A basic feature of Korowai people’s social world is that their landscape is divided into a patchwork of territories owned by named patriclans. Almost all interaction is strongly inflected by questions of who is an owner of specific places and who is not. When I once asked a friend named Fenelun the purpose of landownership, he said the institution exists so that a man can live on his land, marry, raise children, and go about producing and procuring food without other people getting angry at him. Many other Korowai answered questions about landownership in similar terms. They said that if people were to build, dwell, hunt, trap, garden, and eat on the same land, then they would consume each other’s property, have affairs with each other’s spouses, criticize each other, and fight. To avoid conflicts, everyone should have separate places to live and different streams, sago palms, garden clearings, pandanus trees, and other resources to exploit.

Such statements straightforwardly link landownership to spatial dispersion. Often it is more than a half-hour walk from one occupied clearing to the nearest neighboring houses. This separateness is organized by the clan territory system. The statements also tie ownership and dispersion alike to a more basic value, political autonomy. Actors will violate one another’s rights over desirable possessions if they are not separated by a spatial buffer. Korowai see their system of landownership as a system of self-determination.

People’s ways of categorizing space and acting in it are central to the making and defining of social life. Korowai take an intensely
space-focused approach to social relations. I argue in this chapter that Korowai spatial practice shapes people’s lives as a matter of otherness-focused social relating. My description of the Korowai landscape here is a description of an otherness-structured social world. At the same time, it is a description of Korowai people’s acute, constant concern with qualities of belonging in relation to what is around them. What I document is that Korowai spatial categories and spatial practices are systematically two-edged. They at once define boundaries of otherness between people and link people together across these boundaries of otherness. Belonging and otherness are mutually interdependent and irreducible.

Landownership defines the character of the Korowai polity and social relationships in it. This spatial institution’s structuring of residential dispersion and its support of political autonomy are major channels by which the institution is simultaneously separative and connective. Fenelun’s account of ownership might suggest that ownership is purely separative: people own different lands in order to step out of relations altogether. We will see instead that what ownership does is institutionalize an otherness-first configuration of social relating. Ownership sets the space-traversing, autonomy-affirming terms of people’s mutual involvement. The Korowai landownership world is a world of connections that people make across boundaries of strangeness, drawing the familiar and strange together.

PLACES OF BELONGING

After emerging from the highland mountain chains, New Guinea’s southern rivers cross a ninety-thousand-square-mile lowland plain. The Korowai lands lie in the northwest corner of this plain, near the mountains and far from the coast, in the upper watersheds of the Eilanden and the Ndeiram Kabur Rivers (see map 1). The tall, multilayered forest between these rivers is broken only by smaller waterways, banana gardens that Korowai clear around their houses, and stands of sago palms, which are shorter and sparser than stands of woody trees and which flourish on low, occasionally inundated ground near the rivers and at the origins of small streams. Korowai see important variations of topography and vegetation across all parts of the land, but they portray waterways in particular as cuts of distinctiveness in the forest terrain. Streams are the only land features that bear proper names. Alongside stream names, categories such as upstream and downstream are even more important in people’s ways of orienting themselves on the land, in
their talk about spatial locations, and in their talk about links between
different locations. Because of heavy but erratic rainfall and flat relief,
streams fluctuate dramatically in size, something people also monitor
with great day-to-day interest.

Even more prominently than the landscape is divided and unified by
streams, it is divided and unified by ownership. The day-to-day conse-
quentiality of landownership is well illustrated by pressures I experi-
enced during my fieldwork. There was always an intense politics
regarding where I was staying on the land. It would have been almost
unthinkable for me to travel to any place without its owners’ agree-
ment. Owners were the people most burdened by my presence, and they
were also the persons with whom I most needed to establish valued rela-
tions of mutual recognition, such as through gifts. In addition to raising
questions of my obligations to owners, their gains from me, and their
moral accommodation of me, my physical location shaped nonowning
people’s access to me. How someone else stood in relation to owners
affected whether that person would come into my presence at all and
what conversations and material transactions would occur between us.

Landownership tightly joins three categories: “place,” “clan,” and
“owner.” A place (bolüp; Ind. dusun) is usually a contiguous, irregularly
shaped segment of land, typically about a square mile in expanse.
A place is by definition the territory of a particular named clan, and all
clans have places. Korowai ubiquitously speak of different parts of the
landscape by combining clan names with the term bolüp. For example,
dambol-bolüp is “place of Dambol.” The term clan (gun) itself also
means “species, type,” an indication of the strong sense that a clan iden-
tity is a type of human. To anchor the definition of themselves as differ-
ent kinds of humans, Korowai look above all to the landscape and its
different places. Korowai talk about clan-owned places constantly in
their lives, such as when they discuss where they or other people are on
the landscape or when they deliberate over actions they might under-
take and their reasons for doing so. Newcomers who arrive in the
Korowai area with any ability and concern to communicate linguisti-
cally with Korowai about their lives quickly become aware of the land’s
division into these owned territories.

A person generally grows up as a member of the clan of his or her
father, so I call the groups patriclans. (I also refer to clan places as “pat-
rimonial” land, taking patrimony here in the sense of “paternally inher-
ited estate.”) Clans are small, averaging about ten living members.
Many are represented by just one or two persons; others are extinct.
Clanmates are often oriented toward one another more by being owners of the same land than by notions of common ancestry, or other facts unrelated to land. Clanmates own their land and its resources together, though particular persons exercise exclusive ownership over garden plants, animal traps, buildings, sago palms, or other objects they have made or stewarded.

