihan*.

Assimilable at first blush to the push-and-pull models that mediate migration talk in Sabah’s public sphere, *kelebihan* has been glossed in one English newspaper as “more income” and in one Malay-language scholarly article as *pendapatan yang lebih dari diperolehi di kampung*, or “[an] income that [is] more than [that] earned in [their] village” (*Daily Express*, 2015; see also Wan Shawaluddin, 2015). In a personal communication, one social scientist attached to Universiti Malaysia Sabah characterized the significance of *ingin mencari kelebihan* (want to find more income) in terms of its status as a social regularity, one revealing itself in the push-and-pull of reiterative turns of talk. During his team’s fieldwork in Sabah’s palm oil industry, the phrase regularly recurred as the second pair part (or response) to a first pair part (or query) posed to Bugis migrant workers in a line of ethnographic questioning: Why did you come to Sabah? “On average, when interviewed, that was the response from respondents. If one hundred were asked, ninety answered *kelebihan!*,” he projected (Wan Shawaluddin, 2020, personal communication). To be sure, Bugis migrants are pulled by the promise of more income in the east Malaysian state, especially in its booming palm oil industry where they have long constituted the dominant if not centrally important labor force. The push-back pursued here, rather, and one whose ramifications will directly bear on the question of excess, is that *kelebihan* means much more than “more income.”

The *kelebihan* voiced by bilingual Bugis migrants is standard Malay *kelebihan* with an emblematically Bugis twist, the twist being a wrinkle of contrast in the item’s phonological sound-shape. This contrast is an effect of phonotactic “interference” or transfer from (1) the *Basa Ogi* (“Bugis”) constituting migrants’ self-identified *bahasa Ibu* (mother tongue), to what some would unironically identify as (2) the *bahasa asing* (foreign languages) of *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian) or *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay), spoken as it is beyond the interactional intimacies of their *kampung* or village setting. In Bugis, only the glottal stop and velar nasal

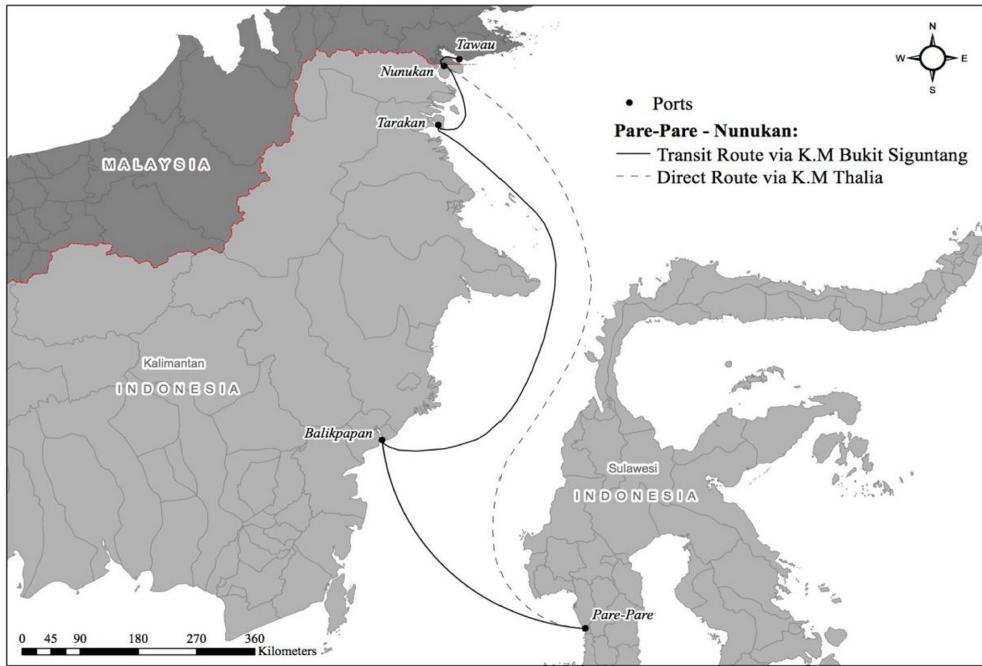


FIGURE 3 Ferry routes taken by Bugis migrants from Indonesia's South Sulawesi province to the border of Sabah (Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS project).

appear as word-final consonants. Though these sound constraints do not typically affect the speech of Indonesia's bilingual Bugis middle class who are educated to *utamakan* (prioritize) *Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar* (Good and true Indonesian) (Errington, 2022, 15), they characteristically figure in the Malay talk of migrant laborers, shaping their pronunciation of everyday items like “fish” (*ikan* → *ikang*) or “eat” (*makan* → *makang*), or even place-names in Sabah (Sandakan → Sandakang).

