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Discordant temporalities of migration and childhood*

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Childhood, though it is understood cross-culturally in very different ways, always has a distinctive temporal framework, since children's growth and development cannot be undone. Yet, in many contexts, the times of childhood have become discordant with the rhythms, timescales, and temporal controls of migration. Focusing on the children of Indonesian and Filipino migrants in Sabah, Malaysia, this article explores the contemporary clash between the temporalities of migration and childhood. Children face separations and ruptures in shared time due to Malaysia's migration regime, and experience the temporariness of migrant life differently to their parents. Educational exclusion leads to temporal discontinuities between Malaysian-citizen and migrant childhoods, and racialized understandings of national time emphasize the negative potentiality of migrants' children. Overall, the article argues for the importance of considering the interaction between the temporal conflicts of capitalism and forms of natural time such as childhood.

For all researchers who work, over time, with children, there is an astonishing pathos to the passage of that time. Energetic 4-year-olds we once played with, or quiet 9-year-olds who sat and chatted with us, transform, in later visits, or in posts on social media, into young adults, workers, migrants, parents. We can all experience this pathos when we look at Malinowski's wonderful photographs of Trobriand children playing – children who, hopefully, went on to lead long and fulfilling lives, but who are now almost certainly long deceased. These images are, as Sontag argued for all photographs, touched with pathos in their role as *memento mori*, allowing us to experience the mortality of the subjects shown, and testifying to 'time's relentless melt' (1979: 15). In this article, I highlight this particular characteristic of time as an intrinsic feature of all children's lives. Although, cross-culturally, childhood is understood in very different ways as a phase of life, all children are born as babies, take time to grow, and have a sense of the passing of time. Moreover, the unfolding and passing of an individual childhood, as an aspect of 'natural' time, cannot be undone.

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Figure 1. 'This is my very simple house'. (Photo and text by Mimi.)

Malinowski's photographs of Trobriand children's games can be contrasted with a rather different set of images taken, when she was 13, by Mimi,[1] the daughter of Indonesian migrants from Adonara, living in the East Malaysian city of Kota Kinabalu.[2] Mimi's images evoke a strong sense of the place where she lived: a two-storey unit in a workers' longhouse (*rumah kongsi*) attached to an abandoned chicken-processing factory (Fig. 1). They show the aubergines and other vegetables planted by her father, Frans (Fig. 2), and the family photographs on the wall of her home (Fig. 3). However, Mimi's photographs are also interesting for what they can only hint at: the fact that she lived here most of the time alone with her 16-year-old sister, Densi. Her mother, Anna, a domestic worker, stayed at her employers' house from Monday to Friday, only returning to the family home for the weekend. Her father worked night shifts at the new factory on the edge of the city, and returned to this old site on Thursdays and Sundays. Only a few of Mimi's images show the family together, for a Sunday barbeque. When I talked with Mimi about her photographs, she told me that although she admired her parents, she disliked the fact that they worked so much and rarely slept in the old house. She wished they could all be together more often.

This article will explore how the specific temporality of childhood as an irreversible process of growth and unfolding, with lasting implications for adult life, sits uneasily with the ruptures, exclusions, and, most significantly, enduring *temporariness* produced by many contemporary migration regimes. As Munn noted in her classic essay on the cultural anthropology of time, control over time is a 'medium of hierarchic power and governance' (1992: 109). Such control is increasingly exercised by nation-states in their regulation of international migration (Cwerner 2001: 10). Policies of

Figure 2. 'These are some of the vegetables my father planted'. (Photo and text by Mimi.)

temporal control are central to the political constitution of 'illegality', often directly related to the transgression of temporal regulations, and migrant experiences are increasingly characterized by insecurity and waiting (Andersson 2014). Living from one temporary work permit to the next, or under the continuous and oppressive presence of immigration enforcement, migrants experience 'temporal alienation' or feel caught in 'a series of *time traps*' (Cwerner 2001: 21, original emphasis). Less dramatically, migrants may experience a different kind of rupture when the rhythms of 'everyday familyhood' become 'out-of-sync' (Acedera & Yeoh 2019: 255) with the rhythms of migration.

These difficult temporalities of contemporary migration share much in common with the wider temporal shifts and alienations experienced by many as a result of increasing economic precarity (cf. Cwerner 2001: 15). As Bear notes, the 'abstract time-reckoning of capitalism … always comes into conflict with concrete experiences and social rhythms of time' (2014: S7). What I will emphasize here, through a focus on the children of migrants in East Malaysia, is that the construction of migrants as *temporary* workers has particularly pernicious consequences for their children. This is because the specific temporality of childhood as a finite, formative period of life that can never be repeated is discordant with migrant experiences of rupture, waiting,

Figure 3. 'These are the family photos in our sitting room'. (Photo and text by Mimi.)

and temporariness. Cwerner, in his ground-breaking work on the times of migration, defined 'discordant temporalities' as ruptures and rifts between different temporalities that 'produce "perturbing" effects over the lives of individuals' (2001: 18). This notion of discordance draws attention to the felt impacts on individual children of the clash that I identify here between temporalities of migration and childhood. I shall describe this with reference to children's experiences of both emotional disturbance and detachment, their waiting and jittery boredom, and their fears for the future. I shall also show how experiences of, and responses to, discordant temporalities do not take a singular form, even amongst children sharing a similarly impossible structural position.