Just as concepts of clan and place contain each other, so too a concept of belonging is present in the concept of land. The word bolüp “place” ubiquitously occurs as a grammatically possessed item, prefixed by possessive pronouns. The concept of owning is also expressed by the word giom-anop “owners.” The men, women, and children of a patriclan are all “place owners” (bolüp giom-anop) of the clan’s land. Like English own, proper, and property, Korowai giom joins a sense of dominion over the owned object with a sense of the owned object being proper to a person, a qualifying condition of his or her being. Belonging is an English category aptly conveying this bidirectionality. Places belong to people, and people belong in relation to those places. The inseparability of land and belonging is also why I translate bolüp as “place.” Alternatives include “estate,” “land,” “country,” or “home,” but “place” best unites the idea of a piece of land with the idea of belonging. Korowai sometimes speak of a clan territory as their “truly own place” (bolüp giom-xajan) to distinguish it from other land that counts as their own in weaker ways. This is a statement more about the “ownness” or “properness” of the object to a person than about a person’s dominion over the object. To be a place owner is to be known and anchored by that place. Consistent with this unity of landowning and human identity, places are inalienable. New persons can be included as owners of land, and existing owners can die out or move away from their land, leading to the ownership relation being forgotten. At a given time, many specific clan territories are in an ambiguous transitional status of being remembered by some persons as actually the land of a certain extinct clan but known by others as without qualification the place of some clan that has in actuality only taken over that land in a recent generation. But while there is some long-term fluidity in relations between clans and land, owners cannot at one moment sell or give away land. Until recently the idea was hardly imagined. On hearing about land commodification elsewhere, Korowai have now formed an explicit consensus that land should not be sold, because any person’s alienation of land would lead everyone toward universal landlessness. This is typical of their sense of the incommensurable worth of clan places.
In these ways, owning land is like having a body or a voice. A place is a kind of second body, a footing in the world by means of which a person acts expressively toward others or stays carefully separate from them. Yet while Korowai use the category "place" (bolüp) to shape their existences around a dominant, constant concern with belonging in relation to physical segments of land, here as in other areas of life owners’ relation with land consists of complex back-and-forth interaction and shifting alignments, not seamless unity. Being an owner is distinct from people’s actions in their first bodies, even as bodily action and landownership affect each other. To illustrate how gaps between owners and their places are central to ownership experience, I examine briefly two overlapping areas of owners’ bodily practices in relation to their land: resource exploitation and residence. The salience of these activities is clear in Fenelun’s and other people’s portrayals of landownership as allowing people to live on land and procure food from it without getting into fights. Yet the interaction of landownership with food-getting and dwelling is more ambiguous than is indicated by Fenelun’s and other people’s accounts of landownership as a social buffer.

Korowai understand transformative action on land to be a basic element of the ownership relation. When stating what their land is, people talk about their sites of dwelling and food getting. A clan place consists of fallow garden clearings, stewarded tree resources, other historical sites of human presence, and specific small streams the owners dam and bail during dry weather to get fish. Walking across land, Korowai routinely remark on scenes of past human actions, such as grave sites, places where a pig was killed, birthplaces, feast sites, abandoned pathways, and logs felled by specific persons. Owners are especially prone to speak of sites of exploitation when their links to land are questioned. One major way in which owners reshape land is by planting and tending sago palms, the source of a starch flour that is people’s staple food. Sago groves are the greatest material repositories of value in Korowai life, and important landmarks. Many groves exist only because humans cleared forest and planted sago sprigs (cf. Ellen 2006). Even groves that are not wholly anthropogenic are heavily affected by owners’ care. The cliché “Sago groves will be killed by the world!” expresses common knowledge that groves shrink when humans neglect them. The statement is also typical of broader Korowai tendencies to describe the world as a hostile scene of existence.

Korowai understandings thus emphasize that people demonstrate ownership of land through action on it and through mixing their labor
with it, in a manner reminiscent of the ideas of Locke. If persons have
left their land to live elsewhere, their co-owners or other relatives might
urge them to return, to keep the ownership relation active. Once when
I was talking with a man about cultural change, he expressed the hope
that two of his four children would grow up attending school and living
in a village and that the other two would live in the forest on his clan-
owned land, “lest the place’s paths grow over with trees and that good
place itself be taken over by other people.” Persons often speak
idiomatically of a place having become “cold” when its owners have
died out or moved away. Follow a death, the disappearance of path-
ways, gardens, houses, and other traces of a deceased person’s presence
on the land is a main focus of the bereaved’s efforts to define their loss.

In this focus on transformative labor, ownership relations have a
two-sided and even contradictory character. A place is available to own-
ers as a total surrounding life-space. (The word *lamol* “world” is often
used as a substitute for *bolüp* “place” to refer to clan territories.)
Exploitation by owners is land’s telos and part of land’s very definition.
Clan places are “good” (*manop*), as resource bases and sites of human
occupation. The owned place gives people their food, while owners are
seen by themselves and others in the marks they make on their land. Yet exploitation-focused talk also highlights the difference owners make to land. The land is separate from them, and their ownership is an active, contingent practice of transformation. Owners could die out or move away, ownership could lapse, but the land would exist nonetheless. Owners take from land, give to it, and inscribe their presences on it. If they do not do so, the land grows and degrades into other shapes than it has when owners are present. The inscriptive relation of owners to land is a relation of unity that is known through resistances and other possibilities besides unity, such as the lamentable absence of owners from land due to death.