I return to *kelebihan*'s diacritic units of form shortly (and the problem of phonic or phonolexico-grammatical “interference” more broadly). For now, though, I wish to turn to aspects of its sense.⁴ [KE-root-AN] features the discontinuous affix {KE ... AN} attached to a root, which in [KE- lebih-AN]'s case, is *lebih* or comparative degree operator “more.” *Lebih* is paradigmatically deployed in what Robert M. W. Dixon (2008, 787) has called the “prototypical comparative scheme” in human languages, one whereby two participants (e.g., NP_j / NP_k) are characterized as sharing the same gradable property (e.g., *tinggi* or height) in different degrees:

(a)	NP _j	[is-]MORE _{ADV-ADJ}	than	NP _k
(b)	Andi _j	lebih	tinggi	dari Aras _k
(c)	Andi _j	more	tall	than Aras _k
(d)	Andi _j [is] taller than Aras _k			

Work in Malay and Indonesian linguistics has conventionally segmented the [KE-root-AN] construction into two separate kinds—[KE-root-AN]₁ nouns and (b) [KE-root-AN]₂ verbs. This noun-verb distinction has been defined as the byproduct of “two distinct morphological [i.e., localizable] processes” (Mahdi, 2012, 429) that feature “homophonous functional heads” (Hidajat, 2014, 29). Taking a different tack that melds insights from Malay linguist Asmah Haji Omar (1968) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), I attend to the construction here

as an instance of what Asmah (1968, 19) calls a “neutral word” whose categorial function (e.g., as a verb or noun) is ultimately affected, as Whorf (1956) would say, “by a certain meaningful grammatical coloring as a part of certain configurations” (197). Resonating with Sapir’s reminder that “a part of speech outside the limitations of syntactic form is but a will-o’-the-wisp” (1921, 118), Asmah (1968) notes that though [KE-root-AN]’s default, macrofunctional sense is partially indicated at the “morphological level” (1968, 19), its grammatical coloring is ultimately acquired and activated “at the syntactical level” (1968, 19; see also Whorf, 1956, 95).⁵

Approached as a “neutral word” (Asmah, 1968, 19), “bare lexeme” (Whorf, 1956, 97), or ambient or “empty” stem “to which verbatation or stativation may be applied at will” (Whorf, 1956, 97), [KE-root-AN]_{STEM}’s default structural sense may be expressed by grammatical analogy with English [root-NESS], or may be broadly glossable as “the quality [+ABSTRACT] associated with ROOT.” This sense is better captured still by gesturing to the apparent “rapport across words” (1956:68) highlighted below:

- KE-*panas* [hot]-AN (“hot-ness,” i.e., “heat”).
 KE-*besar* [big]-AN (“big-ness,” i.e., “greatness”).
 KE-*tinggi* [tall]-AN (“tall-ness,” i.e., “height”).
 KE-*lelaki* [man]-AN (“man-ness,” i.e., “masculinity”).
 KE-*ibu* [mother]-AN (“mother-ness,” i.e., “motherliness”).
 KE-*Bugis*-AN (“Bugis-ness”).
 KE-*kurang* [less]-AN (“less-ness,” i.e., “lack,” “shortage,” “disadvantage,” etc.)
 KE-*lebih* [more]-AN (“more-ness,” i.e., “excess,” “surplus,” “advantage,” etc.)

The examples highlighted below also offer an orientation for the work this expression can do, featuring [KE-root-AN]_{STEM} in stativation constructions ([... [KE-root-AN]_{STEM} ...]_{STATIVATION}) where it has the distribution of a noun, as well as in verbatation constructions ([... [KE-root-AN]_{STEM} ...]_{VERBATATION}) where it has the distribution of a verb.

(1)	Kelebihan KE-more-AN Moreness [is] pointed [to] [by] all things that [are] considered more. “Moreness is pointed to by anything considered more.”	ditunjukkan DI-point-KAN	segala all	sesuatu thing	yang REL	dianggap DI-consider	lebih. more.
(2)	Kita 1PL.INCL. We migrate [to] find moreness. “We migrate in search of advantage.”	merantau ME-region		mencari MEN-find		kelebihan. KE-more-AN.	
(3)	Apa What What [is] your moreness? “What is your strength?”		kelebihan KE-more-AN			anda? 2SG?	
(4)	Kemaring, Yesterday, Yesterday, [the] ship [was] afflicted-by-moreness [of] cargo! “Yesterday, the ship was overloaded with cargo!”		kapal ship	kelebihan KE-more-AN		muatang! cargo!	

(5)	Orang	Bugis	kelebihan	vitamin	G.
	Person	Bugis	KE-more-AN	vitamin	G.
	Bugis people [are] afflicted-by-moreness [of] Vitamin G.				
	"The Bugis suffer from excess vitamin G."				

Recalling Whorf's distinction between overt (i.e., phenotypic) and covert (i.e., cryptotypic) grammatical categories, the examples above evince different cryptotypic "colorings" of [KE-root- AN]_{STEM} that become activated or are realized "as part of certain configurations" (Whorf, 1956, 97) at "the [morpho]syntactical level" (Asmah, 1968, 19).⁶ For expository clarity, each features interlinear morphemic glosses, followed by "literal," and then "free" or idiomatic glosses. In the interest of transparent segmentation, polyfunctional derivational morphemes (e.g., KE-AN) remain uncategorized, following Mahdi (2012).⁷

Example (1) comes from Dr. Firman Saleh, Bugis-Indonesian linguist, semiotician, and lecturer at Universitas Hasanuddin, one of Indonesia's premier universities and one based in the Bugis homeland of South Sulawesi. The manner and rarefied social scientific register in which *kelebihan*'s meaning is characterized makes English "moreness" an apt analogical surrogate, particularly as the semiotician's gloss recalls Peirce's comments on hypostatic abstraction, a process that "turn[s] predicates [e.g., red] from being signs that we think or think through, into being subjects thought of [e.g., redness]" (Peirce, 1906, 522; see also Harkness, 2022; Keane, 2018). The lecturer highlights his heightened awareness of *kelebihan*'s (and by extension, [KE-root-AN]'s) form- or relational-feeling, treating moreness not as the property or thingy-ness of a thing per se but as the relation of a relation.