In the growing attention to the temporal rhythms and controls of migration, and more widely in what has been seen as a 'temporal turn' in anthropology (Bear 2016: 488), there has been – with one or two notable exceptions (Gammeltoft 2013; Vitus 2010) – little attention to children, or to childhood. This is very odd since, whatever else it might entail, childhood – as a variably defined period of human immaturity – is perhaps the only life phase common to all adults (cf. Cole & Durham 2008: 21). Even hunter-gatherers who may view themselves, collectively, as 'children' in relation to the forest nevertheless acknowledge the existence of younger persons with less-developed social skills (Bird-David 2005: 99). In this article, I argue that age should be more central to the anthropological concern with time and temporalities, not only because distinctions and constructions of age are central to social life (Berman 2019: 152), but also because our perspectives on time are likely to be strongly shaped by our position in the life course. Like others (Punch 2020: 130; Toren 1993: 462), I see a focus on children as a way to disrupt dominant theories of social life. In this case,

foregrounding the distinctive temporality of childhood helps to reveal not only the differences between how adults and children experience migrant temporariness, but also the ways in which contemporary migration regimes specifically work to exclude children of migrants from the spacetime of the nation. In the process, the distinctive time of an individual childhood seems to disappear.

Anthropology and the times of childhood

Malinowski, like many anthropologists of his time, paid a great deal of attention to children in his fieldwork, noting down and photographing their games and activities, and describing the Trobriand categorization of four phases in the development of the child. Significantly, each of these phases involved a correlation between temporal and spatial progression, as the growing child became associated with different spaces of the home and village. For example, for the first two phases, the breastfeeding child slept with, and stayed close to, its mother. But in the third phase, *gwadi*, following weaning, children roamed around in their own independent group, what Malinowski memorably referred to as their 'small republic' (1987 [1929]: 45). Weiner, in her later Trobriand research, emphasized the intense physical and emotional bonds between fathers and their children during this phase, even describing how a man might take some kula valuables out of the exchange cycle, cutting them into pieces as 'short *kuwa* necklaces for his children' (1976: 129). As Trobriand children moved through the spatiotemporal phases of childhood, then, they might be decorated with shells representing the wider spacetime of the kula (cf. Munn 1986: 56-8). We can compare these intersecting spacetimes of Trobriand childhood and the kula with Bakhtin's (1981) formulation of the 'chronotope'. For Bakhtin, the concept of the chronotope was a way to analyse the interconnectedness of the spatial and temporal in different literary forms, but also entailed attention to the coexistence of multiple spacetimes. This relates to two important points this article will explore: that children's temporal experiences are always entangled with the spatial, and that the spatiotemporalities of childhood always intersect with other spatiotemporal schemes.

Malinowski's and Weiner's descriptions are classic examples of what many anthropological and historical studies have shown: that although children exist in all societies, there is no universal understanding or structuring of childhood as a phase of life (Ariès 1962; James & Prout 1997*b*). Moreover, constructions of childhood are always also about the times of childhood: the phases of growth, or of social or moral personhood, central to understandings of age (see Berman 2019). Societies draw and mark these temporal boundaries differently, with more or less precision, and often as part of a broader 'periodization of the life course' (James & Prout 1997*a*: 230; cf. Cole & Durham 2008: 6). In the contemporary world, the spread of systems of national schooling, with their specific divisions and rhythms, has imposed new time disciplines on children's lives, configuring a spacetime of global childhood that many communities find hard to achieve (Chin 2003: 309).

To see childhood as 'culturally and historically specific' is to acknowledge its complexity as a social construct (Chin 2003: 311; cf. Berman 2019: 49). This has two key implications. First, in any research context, there may be a number of different, entangled, understandings of childhood that people value. This is particularly the case in an urban, cosmopolitan setting such as Kota Kinabalu, where the life of someone like Mimi is shaped by, among other things, Malaysian notions of gendered and age-appropriate behaviour; globalized understandings of childhood as a time of schooling;

Adonaran perceptions of place and lineage; and Korean pop culture. Second, many children are living in ways considered to be out of step with hegemonic constructions of childhood and may therefore be described as having 'stolen' childhoods. For Chin, such 'children-out-of-bounds' demonstrate that 'children and childhood are two distinct entities that may or may not be perfectly synchronized' (2003: 312). Here, I explore some of the practical and symbolic consequences for children of migrants of being excluded from the dominant society's understanding of childhood.

One reason for the lack of attention to children in current discussions of temporality may be found in the very history of the anthropology of childhood, and the later growth of interdisciplinary childhood studies. For much of the twentieth century, anthropological approaches to children were shaped by Euro-American models of psychological and physical development, in which children were understood as adults-in-the-making (Toren 1993: 469). By contrast, since the 1990s, researchers in the paradigm of childhood studies have stressed the importance of taking children seriously in their own right, as agents who shape cultural life in the present (James & Prout 1997*b*). This emphasis on the 'nowness' of children's lives was crucial to a shift towards appreciating children's actually existing knowledge and experience (Spyrou 2020: 4). However, such a present-focused perspective undoubtedly makes it harder to analyse broader temporal shifts and patterns that influence children's lives, or a more universal temporality, in which 'growing up' is 'inherently and indispensably part of childhood' (Qvortrup 2004: 269; cf. Cole & Durham 2008: 21; Toren 2011).

Whilst acknowledging that childhood and age are social constructions, I emphasize that they are never only that. Without returning to a perspective on children that neglects the significance of their present lives, we must still be mindful of childhood's distinctive temporality. How else can we make sense of the extraordinary differences, which children themselves acknowledge, between younger and older children? Uprichard (2008) has drawn on the work of Prigogine to argue for the importance of a temporal perspective on children as *both* 'being and becomings': that is, as people not only acting in the present, but also experiencing processes of irreversible change. Prigogine was a Nobel Prize-winning physical chemist interested in the irreversibility of processes of change in complex physical systems. His approach is often described in terms of the 'arrow of time' or, more popularly, the idea that 'you cannot unscramble eggs' (Nielsen 2016: 7). To be more precise, although some physical changes *can* be reversed in time (an ice cube, for example, can be melted and then re-frozen), others (the scrambled eggs) most definitely cannot. For Prigogine, in order to understand how things change over time, we must have a dualistic understanding of time, seeing it both as a marker of change, and as an 'intrinsic internal feature of the thing itself' (Uprichard 2008: 307). Uprichard utilizes this distinction to emphasize the dual nature of the temporality of childhood, in which time is *both external and internal to the child*. 'Childhood' itself, as a socially constructed life stage, can be 'understood as a "marker" of time throughout the life course' and should thus be considered to be 'external' to the individual child (Uprichard 2008: 308). However, time is also an 'internal' or ontological property of a child, since individual children (like all people, but usually much more dramatically) are always irreversibly ageing.