Tellingly, Korowai often remark spontaneously that “the earth eats people” (*wola-xolol yanop nole*) and that they are fearful of the land as a consequence. This is an allusion to the disappearance of dead people’s bodies into the earth in burial, and the statement does not have anything directly to do with landownership. Even so, the statement and the sense of fear it expresses are characteristic of the unease that is one face of people’s relation to the landscape on which they live. The sharpest aspect of land’s strangeness to its owners, though, is the presence on most clan places of “taboo sites” (*wotop*), often centered on stream junctions. People’s main orientation to a taboo site consists of day-to-day awareness that they should not exploit the site or travel through it, lest occult beings be angered and cause deaths. Until the recent intrusion of missionaries, tourists, and other foreigners on the landscape, Korowai regularly offered pig fat to occult beings at the sites. Performing these sacrifices, people stringently observed a prohibition against nonlandowning strangers being present on the land, because landowners face extreme danger in their relations with ill-tempered *wotop* beings, and the presence of outside interlopers would endanger the landowners even more. Here too we see a pattern of intimacy and otherness: stewardship of taboo sites is fundamental to landowner status, yet landowners stand in risky, volatile antagonism to their own land. While clan land is by definition a place for resource exploitation, this exploitation is transformative and transgressive, and owners’ relations to land are partly ties of danger.

There are many levels at which landownership and land-focused belonging are the concrete form of Korowai society, such that to describe social relations is to describe landownership and vice versa. However, another aspect of Korowai people’s intensely spatialized modes of living and defining their social bonds, distinct from landownership and interacting complexly with it, is the question of where peo-
ple physically are on the land. One important mode of physical presence on land is residence. The activity of “living” (bau-; also babo- “stay, sit”) in particular houses, on particular clan places, and with particular other people is a salient fact of Korowai persons’ worlds in their own representations. Expressions such as “house people” (xaim-anop), “housemates” (xaim-lelip-anop; lit., “same house people”), or “live together” (lelip bau-) are prominent in people’s talk about their lives. Dwelling at a specific place, or sharing a roof or even hearth with specific people, is itself a practice of belonging, at least notionally. To state where someone is living, or with whom a person is living, is in Korowai understanding to state value-laden definitions of who the person is and what social relations that person is living out as the most important ones of his or her daily activities. What land a person owns matters a lot to Korowai, but where the person is also matters.

For a lot of people a lot of the time, ownership and residence coincide: persons live on their own patrimonial places. Alongside other forms of physical action on land, dwelling on places is a main way in which Korowai enact their ownership. Presence on land is a practice of human-land unity, taken by Korowai to be emblematic of the ownership relation. They live on owned land because they are comfortable and politically secure there, even as dwelling somewhere can itself assert and reaffirm ownership of that place.

Yet if Korowai society is a world of landownership and of belonging-imbued experiences of dwelling on owned land, it is also a world of movement. Korowai travel avidly, and their lives and social networks are histories of motion. People’s practices of movement take them very frequently across landownership boundaries and into situations of dwelling at a distance from their own patrimonial land, on the land of other people. One of my main goals in describing specific practices of travel and residential mobility throughout this book is to show how dwelling and movement are mutually implicated correlates, rather than mutually exclusive opposites, and more generally to show that there is an internal relation between practices of people living on land of their own and people living on places where their sense of belonging is limited or tenuous. There are many levels at which being apart from owned land, and being physically present on nonowned land, is a normal event in the Korowai landownership system and an important part of people’s overall experiences of belonging in relation to place. In the next section and farther along in this chapter, I look at people’s experiences of political vulnerability in relation to other people’s land and the practices of
transient visiting and hospitality by which Korowai routinely create social bonds across divides of geographic otherness. At this preliminary point I only want to indicate very broadly some ways that residential relations to land also pervasively run against the grain of landownership-determined belonging, in addition to at other times aligning harmoniously with that belonging.

One way in which living away from owned land is systematically built into the landownership institution is that clans are exogamous. Marriage, as a relation of shared living between men and women, is by definition an interlocal social process drawing together people who belong at different places. Although Korowai follow many different principles and desires in deciding where to live, a general expectation is that men, children, and unmarried women will live on their own patrimonial places and married women will live at the places of their husbands. Some couples live at the wife’s place for lengthy periods or even their whole married lives, and most couples commute a great deal between their respective territories, but overall it is typically women who relocate so that spouses can live together. Households vary enormously in composition, but it is common for a house to have at least one married couple among its core occupants, such as a middle-aged couple with children. Landownership geography and people’s conceptions of what a “house” is are in this way deeply interconnected with gender and sexuality. This co-mediation of space and gender is not something Korowai see as needing overt discussion. When I have asked why women move while men remain on patrimonial land, the most that male and female interlocutors alike have usually said is that this is so women will bear children and clans will continue to have people. To Korowai, patrilineal inheritance of land, patrilineal inheritance of group membership, virilocal residence, and patriarchy (or men exercising greater power than women in having other people’s lives organized around their wants) go together as reciprocal sequiturs. People do not generally step back to question or explain the whole tautological and teleological package.

The concrete effects of exogamy and virilocality in the shape of people’s spatial lives are diverse. One major effect is that these norms, when followed, put women in a systematically different kind of relation to land from the basic one of living on one’s own patrimonial place. Sometimes, or in some respects, this puts women in a straightforward situation of vulnerability and dispossession. They do not belong at the place they are living (a husband’s place), and so they do not feel comfortable there and do not have clear rights to the land’s resources; meanwhile,
they are separated from their own land, where they would be comfortable and secure, and their prerogatives of ownership in relation to that land and specific resources on it might even be diminished in practice by the words and actions of other place owners (though in theory women remain owners on their natal land until death). But there are often highly affirmative sides to the extrapatrimonial geography of outmarried women’s lives. These women frequently come to enjoy relations of ownership and ownership-like belonging in relation to their husbands’ land. Sometimes women are quite pleased to leave patrimonial land and the people there well behind and to strike out somewhere new. At other times the residential and resource-exploitative relation to natal land remains strong: married women and their husbands live near the land anyway, they return regularly for feasts and other major events, and they steadily tread the path between the two places. People on all sides of a marriage may find this interlocal bond an entrée to attractive forms of partial belonging in relation to land other than patrimony-based ownership. For example, while a woman’s children do not inherit rights of ownership in her place or its existing resources, they can still stand in complex relations of belonging in relation to that place. Through their mother’s history of movement, these children may be in close touch with maternal clan places that are not strictly their own and may feel vividly at home on that land when visiting it in passing or when staying on it for long periods of their lives.