Examples (2) and (3) also feature [KE-lebih-AN] as a noun in stativation constructions, albeit in contrasting ways. Example (2)—coming from Pak Hamsah, a Bugis labor migrant—aligns with the semiotician's formulation in (1), though take note that while the scholar speaks of *kelebihan* the labor migrant speaks of *kelebihan*. I translate the expression here as "strength" (as opposed to rarefied moreness per se) to idiomatically capture how the quality of being more- than in some semiotically salient but discursively unspecified respect is tacitly framed as instrumentally desirable. Example (3) features a different [KE-root-AN] configuration, where the abstract quality signaled by [KE-lebih-AN] functionally serves to partition or "chunk" semiotically salient dimensions from a noun, which may alternatively be understood as adjunct to [KE-lebih- AN], or the head word of which [KE-lebih-AN] is partitive. These configurations are schematized below:

(a)	[NP _i] _{NP}	"i-NESS"
(b)	[NP _i NP _j] _{NP}	"i-NESS [of] j"

Examples (4) and (5) also feature novel configurations that bear novel cryptotypic "coloring." Here, however, [KE-lebih-AN] appears in a verbativ construction of a particular kind—the two-argument "adversative" or affective-agentless passive. In these constructions, an undergoer or first argument (NP_i) is configured as adversely affected or afflicted by the second argument (NP_j) in manner stipulated by the root of the verb:

(c)	[NP _i [KE-root-AN] _v NP _j] _s	"i [is] AFFLICTED-BY-ROOT-NESS [of] j"
-----	---	--

To foreground the explicitly excessive nature of these afflictional states, I use "overloaded with" as *kelebihan*'s gloss in sentence (4), which was overheard in South Sulawesi's Pare-Pare harbor (see Figure 1), and "suffering from excess" in (5), a curious formulation that as we'll soon see speaks to the semiotics of policing.

In her work on the postcolonial semiotics of Philippine elites, Reyes (2017, 2020) demonstrates how an “iconization of excessiveness” (2017, 221) obtains between reflexive construals of “Conyo” elite figures and language, showing that this modal “too-much-ness” speaks in turn to recursively rearticulated colonial distinctions. Crucially, she demonstrates that qualities like excess “are not inherent to entities or practices, but come to be regarded as such through semiotic formulations that link contrasting qualities of speech to contrasting figures of personhood” (2017, 212). In these ways, Reyes’s work may be read as keying to longstanding anthropological and critical theoretical work on excess—alongside surplus, remainder, hyper-, more-than, plenitude, and so forth—as a “macro-trope” (Rumsey, 2004, 267) in the study of social life (Arispe-Bazán, 2021; Bataille, 1985; Nguyen, 2015; Spillers, 1987). In some sense, such work approaches excess as a metasemiotic caption—as a placeholder, Hortense Spillers (2006) would say—for fashions of speaking and forms of life and for an intuitively “deep persuasion of a principle behind phenomena” (Whorf, 1956, 81).

The forgoing account of [KE-root-AN]’s relations across a handful of configurations is, of course, necessarily abbreviated and incomplete.⁸ And yet, accounting for the construction’s configurative facts and its “patterned ‘potentials of linkage’” (Whorf, 1956, 67) offers a heightened feeling for the semiotic “persuasion” (Whorf, 1956, 81) it holds over social life. In *kelebihang*’s case, such an account allows us to press beyond an understanding of the construction as a hypostatic abstraction to more fully consider, for example, its deployment as a semiotic partitive (example (3), configuration (b)), or the manner it encodes relations of affect, adversity, or affliction (examples (4) and (5), configuration (c)). More broadly still, such an account allows us to track the work it does across stativation and verbatation constructions or to consider how it means so much more than “more income,” resting as it does somewhere between macrofunctional moreness and affective (or afflictional) excess. And perhaps most broadly, though still maintaining a “sign’s eye view,” *kelebihang*’s configurative facts allows us to approach it, as Bugis migrants (and their Malaysian counterparts) do, as a caption for fashions of speaking predicated on comparative relations and evaluations of excess.

This fashion of speaking extends to discussions of Sabah’s demography. In a 2008 interview on the issue of PATI, former Sabah State Secretary and then-Vice Chairman to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) Tan Sri Simon Sipaun touched on a topic that was *begitu taboo* (so taboo), polemicist and political activist Mutalib MD writes, that the recording of the interview that had run for half an hour was shortened to less than 10 minutes (Mutalib MD, 2008). To ensure that his points of concern on the issue at hand were heard and digested by Sabah’s public, the vice chancellor distributed a transcript of his prepared comments, within which he asserted that “the number of P[A]TI in Sabah has exceeded [*sudah melebihi*] the number of Malaysians in Sabah” (Mutalib MD, 2008). Tan Sri Simon noted that in 1970 the total population of Sabah was at most 698,000 people. In 2004, the population had risen to 3.3 million and was estimated to reach 3.5 million in 2008. Drawing a comparison to the natural population surplus rate of Sabah’s neighboring state of Sarawak, the Human Rights Commission vice chairman claimed that “Sabah should have a total population of approximately 1.4 million 2004. This means that there is a ‘excess’ population [*‘kelebihan’ penduduk*] of 1.9 million in Sabah” (Mutalib MD, 2008).