Focusing on the arrow of time that fundamentally, and universally, constitutes childhood does not mean ignoring the lessons of childhood studies and seeing child development as understood in the same way everywhere (cf. Bird-David 2005: 94; Nielsen 2016: 7). In Malaysia, as elsewhere, childhood is a temporal construction that

takes many forms, not all of them future-oriented. However, a focus on the arrow of time does mean acknowledging that all children develop over time, that this growth cannot be undone, and that the times during which children develop make a crucial difference to their later lives. This is why the failure to acknowledge the existence of children of migrants and to provide them with services can have potentially irreversible impacts.[3] In what follows, and in recognition that the very disparate group of children I worked with have no single, unified experience, I will draw attention to four key aspects of temporal discordance: temporal control of migrant family life; temporariness and boredom; delayed education; and, finally, exclusion from 'national time'. I will also briefly suggest how the analytical framework of discordant temporalities might shed light on other examples of childhoods dramatically shaped by migration.

Migration, temporal control and social reproduction

Since the late eighteenth century, the labour of migrants – first from China, and later (during British colonial rule) from South India – has been a fundamental aspect of the economy of the Malaysian region. After the formation of the Malaysian Federation in 1963, and the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1970, migrant labour from South and Southeast Asia became crucial to the development of key industries, including logging, plantations, construction, and service industries. At first, such labour was only loosely regulated. However, subsequent decades have seen the tightening of rules, and the increasing use of 'crackdowns' on undocumented migrants (Nah 2012). In particular, there has been a 'discernible shift' from a recruitment system based on settlement to one 'based on transience' (Wong 2006: 226). Sabah, the East Malaysian state where I conducted fieldwork, has the highest proportion of foreign workers of any Malaysian state (Cheong & Baltazar 2021: 4; Lasimbang, Tong & Low 2016: 114). The vast majority of these migrants are either eastern Indonesians from Sulawesi and Flores, or Muslims from the southern Philippines, many of whom first came to Sabah as civil war refugees in the 1970s (Kassim 2009).

Central to the regulation and securitization of immigration in Malaysia have been attempts to quantify and control migrants' time, whether through age-specific recruitment programmes, or policies regarding the length and renewal conditions for work visas. Because migrants have few rights, and because work visas are tied to specific occupations and employers, workers can be suddenly rendered 'illegal' (Pye, Daud, Harmono & Tatat 2012: 332), resulting in jarring spatiotemporal shifts. When one Indonesian man I heard of was discovered, during a medical check, to be ill with TB, his work visa was cancelled and his entire family were soon deported. Mimi's father, Frans, was once arrested and detained for immigration offences. Although Frans held a work permit for the agricultural sector, his Malaysian employer asked him to work in a hardware store and, after a tip-off, he was detained for working under the wrong visa. When Frans's employer was contacted by immigration officials, he claimed to have no knowledge of him. Anna, Frans's wife, told me that Mimi found her father's subsequent nine-month-long detention extremely difficult to handle. What made it worse was that when they visited him, often taking food, they could only stay for fifteen minutes.

In addition to such spatiotemporal ruptures, migrant work has more mundane impacts on the co-ordination of family life. Whilst the Sunday afternoon get-together that Mimi photographed shows a time of calm conviviality, she was preoccupied by the fact that her parents rarely slept at home. The relocation of Frans's chicken factory to the city outskirts, and the insistence by Anna's employers that she must live-in with

them during the week, made it difficult for the family to be together. This can in part be explained by the more profound way in which the Malaysian migration regime controls the times of family life. In line with the global 'stratification' of reproduction (Ginsburg & Rapp 1995), and increasing difficulties of co-ordinating care in transnational families (Coe 2016: 38-9), foreign workers in Malaysia holding a temporary worker's pass are not allowed to apply for a dependant's pass for spouses or children (cf. Acedera & Yeoh 2019: 253). Since their presence in Malaysia is supposed to be 'temporary', there are no provisions to support foreign workers' family members. Put simply, the social reproduction of migrants who labour in Malaysia is supposed to take place elsewhere: officially, migrant workers either should delay marrying or having children whilst they are labouring in Malaysia, or should delay their migration until after they are able to leave children behind in their home countries (Lasimbang *et al.* 2016: 115; Muyamin 2019: 109; Pye *et al.* 2012: 332). According to this official migration chronotope, in which the families of migrant workers exist 'elsewhere', the children I worked with are 'impossible', their birth to migrant parents in Malaysia considered 'illegal' (Allerton 2018).

This impossible situation has many implications for children's lives. Before turning to the broader impact of temporariness, let me briefly touch on one response: sending children 'back home'. Children who were taken back to live with extended family members in their parents' home villages were usually first- or second-born children of Indonesian migrants, since most Filipinos in Sabah had few remaining ties in the Philippines. Later-born children of Indonesian migrants were more likely to remain in Sabah, as their parents' lives became more embedded (even if precariously) in Malaysia. Although previous research has highlighted the psychosocial impacts on parents of separation from 'sent back' children (Pye *et al.* 2012: 332), I focus instead on the experiences of Sabah-based children separated from siblings living in 'the village'. For example, 15-year-old Maria was the only one of her siblings to live with their parents in Sabah. When I asked her how it felt to have siblings living in Solor, Indonesia, she said, 'It's weird because I have never met my two oldest siblings. I don't feel anything. I don't even miss my brother above me because I haven't seen him again since I was little'. Similarly, 13-year-old Vanessa told me matter-of-factly about her older brother on Flores, whom she has never met, and never even talked to on the phone: 'If I went there', she said, 'he wouldn't even know who I was'. Such statements are powerful, given the well-documented emphasis on the emotional and structural significance of siblingship to both personhood and kinship in Southeast Asia (Cruz 2020; McKinley 1981).