While the norm of residence on one’s own clan territory (and virilocal residence for married couples) shapes a great deal of actual practice, the norm is far from universally enacted. Persons living at odds with these expectations are present in almost any house setting. Many couples live at the woman’s place rather than the man’s, or at some other place altogether. Unmarried people also often find reasons to live at other places than their patrimonial ones (e.g., children who grow up at another place after the death of their father or elderly widows or widowers who move to other relatives’ land for companionship), and they sometimes become comfortable there. About half of males and one-third of females live on their own clan places at any time. Presence on a land of patrimonial belonging is accompanied and known by its alternatives: by experience of living differently oneself or by intimately sharing lives with immigrants on one’s own patrimonial land. A specific term for relatives of other places who live with landowners for a sustained period is laboxdun-anop, literally, “accompanying people, joiners.” Immigrants can come to be called “owners” in conversation,
thanks to closeness with the patrimonial owners and long-term presence on the land. Owners themselves can also become estranged from patrimonial land—because clanmates there are hostile, because of bored annoyance with the land’s characteristics, or because other owners are all dead and the few surviving persons no longer feel emotionally secure and settled living alone on their clan land.

Not only are there a lot of people living elsewhere than their own or (in the case of married women) their husband’s patrimonial land at a given time; another major feature of the social landscape is the rapidity with which people shift from one overall residential arrangement to another across their lives. This rapidity is well illustrated by the household arrangements among people resident on one clan territory, the Dambol place three miles north of Yaniruma, across the five-year interval from 1996 to 2001. In the mid-1990s there were two households on Dambol land, usually living near each other in a single clearing. The core residents were two late-middle-aged Dambol brothers named Silom and Xanduop, their three living wives, and their eight unmarried living children. Silom had three other children who were married and living elsewhere. One married son was staying mainly at his wife’s place, one son and his wife alternated between Silom’s house and the wife’s land, and one daughter lived with her husband on borderlands between Dambol territory and her husband’s adjacent place. The Dambol households were also home to Silom and Xanduop’s “uncle” (their mother’s brother’s son), whose wife and only child had died, leaving his nephews as his only close relatives.

By 2001 this uncle had died. Silom’s own death that year made the future of his widow’s separate household uncertain, even as that household was newly alive with the chatter of three orphaned non-Dambol children who had moved in with her. Silom’s eldest son was now living at the Dambol place rather than his wife’s place, and this couple was now the core of a third household. Xanduop was alive, but his two wives had both died, and his house had become the residence of five non-Dambol newcomers. These were (1) the aged new wife of Xanduop’s first son to marry; (2) another old woman who came to her kinsman Xanduop’s house as a neutral space where she could live separately from her husband, with whom she was in conflict over polygyny; (3) a widow who came with her children to evade the marital advances of one of her dead husband’s relatives; (4) the orphaned brother of one of Xanduop’s dead wives, who had come to live with the children of his dead sister, escape his ill-tempered clanmates, and join in marriage with
Xanduop's niece; and (5) the niece herself, who was a member of a geographically adjacent clan and who had been socially intimate with the Dambol households before moving into her uncle's house. Also in the intervening years, the Dambol-based people had at one point built houses on the land of nearby people who needed help with a feast and at another point carried out a feast on their own land. During the preparations for their own feast, they were joined for several months by whole households of relatives from other clan places. Across all these years many people of the Dambol households also alternated between the Dambol clan place and a house they maintained in Yaniruma village a couple of hours distant.

Idiosyncratic in its particulars, this small sequence of residential comings-and-goings at the Dambol place over a few years is nonetheless typical of the fitful quickness with which many Korowai persons' dwelling arrangements change from one time of life to the next. At least as remarkable, though, is the quickness with which Korowai also move from one house to the next on a day-to-day basis. In 2002 I met a newly married man whom I had known well on first coming to the Korowai area in 1995 but had not seen again in the intervening years. When I asked, “What are you doing these days?” his simple answer was, “Going back and forth.” He was referring to his and his wife's movements between a village house, another house at his own clan place about five miles north of the village, and still another house on the land of some relatives of another clan. In describing travel as his main life activity, the man could have been speaking for numerous other people who reside in several households at once. For example, some mother-daughter pairs shuttle back and forth together between houses on the clan places of their respective husbands. Many unmarried young men are constantly on the move. Even families or other networks of people who live fairly continuously on one clan place will often have more than one dwelling that they currently occupy at different localities on that place. Almost all people shift sleeping places at least once every five days or so, whether as a temporary visit to others' houses or as a residential alternation to a different house of their own. A house that is completely empty one night might see the arrival of a young married couple and their child, then the following night shelter twenty of their kin, and then a night later be home to just the main couple and a few close relatives. Korowai houses, and the clan territories on which they stand, are spaces of arrival and departure as much as staying. In one telling idiom, people sometimes refer to their clan places as their gix
“harbor,” meaning a place on the land they come back to between times away elsewhere, much as a canoe is regularly beached at rest at a specific site on a riverbank between waterborne trips. Korowai experience the idea of landownership not only through living on their land at a given time but also through traveling to or from the land, through memories and expectations of visiting the land or dwelling on it, through turning over in conversation or in bodily practice the possibility of living away from owned land through forming ties to places not previously their own, through making nonowners feel at home, or through otherwise straddling different sides of an ownership boundary. The landownership institution leads people to feel at home when dwelling and moving on certain stretches of territory, but the crossing of ownership boundaries is integral to people’s experience of their lives as organized around land-focused belonging.