Reminiscent of Malthusian fears of so-called “surplus populations,” *kelebihan penduduk* occasions a turn to classical and contemporary work by Karl Marx, ([1863] 2020) and elaborated by Tania Murray Li (2010; see also Prasse-Freeman, 2021). In these formulations, surplus populations that exceed the immediate needs of capital are made redundant, to potentially devastating necropolitical effect. For Li (2010), populations that are formulated by state-market assemblages as absolutely “surplus” may never again experience reabsorption into labor markets. For Marx ([1863] 2022), surplus populations may float in and out of those very markets depending on the contingent vicissitudes of capital accumulation.

Marx's – as opposed to Li's – understanding of populational “surplus” is more readily assimilable to the case of Sabah, a place where so-nominated “excess populations” are central not only to the state's industrial metabolism but also to the parasitic aspirations of its political operatives. Bugis migrants simultaneously constitute the “most dominant” (Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2015, 61) source of labor in the state's bustling palm oil industry, and they are a target population for irregular projects of enfranchisement (High Court of Sabah and Sarawak, 2001).

This excess population—everywhere yet nowhere—is made less indeterminate, according to Mutalib, should one stop to listen to manners of talk (Carruthers, 2017b; see also Inoue, 2006). Mutalib offers an anecdotal but diagnostic account of policing in Sabah's surveillance-scape, a sociopolitical space forever changed, he writes, by the “IC Project” and one where ostensibly “Malaysian” bearers of ostensibly “Malaysian” identity cards are now the subjects of surveillance. He recounts his experience as a passenger on a “wagon” or small bus en route to Tawau when he and his fellow eight passengers were stopped at one of the *halangan jalan* (roadblocks) common along Sabah's east coast. The bus was boarded by a police officer, and the passengers were asked to produce their identification. Mutalib alleges the officer (*konstabel*) approached one passenger—a *lelaki Bugis* (Bugis man)—who, when asked, “looked relaxed” (*kelihatan bersahaja*) and unperturbed. Mutalib alleges the following dialogue unfolded (Figure 4), italicizing or marking for his readers certain lexical items whose clear meta-function is, to quote Bhabha, the marking of an “excess or slippage,” or, “a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (1984, 127):

One week later, Mutalib ran into the same policeman while having breakfast. After small talk over coffee and tea, he asked him what had happened to the Bugis man he detained during the roadblock incident a week prior.

“He's a *real pig* [*babi betul*],” the policeman swore. “Why?,” Mutalib asked.

The policeman replied angrily: “Is it right? I detained the man because he had fake documents [*dokumen palsu*], but my boss let him go. I am so annoyed [*punya bebulu betul*]. Yesterday he honked at me [on the road]. He was even driving a Ninja Turtle [Toyota Land Cruiser]. Apparently, some representative asked for his release because he's a strong supporter... I'm really fed-up. I'm taking a week off to release some tension.” (Mutalib MD, 1999, 155)

Mutalib's account features three *dramatis personae*: (1) the intrepid author in situ, (2) an exasperated and underappreciated police officer, and (3) an illegally suffraged Bugis “citizen-suspect” (Al-Bulushi, 2021) whose efforts to pass as a card-carrying “Malaysian” are bungled by his infelicitous choice of one of a surfeit of identity cards and doubly so by his infelicitous use of Bugis lexical items like honorific *Puang* or discourse particle *palek*. In the words of a newspaper report on “Sabah's ghost voters,” though the Bugis man may ordinarily “pass,” his “alien behavior and awkward local accent would betray [him]” (Bernama, 2001), but only temporarily. He was, Mutalib alleges, back on the streets in no time, and in a 4x4 Land Cruiser to boot.

Bugis Malaysians aren't buying the story or stereotype that Mutalib's selling. “It's too over[the-top]” (*terlampau over*), one told me, “It's too excessive” (*terlampau berlebihan*) he added, deploying intensifier *terlampau* followed by a derivation of that now familiar root *lebih*.⁹ “Sir, Sir” (*Puang, Puang*), he teased, referring to the appearance of conspicuously Bugis lexical items in Mutalib's transcript. “When do they [Bugis immigrants] actually talk like that?” Another Sabahan, and member of Tawau division's UMNO women's branch, concurred. “His story's too dramatic” (*terlalu berdrama ceritanya*), she said, before delving into the narrative's socio-factual “errors” (*kasalahan*) and caricaturistic excesses. She, too, took issue with Mutalib's Bugis man's manners of speech, animated by a cartoonishly truncated repertoire of isolable, simplex

1	KONSTABEL	Mana pas kamu?	Where is your pass?
2	LELAKI BUGIS	Ada <i>Puang</i> .	I have it, <i>Sir</i> .
3	KONSTABEL	Ini KTP.	This is an Indonesian identity card.
4	LELAKI BUGIS	Eh ... salah <i>palek</i> . Ini <i>Puang</i> .	Eh ... I'm wrong <i>apparently</i> . This one, <i>Sir</i> .
5	KONSTABEL	Ini salinan. Mana original?	This is a copy. Where's the original?
6	LELAKI BUGIS	Ada <i>Puang</i> tapi maaf, kena tinggal	I have it, <i>Sir</i> , forgive me, I must have left it
7		di rumah <i>Puang</i> .	at home, <i>Sir</i> .
8	KONSTABEL	Ada lain-lain dokumen?	Do you have any other documents?
9	LELAKI BUGIS	Ini <i>Puang</i> ...	This one, <i>Sir</i> ...
10	KONSTABEL	Ini slip mengundi. Saya mahu tengok pas,	This is a voting slip. I want to see your pass,
11		mana pas?	where is your pass?
12	LELAKI BUGIS	Ada paspok <i>Puang</i> , barusan <i>palek</i> aku	I have my passport, <i>Sir</i> , just now I
13		ambil tadi.	took it earlier.
14	KONSTABEL	Turun.	Get off [the vehicle].
15	LELAKI BUGIS	Tapi <i>Puang</i> ...	But <i>Sir</i> ...
16	KONSTABEL	Turun.	Get off.
17	LELAKI BUGIS	Ini ada sijil UMNO <i>Puang</i> .	I have my UMNO membership card <i>Sir</i> .
18	KONSTABEL	Oh! Kau ingat kau boleh jual saya!	Oh! You think you can bribe me?
19		Turun.	Get off.
20	LELAKI BUGIS	Tolong <i>Puang</i> .	Please <i>Sir</i> .
21	KONSTABEL	Turun.	Get off.