Stafford, in his account of the temporal rhythms of separation and reunion in China, has argued that repeated *physical* separations 'stand in a complex relationship with various forms of *emotional* and *social* separation and distance' (2000: 2). In contexts of precarious migration like Sabah, where lives are marked more by immobility than mobility, repeated physical visits and reunions are difficult for all but a tiny minority of families. Thus, although, in eastern Indonesia or the southern Philippines, it is fairly common for siblings to live for a time with different family members, the *permanent* transnational separation of siblings is a rupture in chronotopic expectations of close siblingship during childhood (cf. Cruz 2020: 325). Children who remained in Sabah experienced a spatiotemporal separation of their childhood and the childhood of their siblings, producing an emotional and kinship discordance, a feeling of being out of step with unknown-but-connected others. For example, 16-year-old Emilya, who had not

seen her siblings in Indonesia for seven years, told me that she felt quite disconnected from them, and intimidated by their educational successes. Their lives offered a vision of another life she might have had, but that, rooted as she was in the culture and place of Sabah, she preferred not to dwell on.

Writing of the experiences of transnational families between Mexico and the United States, Boehm argues that the US state, in its desire for workers as 'detached individuals', expects migrants to be 'simultaneously *here* and *not here*' (2012: 139, original emphasis). Whilst their labour is desired, their children and wider families are not. In Sabah, the construction of children of migrants as impossible has very particular consequences for those young people who remain in the state long after their siblings have left. Migrant parents, who share childhood experiences and regional languages with their separated children, imagine family togetherness as occurring at a future time when enough money has been made and the family can reunite (cf. Pye *et al.* 2012: 338). However, their Sabah-based children feel a discordance between the ongoing time of their childhood *here* and the spatially and temporally separated childhood of their absent siblings who are *not here*. This spatiotemporal discordance also acts as a reminder, however local they might feel, of their family's 'foreignness'.

Temporariness, waiting, and boredom

The Malaysian migration regime acts to produce migrants as *temporary* workers, whether or not they are documented or undocumented. Filipino refugees share this temporary status, since special permits that allow them to live and work must be renewed annually for a fee (Kassim 2009). This legal production of temporariness is seen in many contexts (Griffiths, Rogers & Anderson 2013), and has been described in literature highlighting the 'indefinite indeterminacy' of undocumented or forced migration (Ramsay 2019: 387). Such studies emphasize the constant waiting that irregular migration involves (Bendixsen & Eriksen 2018: 88) and suggest that migrant waiting is a form of liminality, a feeling of being out-of-time with others, in which ordinary social life is suspended, and health suffers (Khosravi 2014). Certainly, throughout my fieldwork, I continually heard the phrase 'still being processed' (*masih dalam proses*) used by both adults and children to describe endlessly delayed but still-hoped-for documents. However, we must be careful not to assume an equivalence between structural uncertainty and actual experience, or to suggest that undocumented life in all contexts, and for all ages, involves the same temporality (cf. Ramsay 2019: 392). Coutin, in her analysis of the implications of being undocumented in the United States, argues that illegality 'erases presence and suspends time' (2005: 196). Yet such an approach only considers time as an external factor, something relevant to work schedules or documentation delays, and does not account for time as an ontological property of a person, in this case a child. Can this kind of 'internal' time be suspended? Even in the context of migrant temporariness, can an individual child 'pause' their childhood?

Many migrant parents spoke of the workers' or squatter housing where they lived as just a 'temporary house' (*rumah sementara*). This chronotope implied that their house was a convenient place to live, but only for a while, and certainly not a dwelling to invest in. By contrast, for children, these cheap and portable dwellings may be the only home they have ever known, a place that offers a material micro-history of their life: its walls decorated with their manga posters; its mattress offering a place to rest when they are sick; its corners allowing for the storage of toys and the care of pets. Though children,

Figure 4. 'This was when we grilled chicken and fish'. (Photo and text by Mimi.)

like adults, would often say that their house was 'rubbish' or 'broken', they never once said to me that it was 'temporary'. Indeed, I was struck by the emotional language that they used to describe these dwellings, as when 12-year-old Flora said of her family's house, squeezed behind a workshop, 'It is important to me and I love it'. Even small and ramshackle rooms in shared workers' housing were repositories of memories, places where children had spent time with parents, siblings, and cousins. Such housing – like Anna and Frans's old factory house – was often in the slow process of being abandoned and becoming a ruin, but this might be resisted by children. Mimi, whom I mentioned earlier, photographed and described the slow crumbling of her family's old house at the abandoned factory, where plants were growing up through the concrete yard, and large lizards were increasingly encroaching on the surrounding space. However, her photographs of planted vegetables, as well as her images of weekend barbeques (Fig. 4) and birthday cakes, suggest an ongoing inhabitation, a resistance to the physical and psychological process of ruination (cf. Stoler 2008: 195). Wherever her parents see themselves as belonging, Mimi's photographs and descriptions of her home suggest the kind of deep, intimate, and everyday place-attachment that is acquired over time during childhood (Gonzales 2016: 69). Her childhood, as a place-based temporal process, is discordant with the structural temporariness of migrant family life.