A last broad way that I want to mention in which land-focused belonging is relational to its alternatives is that the definition of what land counts as a person’s own is also fluid and a matter of contingent processes of persuasion and alignment. For example, clans with adjacent territories sometimes define themselves as having “the same place” (boliup-lelip), but in other contexts they spell out their distinct territories. A small episode, again from the Dambol households, tellingly illustrates the context dependency of owner standing. Across his adult life Silom stood in a relation of reciprocal hospitality with a man of another clan named Bolum, the brother of Silom’s deceased first wife. In 2001, when Silom was still living, Bolum became a target of angry compensation demands on the part of a youth of another clan because the youth had wanted to marry one of Bolum’s daughters, but the woman married someone else. The Dambol houses stood close to the Dambol place’s border with the youth’s place, and the youth’s clan and Dambol are often said to share “the same place” on the basis of being neighboring clans. One afternoon when the youth was in Silom’s house, Bolum and his family arrived for a visit. The youth left the house in silent rage and from another house sent demands for compensation. In response Bolum and his family left for their own place, despite the house owner Silom’s objections and reassurances. Later, overhearing reports of the youth’s statement that Bolum should not travel on his place until he paid him, Silom wryly retorted to the absent youth, “This is not your place. Your place is downstream.” The youth claimed an expansive definition of his “place.” Behind the youth’s back, Silom affirmed a more restricted threshold of ownership. Here, as in many other situations, owner status
arises most clearly in encounters between people who belong more and people who belong less, on a spectrum of possible states of identification and estrangement in relation to land.

**SOCIETY AS A FIELD OF OTHERNESS:**
**EGALITARIANISM AND BOUNDARY CROSSING**

The pattern that a life structured around land-focused belonging is also structured around estrangement is even clearer when we move more fully from trying to consider the relation between owners and land in artificial isolation to giving central attention to relations between different people across the landscape. One of my points in looking at this level of the interlocal landownership institution is to document that Korowai dominantly experience society as a field of otherness. People imagine their social world as consisting of a population of strangers, they experience specific relations as built mainly around qualities of otherness, and they locate different relations by how they compare to each other on measures of nearness versus distance. My additional goal, though, is to show that in this field of otherness distance and edginess are connective as well as separative. Korowai understand boundaries of interlocal otherness to imply and demand engagement between people separated by these boundaries.

Korowai experience their world as a field of otherness on many dimensions, but space is an especially prominent one. One reflection of people’s imagining their social world to be a field of otherness is the frequency with which they use words meaning “other” and “stranger” (or their opposites) to talk about their social relations. Korowai routinely describe specific persons in their lives as “other, strange” (yani) to themselves or as “together, identical, unitary” (lelip) with themselves, and they frequently refer to specific “strangers” (yani-yanop) or as “intimates, together people, associates” (lelip-anop). Intimates and strangers are the categories that matter in Korowai reckonings of where they stand in the social world. But people often specifically portray social unity or strangeness as a matter of geography. The words yani-bolüp-anop “person of another place” and laxinga-anop “faraway person” are commonly used synonyms for “stranger,” while bolüp-lelip-anop “same place people” is a common synonym for “together people.”

Before turning to the role of landownership in organizing people’s world as a field of otherness, I want to offer three simpler illustrations, from domains other than ownership, of the general kinds of points I will
be making in that discussion. The first illustration is the statement “Upstreamers are angry” (*kolufo xenga*), which is one formulaic item in a wider range of common Korowai turns of speech describing the world as populated by hostile strangers. The statement is typical in portraying the world as populated specifically by geographic others. “Upstreamers” (*kolufo*) live distantly east or northeast from the speaker, higher up the courses of the region’s two rivers. People assert the stereotype of angry upstreamers when explaining those others’ past violent actions or when urging relatives to avoid contact with them. Tellingly, the cliché centers on a shifter. Persons described as “upstreamers” by someone else will themselves deny that they are upstreamers and instead use the same term (*kolufo*) to refer to people still farther upstream. Being “angry” is similarly here a shifting attribute of people who are geographically strange to the position of a given speaker. The stereotype of angry upstreamers is also typical in the way it blends multiple modes of otherness. The cliché describes upstreamers as epistemologically strange by portraying them as indefinite, generic people on the speaker’s outer horizons. “Angry” also means “violent, hostile, fierce, sharp, wicked,” and it describes both an emotion and a quality of action and demeanor: for Korowai, “anger” is what people do, not an interior state removed from activity. Thus the cliché portrays upstreamers as culturally and interactionally strange: their character is that they act violently and unreasonably. The statement also asserts political otherness: cooperating socially with upstreamers as equals is impossible. This kind of bundling together of geography, emotion, knowledge, interactional morality, culture, and power is a major feature of Korowai experience of spatial otherness.

The two other illustrations of the pattern of geographic otherness highlight the tendency for otherness to be connective. One is a pattern of fighting. A feature of persons’ sense that they are surrounded by a world of hostile strangers is that even antagonism is a relation. People are engrossed by connections to enemies and by their own sense of living on an overall landscape of unreliable others. As an idiom of negative relations, “anger” often involves intense relational engagement. Persons locked in conflict over theft, killing, or marriage sometimes proceed by the commonly felt compulsion to transform their antagonism into a positive relation through sequences of demand, payment, and sharing. This is the “reciprocity” in what Sahlins (*1972 [1965]*) termed “negative reciprocity.” Even murders may lead to marriages that join together as mutually supportive kin people who were bitter enemies only months before. A minor event from my own experience was typical of the posi-
tive potentials of enmity. In 2002, a man sought me out to say I should sleep in his house, rather than someone else’s, when I came to the area where he lived. He said I should do so because some years earlier he had expressed anger at me and his nephew for coming to his land, when we mistakenly thought I was welcome there. He cited the earlier interaction as a history that joined us more strongly than I was linked to other people in his vicinity. The overall pattern of seeing conflict as relational exemplifies the way that Korowai take social connection and estrangement to be correlates rather than opposites.