FIGURE 4 Passing gone awry (Source: Mutalib, 1999).

lexemes—honorific *Puang* and particle *palek*—that “real” Bugis immigrants *jarang guna* (rarely use)—and all the less so when they're out and about in public. “The ones who use language like this are ones who have *just left the palm oil plantation [baru keluar kebun sawit]* for the first time, or who have *just landed [baru mendarat]* from Sulawesi,” she observed, asserting that in Sabah's surveillance-scape, such speakers are not yet brave enough to appear in public, let alone *berani* (brave) enough to drive about in a conspicuously expensive car.

According to these Malaysian Bugis, the issue at hand is not that some Bugis immigrants in Sabah—especially those who *baru mendarat* or are “newly landed”—are characterized as having an “awkward local accent” (Bernama, 2001). What they take issue with, rather, are the speech forms selected and highlighted by Mutalib, someone lacking an intimate knowledge of Bugis habits of talk in Sabah and lacking a concomitant sense of intersectional intimacy or an empathetic recognition of the discreditable vectors of immigrant identity that are not merely “a source of external embarrassment” (Herzfeld, 2014, 3) but whose detection may lead to discrimination, disenfranchisement, detention, deportation, or general ruin (Garfinkel, [1967] 2013).¹⁰ Amid immigration raids held in fish and vegetable markets or other public places where plainclothes officers attune to the talk and interactional demeanor

of suspected “illegals” (The Star, 2012), migrants in Malaysia's surveillance state are policing their own manners talk.

They're often told to do by their Malaysian counterparts, in a transparently paternalistic manner. As one longstanding member of Sabah's Bugis community told me, “It's best if they correct their pronunciation as best they can [*Sebaiknya mereka harus memperbaiki sebutan bahasa sebaik mungkin*], because from their pronunciation one can tell if they've lived a long time in Sabah or just a few years, even though they hold ICs.”

It isn't necessarily a surfeit of lexical items of conspicuously Bugis provenance like *Puang* or *palek* that constitutes an unmanageable source of embarrassment and discreditation. Neither, for that matter, is *interferensi morfologis* (morphological interference) a particularly salient source (see Mokhtar, 2000).¹¹ The primary wellspring for the interactional eruption of alterity is, rather, an emblematically Bugis “excess in vitamin G,” in a manner of speaking.

In the early 2000s, Haji Johan—or as she would come to be called, “Haji JohanG”—would exemplify this manner of speaking and go viral in the process. After travelling by ferry from Batu Licin in Indonesian Borneo's East Kalimantan province to her hometown in South Sulawesi province's predominantly Bugis regency of Barru, the middle-aged Bugis woman bumped into a reporter and camera crew while disembarking. The crew was interested in detailing passenger experiences of the Batu Licin to Barru line, and Haji Johan happily obliged (See Figure 5).

This fleeting speech event unfolding at a nondescript port along the east Indonesian shores of Barru became a perduring, entextualized “image-text” (Nakassis, 2019) of *kebugisan* (Bugisness), one that would undergo what has now been more than a decade-long mass-mediated process of de- and re-contextualization across Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, and TikTok. One recently re-editorialized iteration of this widely circulating image-text features superimposed video and text effects that highlight or heighten the overall image effect of Haji Johan's now iconic *kelebihan* (excess). By adding these effects, the content creator drew special attention to the phonological transfer (interference) and hypercorrection effects in Haji Johan's speech, ones widely and recurrently imitated by Bugis social media users over the past decade. Titled “Kelebihan G” or “Excess G,” the video ends with the suggestion that viewers might “save it for the future” (*simpanG untuk masa depan*), where “save” (*simpan* → *simpang*) and “future” (*depan* → *depanG*) evince the excess G in question (See Figure 6).

Haji Johan is herself a sufferer of that affliction common among Bugis, namely, an “excess in Vitamin G” (compare with example (5) above). The following mock-outrage formula widely replicated across social media also evinces this double-voiced, self-consciously ironic typification:

			PHONOLOGICAL TRANSFER	HYPERCORRECTION
1	HJ. JOHAN Naik ke Batu Licing, eh,	We left for Batu Licing, eh	BATU LICIN → BATU LICING	—
2	kemaring jang, eh berangkat	yesterday at what time, eh departed	KEMARIN → KEMARING/JAM → JANG	—
3	jang, jang sepuluh!	at what time, 10 o'clock!	JAM → JANG	—
4	Perjalanam bagus, lancar!	The journey was good, smooth!	—	PERJALANANG → PERJALANAM
5	Sampai ke anu ini, Barru,	We arrived at um, at Barru,	—	—
6	eh, jang, sandar	eh, at what time, we docked at	JAM → JANG	—
7	jangm delapang pagi.	eight o'clock in the morning.	DELAPAN → DELAPANG	JANG → JANGM
8	Ini ombat bagus.	The waves were good.	—	OMBA' → OMBAT
9	Perjalanang lancar, bagus,	The trip was smooth, good,	PERJALANAN → PERJALANANG	—
10	cepat. Di atas kapal	fast. On the ship deck	—	—
11	bagus juga. Nda' mabut.	it was nice, too. I wasn't seasick.	—	MABU' → MABUT

FIGURE 5 Haji Johan's journey.