Parents and children, then, may have very different experiences of the indeterminacy of migrant life in Sabah. Whilst parents tended to be busy with work, children were likely to emphasize the waiting and the monotony that their lives involved. Work on migrant temporariness shares many themes in common with a wider literature on 'waiting' and boredom. In very different contexts, ethnographers have described the ways in which people endure a delayed passage to adulthood or to some other desired

status (Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2007). Such waiting takes many forms: it is not just passive but may also be more purposeful (Andersson 2014: 802), as amongst young Indian men whose 'timepass' enables political mobilization (Jeffrey 2010), or men in Manila whose 'boredom' leads to 'wheeling and dealing' (Jensen 2014: 43). Though much of this work has focused on 'youth', very little of it has explored the difference that childhood might make to waiting.[4] However, if our subjective experience of waiting relates to our ability to control our own time (Bendixsen & Eriksen 2018: 92), then children are likely to experience very different forms of waiting to youth or adults, since their time is shaped not only by the structures of migration, but also by their adult caregivers.

In his analysis of 'waiting' in South Africa, Crapanzano argued that waiting was not only an 'ordinary experience' but also had a more 'metaphysical dimension' (1985: 44). Amongst children of migrants, waiting as an ordinary, everyday experience usually involved waiting for 'busy' (*sibuk*) parents to return (cf. Gonzales 2016: 65). When 15-year-old Joni completed a 'time-use chart' with me, it revealed the endless hours of television that he watched with his younger sister as they waited for their Solorese parents to finish work. For 12-year-old Yustin, much of her time was spent at home 'just sitting' (*duduk saja*), waiting for her Torajan mother to return every evening from her job as a domestic worker. Of course, it is a common experience for children everywhere to wait for their parents to return from work. What made this experience particularly difficult for these children, however, was the fact that child illegality confined them to their homes, often in out-of-the-way parts of the city, with few friends nearby. Moreover, in the case of domestic-worker mothers, work routines were not structured by an impersonal 'clock time' (Thompson 1967) but by the whims and demands of employers, who might suddenly extend the working day or demand that women stayed overnight, regardless of their family lives.

The more troublesome and 'metaphysical' aspect of children's waiting related to what some of them saw as a lack of control over their future. There were significant differences between children, depending on the wider spatiotemporal orientation of their family. Muslim refugees and migrants from the southern Philippines showed no desire to return to the violent circumstances from which their families had fled and, although they faced difficult working and living conditions, considered themselves to be permanently settled in Sabah. They were far more likely to spend money on furnishings for their squatter houses, or on wedding parties, and their orientation to the present, rather than the future, had positive advantages for children. Similarly, Bugis migrants, who have extensive social networks within Sabah (Sayed Mahadi 2016), were unlikely to speak of a return 'home' to Sulawesi. By contrast, many Florenese and Torajan migrants were still influenced by the temporality implied by the Indonesian chronotope of *merantau*, which indicates a circular migration (Lindquist 2009: 7). These parents utilized a discourse of temporariness to focus on a hoped-for future return to Indonesia. They were almost obsessed with trying to save for this return, and emphasized endurance of poor conditions as a kind of moral quality, something that distinguished them, ethically, from the Malaysians who were too rich or proud to take up the work they did. Indeed, when Mimi's teenaged sister Grace obtained a job washing chicken feet in the factory where her father worked, her mother repeatedly asked her, 'Can you endure it?' These parents' discourses seem to suggest the kind of liminality and suspension of time discussed in the wider literature on migrant temporalities.

However, for the children of these migrants, such discourses of temporariness were discordant with the place-attachments developed during their childhood. Having spent

all or most of their lives in Sabah, they could not see their childhood experiences as a temporary or liminal period of endurance, a prelude to a future 'return'. Their mundane waiting was not socially productive (cf. Jeffrey 2010: 3), but was short term, shaped by their parents' work schedules, and their boredom was influenced by illegality and immobility. It was not their everyday, TV-filled waiting that caused them angst; rather, it was their parents' long-term waiting for a 'return' to a place they did not know. When asked about his parents' desire to return to Adonara in the future, 16-year-old Emanuel spoke with resignation: 'Let's just see how it goes', he told me. 'If I get to continue living here, then I will. If my parents go back there, then I will have to follow them and go there as well … I have no choice but to get myself used to it'. Some children, then, lived not only with everyday uncertainty, but also with a peculiar kind of anticipation or dread of the future rupture in time and space that their parents' return would cause.

Educational exclusion and 'lost' time

For children of migrants, perhaps the most significant consequence of migration regulations is their exclusion from Malaysian government schools (Lumayag 2016: 194). This exclusion is a specific form of temporal control aimed at children, and is consonant with the construction of migrant parents as 'temporary' workers without co-resident families. As in many contexts, the national system of schooling, with its age-based entries and progressions, terms and timetables, is central to the basic framework of a Malaysian childhood. Though this temporal framework is shared by most citizen children in the country, it is one from which non-citizen children, even if born in Malaysia, are deliberately excluded. However, this exclusion clashes with many children's own expectations – whether learnt from their parents, absorbed from the media, or based on observation of citizen children – of how childhood should unfold.

Such schooling exclusion leads to various discordant subjective experiences for those children whose parents try, in any way possible, to access education for them. For example, a number of children I knew had previously attended government school, often using forged or borrowed documents. However, when their circumstances were discovered, such children faced the rupture of removal from the shared times of Malaysian childhood. Emy, the 12-year-old daughter of Suluk Filipino migrants, had been forced to leave a government school when it became apparent that she lacked a birth certificate. At the time that I knew her, Emy was sporadically attending a small, volunteer-run learning centre on the edge of Crossroads squatter village, one of many such centres set up by humanitarian and religious providers in Sabah (Lumayag 2016; Muyamin 2019). She appeared frustrated by her poor writing and mathematical skills, and was often angry in class, refusing to answer questions, or arguing with her peers. Her experiences of educational disruption seemed to have left her with a strong desire to attend school, but also a frustrated awareness of time she could never get back, including the learning she had missed, and the skills she was so self-consciously aware that she lacked. Emy's frustration at what she felt she *should* but *did not* understand is a poignant example of what can be lost as the internal time of childhood unfolds.