A pattern of ethnic self-designation similarly illustrates how belonging in a place and involvement with strange peripheries are two sides of a coin. The geographic extent of the Korowai dialect chain exceeds any speaker’s own travel experiences, and stable social categories larger than patriclans are not prominent in people’s talk. Yet Korowai do sometimes speak of themselves as an overall category of humans, in contrast to other people. One ethnic self-designation is *kolufo*, which also means “upstreamer” and which is the source of the internationally known name *Korowai*. The term’s use as an ethnic self-designation probably derives from its more basic use as an other-designating shifter. This association of the meanings “upstreamer” and “Korowai people” in one word is symptomatic of the importance of perspectival relations between self and distant other in Korowai understandings of who they are (cf. LeRoy 1985: 28–29; Welsch 1994: 88–90). The more common Korowai self-designation, though, is *bolü-anop* “place people.” This word is ordinarily used as a synonym for *bolüp giom-anop* “place owners,” in the sense of owners of a clan territory. Its use as an ethnic self-designation is based on a larger-scale sense of “place.” Drawing a contrast with lands of non-Korowai people, speakers refer to the totality of Korowai lands as “the Korowai place” (*kolufo-bolüp*). The ethnic self-designation *bolü-anop* “place people, place owners” is based on a model of the tight linking of language, land, and category of human being (Stasch 2007). A language and a category of people are both territorial entities. Asked why they call themselves “place people,” Korowai often say it is because they all speak the Korowai language (“place language,” *bolü-an-aup*), as if this fact of linguistic affiliation is reason enough for the land-focused ethnonym.

Speakers also say that the “place people” designation is based on being surrounded by peripheral strangers. Korowai regularly answered my questions about the ethnonym’s rationale by noting that they live midway between other people and locations: between two neighboring
ethnolinguistic populations, two bounding rivers, or two faraway cities. As one woman said about the designation, “It’s because at the margins are people of other languages.” In this understanding, to be defined by the land one owns is to live between other places to which one is marginal. People sometimes refer to a clan-owned territory as *nangaïmngai* “my boundaries, limits, margins.” A person’s clan place is the person’s “limits.” Belonging in relation to places involves mindfulness regarding surrounding peripheries that are not one’s own but that are part of one’s world.

Landownership is perhaps the single biggest cultural force making Korowai experience of social strangeness strongly geography focused and geography organized. Landownership spatializes social and ethical life. It does so by defining persons by their places, by making the divide between owners and nonowners salient across all action, and by organizing the geographic dispersion that is such a consequential feature of people’s everyday social experience. In my fieldwork activities I was highly aware of *not being in the presence* of the society I was involved with. I lived only in the western Korowai lands, staying most of the time with single or paired small households. The narrow spatial horizons to what I was directly hearing or seeing at a given time are among the reasons that this book is an intrinsically partial, provisional effort. Yet in often learning about events, people, and practices at second hand, I experienced the dispersed social landscape in many of the same ways Korowai do. The book in this sense takes as its subject the ways in which separation-based uncertainty and partiality of knowledge are a routine concern of people’s lives and an integral feature of social bonds.

The institution of landownership structures people’s social world as a geographic field of otherness on many dimensions. For example, owners are very much connected to their land as a “territory of knowledge” (Århem 1998). They know their land’s features, the names of its streams, and the histories of its use. The strangeness of other people’s places rests in part in lack of knowledge of that land. People’s situations of specifically epistemological belonging and estrangement in relation to the heterogeneous landscape stood out most obviously to me when I traveled with Korowai from one place to another. Here is one excerpt from my notes after walking a long distance with four men who were themselves from different regions of the landscape and had different backgrounds of geographic knowledge:

One lesson of the day was the intensity of the question of knowledge of pathways and the differentiatedness of the landscape in the form of path-
ways and features along them. All along there were shifts among our group in which persons were familiar with local pathways, and lots of collective discussion of uncertainty about pathways. We cooked lunch 1:00–2:30 across Mabül stream from the house of a Sendex man, and he showed us the path onward for a ways. Then when he stopped to return to his house, he gave us detailed descriptions of pathway features for the next couple miles. A lot of mention of species of “trunks” [i.e., standing trees] that our path would pass at specific transition points, such as hardwood or palm species. Also a *balep-siop* [pounded-out end of a thorned sago log] that we did in fact walk over. There were many times when we wondered if we had taken a wrong turn.

Another common event is for a traveler to ask a more knowledgeable companion about whether people in the area swim in or drink from specific streams or whether these streams are off-limits due to being “taboo sites” (*wotop*). People’s lack of knowledge of areas of the landscape where they are not owners is intertwined with their emotional, political, and physical wariness of those places.

To make concrete the point that landownership is particularly responsible for the strongly spatial cast of Korowai social life, I turn now to a sketch of the ways in which landownership works as a system of specifically political otherness: ways, in other words, in which landownership saturates social space with concerns of equality, autonomy, dependency, and subjection. My goal is to show how people’s involvement with local spaces of belonging is implicated in a larger system of interlocal social relating and how that larger interlocal system is implicated in local spaces of belonging. The point I develop here is in this way parallel to my point about the “place people” ethnonym. Landownership is a particular organization of involvement with alien peripheries, not merely a way to have a home.