FIGURE 6 Haji Johan's excess. Source: WhatsApp.

Siapa	bilang	orang	Bugis	bicara	kelebihan	huruf	(G)	tidak	mungkin!!!
Who	say	person	Bugis	talk	KE-more-AN	letter	(G)	NEG	maybe!!!
Who says [if] Bugis people talk [there] [is] moreness [of] [the] letter G not possible!!!									
"Who says if the Bugis talk there's an excess of the letter G? Impossible!!!"									

The punchline here is that the expressed "impossibility" of this alleged excess features the very excess in question (*mungkin* → *mungking*).

As a metapragmatic lexation or label used to typify a pattern of speaking and its pragmatics in Bugis social life, *kelebihanG* [kə.le. 'bi.harŋ ge] reflexively and recursively evinces the criterial pattern it typifies: an "excess G." Here, the excess so entextualized is aesthetically imaged or visualized not in terms of sonic form or phonetics, but in terms of graphemics: it is not an excess in /ŋ/ but an excess in *huruf G* or "[the] letter G." (see Figure 7).

This observation occasions a return to Mutalib's (1999) lament: in contemporary Sabah, it is now impossible to tell who among "illegal immigrants" and "local people" are *lebih Bugis* "more Bugis" (Mutalib MD, 1999, 455). The account of one indigenous Sabahan conflicts with that of Mutalib but accords in its use of a similarly comparative expository strategy, one featuring that paradigmatic degree operator *lebih* (more) that scopes over Bugisness itself.

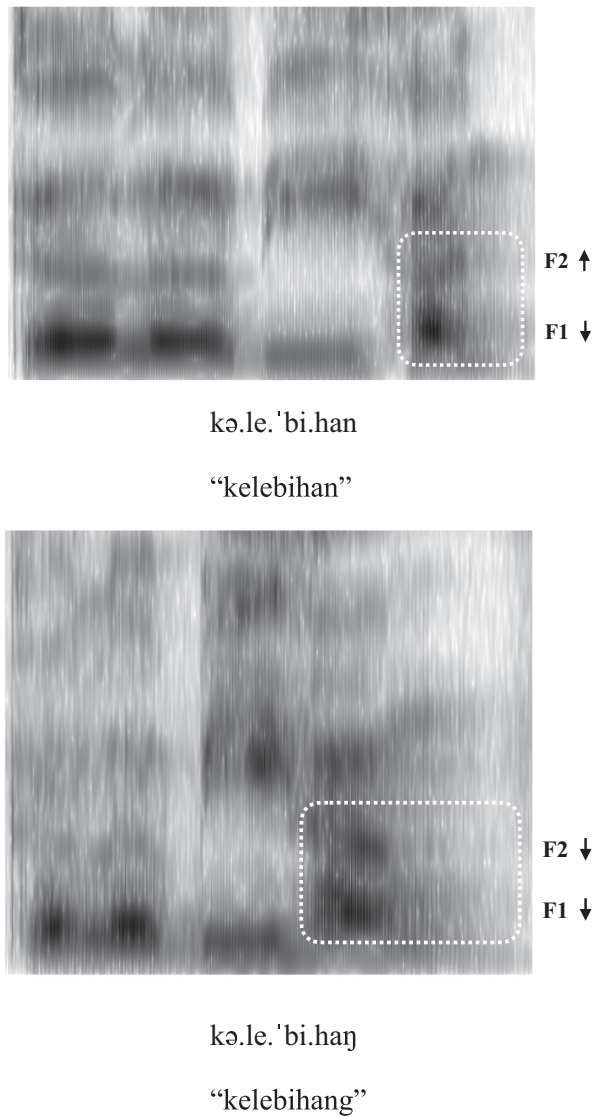


FIGURE 7 “Excess” entextually imag(in)ed. *Source:* Author.

He would begin by gesturing to that familiar “dominant discourse of sameness” diagnosed by Dollah et al. (2015, 13), and by reiteratively asserting that Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians seem at first blush *sama sahaja* (just the same) and *hampir sama* (virtually the same). But if you “listen closely” (*dengar baik-baik*) you become “aware of the difference” (*sedar perbezaannya*) (See Figure 8).

This exchange highlights what is otherwise glossed as an excess—or, more precisely, an ideologically constructed and construed minimal pair contrast—as a shibboleth, a “difference that designates difference” (Busch and Spitzmüller, 2021, 133). As “enregistered sociolinguistic borders” that “represent register boundaries” (2021, 132), shibboleths are post-facto meta- markers that serve as “accent[s] of an accent . . . , a recuperation of the deviancy of the accent by reducing it to something simple, manageable and under the control of people outside the accent-community” (Hodge and Kress, 1988, 86, cited in Busch and Spitzmüller, 2021, 132; see also Agha, 2007, 148; Labov, 1973; Vološinov, 1986, 81).