In such cases of explicit ejection from Malaysian education, children felt a 'temporal discontinuity' (Frederiksen & Dalsgård 2014: 2): a feeling that they no longer shared the same times with others around them. Ardi, a 17-year-old Bugis teenager, attended a Malaysian school for six years with a forged birth certificate. After this was discovered, and he was forced to leave, he spent three years out of school. Of this time, he told me:

> I didn't do anything. I only stayed at home and I was so sad … It was horrible. I sometimes thought to myself, what will happen to me if I only stay at home, and what about my future? I cried a lot when I had just stopped school. I had nothing and my future was so dark. I barely went out of the house. My parents didn't allow me to because they were worried about the police.

What is striking is the way that time stands out in Ardi's narrative. He recalls being upset not only about his experience in the present, stuck at home, but also about his future, which appears 'dark' and empty. The control of his movements, made necessary by his undocumented status, clashes with his sense of how the time of his childhood should unfold, and how it relates to his future adulthood. Ardi's comments point to the significance of time as an ontological property of individual children, an internal feature of which they themselves are aware (Uprichard 2008). That is, Ardi feared for his future because he *expected* it, yet his internal sense of time moving forwards was discordant with the chronotope of blockage produced by schooling exclusion.

Ardi was somewhat unusual in that he was relatively ambitious for his education, eventually attending extra classes at the only Indonesian high school in the city. Other children I knew seemed most interested in attending learning centres as a way of coping with the bored restlessness of waiting for 'something, anything to happen' (Crapanzano 1985: 47). At the Crossroads learning centre, I was struck by how desperate the Suluk and Bajau children seemed to be for the centre to open in the mornings, lining up in the street well before the teachers arrived. Yet once teaching began, the children seemed equally desperate for breaks. A group of boys who had rejected the teachers' offer of attendance frequently roamed around, disruptively, outside the shophouse where the learning centre was housed. They once threw a spectacularly large water bomb through the second-storey window, which exploded over the tables, and over 11-year-old Salma in particular. This and other disruptions caused much distress to the centre's teachers, but not to the children, who often responded with excitement. For these children, as for the rural children in Shanghai's vocational schools described by Ling (2019: 127), the learning centre was a place to enjoy play and fun with other children (cf. Lumayag 2016: 203), rather than a place that might enable a specific future.

Community learning centres in Sabah have a relatively relaxed policy of accepting children at any age. At one Indonesian centre, the second class of 'middle school' (SMP) included a young man, Fredi, who was possibly 19 or 20. Fredi's desire for education in some respects kept him in the category of 'child' for an extended period. However, his tenacity in seeking to continue his education was relatively unusual. Whilst Fredi never commented on his older age, other young people I knew felt more uncomfortable sitting in classes with those much younger than themselves. Densi, the older sister of Mimi, did not enter any kind of school until she was 15. However, even after starting at an Indonesian learning centre, she found it hard to continue when so many of the children in her class were so much younger than she was. She felt that the teachers treated her more harshly, expecting her to understand more quickly than the younger students. Another older boy in class 1 at a learning centre told me that he felt very ashamed/embarrassed (*malu*) to study with younger children, and he also chose to leave.

One word that was often used when children described their families' delayed attempts to find them education – not signing them up to a learning centre until they were 12, failing to obtain the correct documents for government school – was that they had been 'late' (*lambat*). By emphasizing this 'lateness', children of migrants show a particular awareness of temporal discordance. They are not only self-consciously aware of their own ageing, but are also aware of how their lateness to education

does not conform with the linear, clock time of childhood schooling (cf. Jeffrey 2010: 13). For these children, such awareness often leads to a desire to leave school, rather than to 'catch up' with their education. Wati, the 14-year-old daughter of Torajan parents, surprised her friends by suddenly and unexpectedly leaving their Indonesian learning centre. Moreover, as if to protect herself against the possibility of returning, she burnt her uniform and school shoes. When I talked with her, it seemed that her discordant experiences of working (as an adult) in a market and car wash whilst also attending 'school' had become an embarrassment to her. Picking up on the Prigogine-inspired ideas of Uprichard (2008), we can say that Wati experienced as oppressive the discordance between her *internal* sense of ageing and her *external* circumstances of being stuck in a primary class. She found her own way to resolve these feelings, despite the disapproval of the centre's teachers, for whom this decision made her a 'child-out-of-bounds' (Chin 2003).

Attending the same Indonesian learning centre as Wati, 15-year-old Mas had a complicated history with education. When he was younger, his father, Filipus, had been unable to find him any education in the city, so had sent him, with an older sister, to primary school in Flores, Indonesia. After two years, his living situation with a violent uncle became untenable, and so Mas returned to Sabah. Eventually, he was enrolled in the new learning centre but, aged 13 at the time, he was already relatively old for primary school. Though Filipus emphasized the importance of education, I sensed that Mas was wanting to stop. He told me he had been offered building work (*kontrak*) and would like to do it, but his father would not let him. In this case (and by contrast with Fredi), Mas's desire to begin work and to stop education seemed to signal a desire to embrace the passage of time and move out of the category of child. However, his father was not yet able to allow him to leave the spacetime of schooled childhood. Interestingly, then, children's sense of their own ageing may allow them to 'give up' on pursuing education in favour of embracing paid work. However, the very same arrow of time may be experienced as much more difficult by their parents, who often find it harder to accept that their child's education (and, implicitly, their childhood) has ended. This shows how awareness of time's passing is often inseparable from positioning within intergenerational relationships (cf. Bird-David 2005: 100).