To specify what I mean by “political otherness,” I need to make explicit how landownership stands in fundamental contradiction to a similarly taken-for-granted feature of Korowai people’s lives, egalitarianism. Korowai egalitarianism consists of aversion to anyone controlling others’ actions by authoritarian domination and discomfort with anyone being wealthier or better than others. Social relations are felt to be valuable and livable only to the extent that the participants are equals. Prominent patterns of egalitarianism in Korowai social practice include that there are no indigenous long-term leadership offices; that any accumulation of wealth is usually quickly dispersed, under pressure of requests and demands; that a relation in which people’s material gifts are reciprocal and commensurate is felt to be satisfying while asymmetry...
(xolodoptanux “one way only”) is annoying and immoral; that acquaintances interrupt each other or take conversational turns with little regard for hierarchies of age, kinship, or gender; and that adults try to influence children by persuasion rather than command. Perhaps most significantly, Korowai models of personhood emphasize political autonomy. One common autonomy-asserting statement is, “He has his own mind” or “She has her own mind,” which speakers utter when asked to explain or predict another person’s actions. The statement is a blunt disavowal of the power to know other people’s motives and of the power to control their decisions (Stasch 2008a).

Korowai egalitarianism does not mean that people’s lives are free of inequality but only that inequality is a problem to them. Egalitarianism is here a partial and contradictory social principle, generating complex and troubled social experience, including acts of bodily violence, theft, and coercion. Such acts often follow from shortcomings of egalitarian recognition of others’ autonomy as a path for fostering social coordination. People’s desires toward others (e.g., their desires for others’ possessions, or for others’ cooperation and intimacy) can regularly exceed their actual influence on those others so acutely that someone commits a deeply inegalitarian act.

In this broader context landownership both solves and creates problems of egalitarian living. Ownership puts people on an equal, autonomous footing by giving them independent resource bases, as is emphasized by people’s “social buffer” explanations of the institution. Yet landownership is also exclusionary. In relation to any part of the landscape, some people are owners and others are not (Hallowell 1955: 239; Rigsby 1998: 23). As egalitarians, Korowai are acutely sensitive to the asymmetry between owners and nonowners. Owners’ prerogatives in relation to land are generally not discussed as a highly codified, explicit body of rules but are immanent in people’s constant sensitivity to who has owner standing, to whether owners are being appropriately recognized and deferred to by others, and to whether nonowners are doing anything that makes them vulnerable to being reminded out loud of their lack of standing. Telling someone he is “not an owner” in relation to the place where he stands or sits is an extreme breach of decorum, but it regularly occurs in disputes. Even in the absence of open conflict, contradictions between landownership and egalitarianism are felt in day-to-day interaction.

Keeping away from other people’s places is one method for coexisting under these conditions. If a relation violates egalitarianism Korowai
often physically stay clear of that relation. They avoid other people’s power by avoiding their land. Sensitivity about owners’ power supports a tendency for people who live far apart to be mutually fearful strangers and for people who live on shared or neighboring places to be moral and emotional “together people.” Their relatively equal mutual standing across their histories of interaction helps them to be comfortable in each other’s presence.

Yet boundaries of ownership difference also work as boundaries of contact. Different people own different places, but they hold in common similar concepts of “place” and “owner.” The collective stake in ownership principles is exemplified by the pattern that other nonowning people sometimes exhort owners to act as they should in relation to their land. Bystanders might, for example, make a rhetorical case that absent landowners should return to their place and put on a feast that surrounding people will attend as guests. To have a land base is to be engaged also with the perspective of other people and to build up an intersubjective reciprocity of perspectives in which one’s own standing and actions as landowner depend on the understandings and actions of those others (cf. Robbins 2003). The same institution both locates persons as belonging to specific places and locates them as living on a wider landscape of owned places to which they do not belong. Separate living is one face of people’s lives, but ownership boundaries also set the terms of people’s intense interactional and mental contact across geographic distances and across asymmetries of belonging in relation to place.

OWNERS AND GUESTS

Interaction between hosts and guests is a paradigmatic activity of involvement across ownership boundaries. This is a site where people seize on the connective potentials of political otherness as the very content of their social lives. In this section I look at evidence that Korowai themselves understand host-guest interaction as centered on the interaction’s own contradictions of closeness across political divides and that this is what makes the interaction simultaneously fraught and valued. I look at host-guest interaction here both because of how it makes interactionally concrete some of the points about landownership outlined so far in this chapter and because it is a good entrée to another important aspect of the Korowai landscape I need to introduce in this chapter, the look and feel of houses. Before turning to details of Korowai host-guest encounters, though, I want to clarify in abstract terms the model I am putting forward.
of a “connective” aspect of boundaries of otherness. I do so by drawing
links to two broad theoretical precedents for this model.

The first precedent lies in studies of grammatical shifters (after Silver-
stein 1976). Many linguistic modes of categorizing space, for example,
depend for their meaningfulness on aspects of the context of category
use, such as the bodily position of speakers and addressees, or the posi-
tions of speakers, addressees, and referents in relation to orienting
landforms (Hanks 1990; Levinson 2003). Korowai expressions for
“upstream” and “downstream” are a case in point: whether a referent is
“upstream” or “downstream” depends not only on where the referent is
but also on where it and the speakers are in relation to each other, and in
relation to a waterway that is the deictic ground of the referential act.
Something upstream in one conversation can be downstream in another.

The concepts of place (bolüp) and place-focused belonging are
shifter-like. I earlier compared owning land to having a body. Unlike
direct embodiment-based linguistic shifters, owning land is not a form
of categorization concerned with mere spatial presence and perception,
such as the physical location of people, land, and objects. The referent
a speaker calls “my place” does not change with changes in where the
speaker is standing, at least not as radically and directly as the referent
of “upstream” changes.4 Ownership is a perspectival category less in
the order of physical position and physical perception than in the order
of ontology: not where land and people are in relation to each other but
what they are in relation to each other. Owning land involves a perdur-
ing emotional, moral, political, and epistemological position, the posi-
tion of being at home in relation to the land and being recurrently
present on it over the long run, regardless of whether one is present on
it at a given moment.