1	F	Nah, ini Bugis, kita tahu sahaja	Now, these Bugis, of course we know it's them
2		kerana selalu "G" [/'dʒi:/] dia orang	because it's always "G" [/'dʒi:/] they
3		tidak boleh pakai.	can't use.
4	ANDREW	Selalu "G"?	Always "G"?
5	F	Ah, "N" [/'en/], "N!", "N" kah	Ah, "N" [/'en/], "N!", is it "N,"
6		"pulang," "pulan."	"return," "return."
7		"G" kah dia tak boleh pakai? "N" kah?	Is it "G" that they can't use? Is it "N"?
8		"Ikang," ah "N" tak boleh sebut!	"Fish," ah it's "N" that they can't pronounce!
9		Kalo, kan "ikan," "ikang."	If, right, they say "fish" it's "fish."
10	ANDREW	"Ikang."	"Fish."
11	F	Kalo "Sandakan," "Sandakang,"	If "Sandakan," it's "Sandakang,"
12		asal "N" hujung, "N" dia tak boleh	if "N" is at the end, "N" they can't
13		sebut.	pronounce.

FIGURE 8 Of ikan and ikang, Sandakan and Sandakang. Source: Author.

Sometime after this speech event, sitting among Bugis friends and secret-sharers, I highlighted how this non-Bugis, non-Malay, non-Muslim, Indigenous, Malay-speaking Sabahan had highlighted for me, after a few false starts, the prototypically Bugis propensity for *kelebi-hang*. "The point is" (*pokoknya*), one friend uttered in response,

Jangan	terlampau	berlebihan.
NEG.IMP	TER-past	BER-more-AN.
Do not [be] too excessive.		
"Don't be too excessive."		

This excess is determined and rendered real, constructed and discovered, through recourse to a comparative complex (see Kockelman, 2022, 176) or ensemble of comparative strategies, whose features exceed those associated with the prototypical comparative schema (Dixon, 2008), including reduplication (itself a diagrammatic icon of intensity), (in) definite quantity expressions, and adverbial constructions featuring modal intensifiers like *terlampau* (too) that mark how migrants have *limpas* (crossed) and thus exceeded and violated thresholds or boundaries of acceptability.

The problem of "too much" (Reyes, 2017) returns us to the valence and tacit normative gauge of *kelebi-hang* as an adversely affecting excess in certain configurations. As linguistic and ideological grounds for the exteriorization of social anxiety amid Sabah's "sense of gloom," metasemiotic formulations of excess are immanent to the denotational patterning of Malay talk, while also imposed, as it were, from above, proffered by bureaucrats (Tan Sri Simon Sipaun), political activists (Mutalib MD), and migrants themselves (Haji Joman) across one-to-many participation frameworks (Goebel, 2019) that transcend international border regimes.

CONCLUSION: SPECTERS OF COMPARISON REVISITED

[L]as comparaciones ayudan bien á la comprensión de las cosas incomprensibles.

— José Rizal ([1887] 2006)

Across this article, I have highlighted how migrants exceed regnant, “authority-defined” (Shamsul, 2001, 365) forms of life. In turn, I have tacitly suggested the ways particulars presented here exceed or comparatively diverge from matters of concern and schematic perspectives proffered by American(ist) anthropology. In Malaysia, a raciolinguistic perspective is not necessarily a progressive one, serving as it has majoritarian intellectual and political interests and putting under erasure manners of Malay talk considered otherwise. In Sabah’s transnational borderlands, sameness, rather than difference, is the “dominant discourse” (Dollah et al., 2015, 13). And among Bugis migrants, it is a self-expressed excess or surfeit of sameness, rather than one of difference per se, that might get one detected, detained, or deported.

In *Noli Me Tangere* (“Touch Me Not”) ([1887] 2006), José Rizal offers an account of the properly political character of comparison. Rizal was an ophthalmologist and Filipino nationalist who spent several years pursuing his education in Europe before returning to the Philippines, then under Spanish colonial rule. Rizal’s novel critiqued the colonial government, its ways of seeing and forms of knowledge, and the complicity of the corrupt Catholic Church. His book, written in Spanish, played a formative role shaping Filipino nationalism while offering a sociology centered “on the nature and conditions of Filipino colonial society and the requirements for liberation from colonial rule” (Alatas, 2017, 143).

In a well-known scene in the novel, Rizal’s protagonist, Ibarra, travels by carriage in 1880s colonial Manila after returning from travels in Europe. Gazing from his window at Manila’s municipal botanical gardens, Ibarra finds himself, as Benedict Anderson tells us, “at the end of an inverted telescope” (Anderson, 1998, 2):

The sight of the botanical garden drove away his gay reminiscences: *el demonio de las comparaciones* placed him before the botanical gardens of Europe, in the countries where much effort and much gold are needed to make a leaf bloom or a bud open; and even more, to those of the colonies, rich and well-tended, and all open to the public. Ibarra removed his gaze.

(Rizal, [1887] 2016, 58)

Famously glossed by Anderson (1998) as “the spectre of comparisons,” *el demonio* now haunts Ibarra’s “incurable doubled vision” of his botanical gardens. He “can no longer matter-of-factly experience them, but sees them simultaneously close up and from afar” (1998, 2). This is not the joyful noticing associated with Zora Neale Hurston’s (1935, 1) “spyglass of anthropology” but a melancholy one, reflecting and rendering palpably and affectively real an imperialist vision and locational politics.