National times, impossible children

So far, I have drawn attention to three key issues. First, I have shown that Malaysia's migration regime causes ruptures in shared time for migrant families because it assumes that children are looked after elsewhere; this creates separations and emotional detachments for children. Second, I have argued that although some migrant parents emphasize temporariness, this is experienced differently by children, who are attached to Sabah, whose waiting is more short term, and who dread the rupture of future 'return'. Third, I have argued that educational exclusion leads to temporal discontinuities between Malaysian-citizen and migrant childhoods; this often leads children of migrants to experience any education they do receive as 'too late'. In this final section, I step back from temporal experiences of everyday life and consider broader ways in which the nation-state's temporal frameworks influence understandings of migrant families.

The concept of 'national time' refers to the ways in which nationalism constructs an image of a country's people as those who share collective memories and ancestry (cf. Bear 2014: S7). For Anderson, the 'imagined' idea of the nation depends on a

particular understanding of shared time, best illustrated by the 'calendrical coincidence' of a newspaper read by a national community (1983: 33). However, his idea of the shared time of a national narrative has been criticized by Bhabha, who draws attention to the 'incommensurable temporalities' that interrupt the apparent 'cultural homogeneity' of nationhood (1994: 158). Bhabha's critical perspective on national time is useful for thinking about the specific temporal imaginings of Malaysia as a postcolonial nation. In Malaysia, citizens are placed in a racialized temporal hierarchy, based on the fundamental contrast between prior, autochthonous belonging and later arrival. Thus, the Malays, as the apparent temporal predecessors of non-Malay citizens, are granted special rights as original inhabitants – the so-called *bumiputera* or 'sons of the soil' (Lee 2004: 126) – whilst Chinese and Indian Malaysians are treated as 'second-class citizens' (Ong 2014). Even the national language, Malay, has been imagined as the soul of the Malay 'race', and therefore not a language in which non-Malays could ever become truly fluent (Leow 2016). In Malaysian nationalism, there is no imagination of a deep history shared by all citizens. Rather, Malay privileges are explicitly founded on an understanding that *they were there first*, and that non-Malay citizens have shallower – that is, more recent – claims to belonging. One significant corollary of this temporal hierarchy of citizenship is that, since non-Malay citizens (as migrants of the distant past) are excluded from shared Malay time, it is relatively straightforward also to exclude more recent migrants, even after long periods of residence in the country. Certainly, this perspective is crucial to appreciating the particularity of Sabah, a north Borneo state with Malaysia's highest numbers of foreign workers; a state shaped by, dependent on, but still extraordinarily resistant to the presence of refugees and migrants (cf. Cheong & Baltazar 2021: 5).

Gammeltoft (2013) has written of the haunting futures that unborn children, visualized through sonographic imaging, represent in Vietnam. These children-to-be have a potentiality that is not only positive but also (because of Vietnam's history of war, chemical contamination, and deformity) negative. The past, in this context, refuses to go away, and continually haunts anticipations of future children. In Malaysia, but in very different ways, children of migrants also have a negative potentiality for the nation. From a nationalist perspective, theirs can only ever be a *foreign* potentiality, since their present and future are prefigured by the determining spatiotemporal act of their parents' migration. This is why such children, despite their birth in Sabah, are always described by journalists or politicians as 'migrant children', a simple but inaccurate terminological switch which keeps them out of the normative model of Malaysian childhood. In such descriptions, having a 'migrant' status becomes untethered from any specific act of migration, and these children's childhood experiences do not count as their own unique *Malaysian* time. Rather, the irreversible process of childhood place-attachment is cancelled by the exclusionary logic of a national time in which past migration can never be forgotten. This is why, although local media have reported on the problem of 'migrant children' in Sabah since the 1990s, there is rarely any discussion of what might have happened to those children whose childhoods are now in the past, those for whom the arrow of time has moved forwards. Instead, discussions of this 'problem' are often written in a general and timeless manner, as though these children – as an enduring social problem in Sabah – *can* pause their childhoods. Such timeless nationalist chronotopes are reminiscent of Bakhtin's description of the 'adventure-time' found in Greek romances, which 'does not have even an elementary biological or maturational duration' (1981: 90). And yet, as I have described, children

of migrants are of course not ageless, and do experience time as an internal process.

The discordance that I am highlighting here between the irreversible unfolding of an individual childhood and the circularity of national imaginings of time and origin can also be seen in other contexts. For example, in the summer of 2018, US Customs and Border Protection officers separated thousands of children from their migrant parents at the US-Mexico border (Cromer 2019: 20). Despite public outrage regarding these separations, over two years later, more than 600 children had still not been reunited with their parents (Artz 2021). This policy, designed as a particularly harsh deterrent to undocumented immigration, seems deliberately premised on an appreciation of the temporality of childhood, which cannot be paused, and which makes long-term separation of young children from parents particularly traumatic. Another example is the case of Shamima Begum, the London schoolgirl who in 2015, at the age of 15, left the United Kingdom to join Islamic State. In 2019, after Begum was discovered living in a refugee camp in northern Syria, the Home Secretary stripped her of her British citizenship, whilst confirming that her unborn baby would be a British citizen. The British government has justified this action, which made Begum stateless, on the grounds that (through her mother) she is eligible for Bangladeshi citizenship, yet Bangladesh has refused to accept her as its problem (Knight 2020; Peerbacos 2019). Begum's story is clearly a complicated one of online radicalization and 'grooming', but it is also a story of the temporal discordances of migration and childhood. In its desire to make an example of her, the British government locates Begum in a national time in which, because of her religion, her ethnicity, and her alleged crimes, she now belongs to Bangladesh. Her childhood in London, and the citizenship of her own deceased children, comes to count for nothing against this racialized temporal hierarchy of citizenship. Though she herself is no longer a child, the past time of her childhood, and therefore her future in the nation, becomes impossible.