One of the aims of the special issue of which this article is a part, at least as I see it, is to grapple with this double vision while also contending with its parochializing potential for unsettling what Ruth McVey would call the Western academy’s “regnant vision” (McVey, 1995, 3) or Faye Harrison (McGranahan et al., 2016) would call its “epistemological imperialism.” Contending with this potential necessarily means contending with Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s proposition that anthropologists “abandon the fiction that [anthropology] is not primarily a discourse to the West, for the West, and ultimately, about the West as a project” (Trouillot, 2003, 136) or with Édouard Glissant’s observation that “The West is not the West. It is a project, not a place” (1989, 2, cited in Trouillot, 2003, 1). This contention entails challenging the “condescending tolerance of work the Northern academy considered dated, irrelevant or only wrong-accented” and its

“deeply embedded mode of erasure mediated by the fetish of the new” (Musila, 2019, 3, cited in Al-Bulushi et al., 2020). It involves tracking the shaping effects of a politics of location (Al-Bulushi et al., 2020; Rich, 2001) on “whatever the prevailing political trend in Euro-America’s academic conversation might be” (Ke-Schutte and Babcock, 2023). It means taking seriously how such a politics shapes our situated, interested, and partial capacities to attend to “relations and conjunctures across sites” (Al-Bulushi et al., 2020). It requires “be[ing] equally accountable to unequal places” (John, 1996, 4, cited in Al-Bulushi et al., 2020).

In Sabah, comparisons to the US–Mexico migration regime are frequently made, whether by the international scholar or the “everyday semiotician” (Reyes, 2021, 293). The reverse may not be said of scholars and everyday semioticians located and working in the United States, where comparisons to the Malay-speaking archipelago are far less frequent. What if it were US-based scholars or American(ist) anthropologists who had Rizal’s “spectre of comparisons crouched on [their] shoulders” (Anderson, 1998, 232)? What parochializing angles of vision might such a stance afford?

To channel the spirit of an American logician whose architectonics still haunt and animate American linguistic anthropology, “potential means indeterminate yet capable of determination” (Peirce, 1998, 323). In the élan of calls to imagine how American linguistic anthropology “could be otherwise” (Hoffman-Dilloway, 2018, 287), one way we might do so is by determining American(ist) anthropology’s indeterminate rapports—its as-of-yet unrealized potentials for linkage—with sites, speakers, and schematic modes of witnessing that exceed its hemispheric purview.¹²

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The work so mentioned is metasemiotic because the determination of object-signs of illegality is itself governed by meta-semiotic frameworks that formulate those determinations’ criterial dimensions and thus direct their trajectories.
- ² Singapore’s membership in a federated Malaysia was, of course, short lived, with the island becoming the city-state of Singapore in 1965 after a series of tumultuous race riots and disagreements with Kuala Lumpur’s ruling regarding the United Malays National Organization (see Andaya and Andaya, 2017).
- ³ For a complementary angle on Shamsul’s (2001, 355–357) “authority-defined discourses,” see Goebel’s (2019, 4) account of “authorization frameworks” in Indonesia.
- ⁴ For an abbreviated genealogical account of the relations obtaining between units of *form* and units of *sense* – and one written for a general anthropological readership – see Carruthers (2023).
- ⁵ To highlight one of the grammatical-categorial distinctions made by Whorf, this in turn means that the noun/verb distinction in Malay is important on a “modulus,” not “selective” basis (Whorf, 1956, 99; see also Asmah, 1968; Teeuw, 1962).

- ⁶ My use of *macrofunctional* tropes on Gil's (2004) discussion of macrofunctionality in Riau Indonesian. For Whorf, overt categories are distinguished on the basis of some transparent, localizable "phenotype" or ever-present surface-segmentable formal mark (e.g., affixation), whereas covert categories are identifiable on the basis of some less transparent, morphosyntactically configurative "reactance" or possibility for co-textual patterning (see Lee, 1996, 180–221; Silverstein, 1979; 1995; see also Sneddon, 2000).
- ⁷ First person plural inclusive and second person singular pronouns *kita* and *anda* are glossed as 1PL.INCL and 2sg, while so-called "function word" (Asmah, 1968) *yang* is glossed as REL (relativizer).
- ⁸ Sneddon (2000) has identified several cryptotypic "sub-types" of the [... [KE-root-AN]_{VERBATION} ...] construction according to argument structure and the nature of root. Readers familiar with studies of standard Indonesian Malay will likely notice some leakage between Sneddon's subgroups. Certain root-bases (e.g., *hujan*) are classified as one way or the other by Sneddon (e.g., as verbal, adjectival, or nominal bases) but could be classified as something else depending on their configurative distribution.
- ⁹ BER-*lebih*-AN, which is glossable as "excessive," features the "middle voice" prefix BER- indicating the "having," "use," or "evincing" of ROOT, and suffix -AN, a nominalizer used (1) indicate the instrument or resultative object of the action of ROOT, (2) as an action nominalizer, (3) to indicate indefinite multiples of a numeral ROOT, or here, (4) to magnify or extend ROOT.
- ¹⁰ This tendency to focus on simplex lexemes as emblems of outsidership is also a function of metalinguistic awareness (Lucy, 2010; Silverstein, 1979; Whorf, 1956).
- ¹¹ The pronominal, aspectual, and modal clitics and particles so ubiquitous in the Malay spoken in the Bugis homeland are rarely heard in the Malay spoken by (other-than-recently-arrived) Bugis migrants in Sabah (see Jukes, 2011). This apparent lack of lexico-grammatical interference is ideologically motivated, according with the literature stipulating that lexical variables are generally more available to speakers' awareness for reflexive manipulation and description (see Errington, 1985; Labov, 1973; Silverstein, 1981).
- ¹² For a recent and influential anthropological account of "witnessing," see Thomas (2019).

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