Conclusion

Anthropology has a rich and growing literature on the temporal conflicts of contemporary capitalism, including numerous studies exploring the temporal control central to securitized migration (Andersson 2014; Bendixsen & Eriksen 2018; Coe 2016; Cwerner 2001; Griffiths *et al.* 2013; Khosravi 2014). A number of these studies have explored the particular difficulties faced by youth in precarious circumstances, who are unable to make the transition from childhood to adulthood, and are reduced to 'waiting' for things to change (Jeffrey 2010; Jensen 2014; Mains 2007). What anthropology has not yet done is to consider how these conflictual and anxious times interact with the specific temporality of childhood, as a variously constructed but nevertheless finite and deeply influential period of the human life course. Considering such interaction is crucial, given the many restrictions on social reproduction – an emphatically spatiotemporal phenomenon – faced by migrants in many settings. In this article, I have made a first attempt to analyse this interaction, by outlining the discordance between the unique temporality of childhood and the temporalities of migration. Because childhood is both a socially constructed phase of life *and* a 'biological process of maturation' (Vitus 2010: 27; cf. Toren 2011: 40), it provides us with a fascinating perspective from which to theorize temporal experience. In particular, it enables us to interrogate the interaction between forms of natural time and the social constructions of time that are often symptoms of inequalities (Bear 2014: S20).

Children of migrants cannot pause their childhoods in line with migration regulations. As their childhoods unstoppably and irreversibly unfold, these children become attached to and embedded in the places where they live, normalizing and coping with their experiences of exclusion. However, this unique time of their childhoods is discordant with a regime that, in Malaysia as elsewhere, shapes migration as a time of discontinuity, rupture, and temporariness.

It was ironic, though perhaps apt, that I wrote my first drafts of this exploration of discordant temporalities in the midst of a global pandemic, when so many people experienced a pause, or even a rupture, in their livelihoods, relationships, and education. One of the many things that COVID lockdowns taught us was that age makes a difference to such temporal experiences. The feeling of 'time's relentless melt' (Sontag 1979: 15) is particularly intensified and heightened at the beginning and end of life. Losing time with friends and relatives is heart-breaking for the elderly. And losing months of education may have a significant impact on some children's futures, an impact intensified by existing inequalities. Here, I have drawn attention to what might be lost in the contemporary clash of temporalities of migration and childhood. Certainly, much of what is lost is time itself: the loss of a shared childhood with siblings sent 'home'; the loss of time spent waiting for parents to return from work, parents who deliberately sacrifice this shared time in hope of a future of endless family time; and the time lost when a child is too 'late' to enter education. A further type of loss might be said to be the loss of childhood itself. Of course, in the sense that, following Uprichard, I identify time as internal to individual children, childhood *has* very much continued. However, childhood as an external construction and shared experience has been disrupted. In particular, children of migrants are excluded from Malaysian-citizen childhood, with its school routines and everyday mobility. And this connects to a third loss: the loss of belonging, and of these children's connection to the national time of Malaysia, since the unique time of their childhood is cancelled by narratives that see them as always foreign, always migrants. As other examples help reveal, the losses caused by discordant temporalities are no simple accident. Rather, they are a fundamental aspect of the politics of contemporary migration, which is simultaneously a politics of time, a politics of reproduction, *and* a politics of childhood.

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NOTES

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] Mimi borrowed a camera from me to take part in a project called 'Photos of My Life', in which children were encouraged to take pictures of places, people, and activities that were important to them in their everyday

lives. When I lent the children the cameras, I also gave them a printed sheet explaining the project, and detailing how I might use the images in the future. When returning borrowed cameras to me, children were asked verbally whether they were happy for these images to be used in my research. A week later, I gave the children printed copies of their photos and asked them to describe their images, whether verbally or in writing. On this occasion, I again checked with the children regarding their consent to share their images. In Mimi's case, I also met with her parents and talked with them about her involvement in my research. In line with the principles of rights-focused participatory research with children, consent was gained through a long-term process of involvement and discussion, in which children themselves had multiple opportunities to refuse involvement or delete images, rather than simply asking adult caregivers to sign a consent form.

[3] A notorious but relevant example concerns the 'pirate day-cares' of Tel Aviv, developed in desperation to provide care for the children of migrant workers, but with such poor staff-child ratios that young children were neglected, with devastating developmental impacts (Willen 2019: 77-83).

[4] One important exception is Vitus's (2010) work on how children living in Danish asylum centres become 'de-subjectified' by the experience of living without a future.

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Les temporalités discordantes de la migration et de l'enfance

Résumé

Bien qu'elle soit définie de façon très différente d'une culture à l'autre, l'enfance a toujours un cadre temporel spécifique : la croissance et le développement des enfants sont irréversibles. Pourtant, dans de nombreux contextes, on observe aujourd'hui une discordance entre la temporalité de l'enfance et les rythmes, échelles de temps et contrôles temporels des migrations. À travers le cas d'enfants de migrants indonésiens et philippins au Sabah, en Malaisie, l'autrice explore le choc en cours entre les temporalités de la migration et de l'enfance. À cause de la politique migratoire de la Malaisie, les enfants vivent des séparations et des ruptures du temps partagé et ne perçoivent pas le caractère temporaire de la vie de migrants de la même manière que leurs parents. Leur exclusion de l'éducation crée une discontinuité temporelle entre leur enfance et celle des citoyens malais, tandis que la perception racialisée du temps national accentue leur potentialité négative. Plus largement, l'article plaide pour une prise en compte de l'interaction entre les conflits temporels du capitalisme et les formes naturelles de temporalité telles que l'enfance.

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