The parallel between Korowai landownership and perspective-based
linguistic categories resembles a parallel drawn by Viveiros de Castro
(1998, 2004) in his work on Amerindian cosmological models, accord-
ing to which animals experience the same world as humans do but see
that world differently than humans. Viveiros de Castro compares this
perspective dependency of perceptual experience to kinship terms:

Kinship terms are relational pointers; they belong to the class of nouns that
define something in terms of its relation to something else. . . . Concepts
like fish or tree, on the other hand, are proper, self-contained substantives:
they are applied to an object by virtue of its intrinsic properties. Now, what
seems to be happening in Amerindian perspectivism is that substances
named by substantives like fish, snake, hammock, or beer are somehow
used as if they were relational pointers, something halfway between a noun and a pronoun, a substantive and a deictic. . . . You are a father only because there is another person whose father you are. Fatherhood is a relation, while fishiness is an intrinsic property of fish. In Amerindian perspectivism, however, something is a fish only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is. (2004: 472–73; original emphasis)

In a similar way, a Korowai clan territory is a place of belonging for somebody. Place ownership transposes subjective perspectives into the land. A segment of land is a body-external medium in relation to which persons feel particular familiarity and compatibility.

Benveniste (1971 [1956]), in his famous analysis of first- and second-person referring forms like the pronouns I and you, emphasized that these forms encode aspects of a situation of language use. Like other shifters, they depend for their meaning on perspectival aspects of a specific event of language use, and they are thus an indissoluble unity of langue and parole (in the terms of Saussure’s unsustainable distinction). Benveniste emphasized further that in this way pronominal forms are points of integration between the perspectival experiences of different people and between personal perspectives and linguistic code generally (1971 [1958]: 224–25). One aspect of this is what Rumsey (2003) terms “perspective swapping”: in occupying the alternating positions of “I” and “you” in the course of a conversation, a person is in contact with other people’s experience of the same perspectival positions. This pattern of joining of otherness and contact stands out even more vividly in Viveiros de Castro’s above-noted adaptation of the model of linguistic shifters to Amerindian cosmological thought. In his account the whole force of the Amerindian cosmological models lies in their relativization of the position of humans. Here, to occupy a perspectival home is also to be densely involved with other perspectives strange to oneself. A perspective consists of what is peripheral to a being, not just the being’s familiar place for looking outward at peripheral horizons.

The image of society as a field of otherness has often been summarized by anthropologists diagrammatically, in the form of a series of concentric circles that represent degrees of social distance outward from a perspectival center (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940; Middleton 1960: 238; Sahlins 1972 [1965]; Århem 1981b: 71; Taylor 1985: 168). These diagrams describe the remarkable fact that in some human communities a spectrum of increasing strangeness is some people’s primary image of what society is. This contrasts with images of a unitary social totality or a commanding social center held by people whose lives are organized
around state regimes. However, it is easy to read concentric-circle dia-
grams as implying that strangers and estrangement are less important to
people's lives than are familiar and familiarity. This would be a serious
mistake (Viveiros de Castro 2001: 25, 30, 41 n. 14). The effect of per-
spectival cultural forms—like Amerindian beliefs about animals, or the
Korowai concept of an owned place—is above all to organize social
experience in otherness-charged terms. The image of a spectrum of
degrees of estrangement, as the definition of society, construes all social
relations in that field (wherever they lie on the spectrum) as relations of
strangeness. Otherness is the defining metric of the social field. Korowai
landownership, at least, puts at the center of social life a model of per-
sons in perspectivally situated positions engaging with the alterity of
what lies on their surrounding peripheries.

A second theoretical tradition that offers an orientation to the model
of Korowai landownership I am forwarding is Simmel's frequent pattern
of describing human social relations as a unity of opposite qualities. In a
newspaper article titled "Bridge and Door," for example, Simmel takes
as his subject the activities of "separating" and "connecting":

One of these activities is always the presupposition of the other. By choos-
ing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to des-
ignate them as "separate," we have already related them to one another in
our consciousness, we have emphasized these two together against what-
ever lies between them. And conversely, we can only sense those things to
be related which we have previously somehow isolated from one another;
things must first be separated from one another in order to be together.
Practically as well as logically, it would be meaningless to connect that
which was not separated, and indeed that which also remains separated in
some sense. The formula according to which both types of activity come
together in human undertakings, whether the connectedness or the separa-
tion is felt to be what was naturally ordained and the respective alternative
is felt to be our task, is something which can guide all our activity. In the
immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intel-
lectual sense, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or

Elsewhere, Simmel develops similar claims in an idiom of "boundaries." He
writes that humans live between boundaries, that we know ourselves
by boundaries, and that "we are boundaries" (1971 [1918]: 353, origi-
nal emphasis). He asserts that knowledge of oneself as bounded crucially
involves knowledge of what is beyond one's boundaries: "For only who-
ever stands outside his boundary in some sense knows that he stands
within it, that is, knows it as a boundary" (p. 355). Viveiros de Castro's
account of Amerindian perspectivism describes a structure of this kind: the boundary between humans and animals is a boundary of extreme otherness, but it is also a boundary that puts humans in close engagement with the otherness of the beings from whom they are separated.

In a broadly comparable way, Korowai landownership organizes people’s mutual separateness but is also a particular organization of the terms of their contact. Margins of otherness are subjects of people’s practical acts and forms in which people’s practical acts unfold. It is in the nature of boundaries as Korowai understand them that possibilities of involvement with what is across a boundary are part of that boundary itself.6

The idea of boundaries having the double quality of being separative and connective can also be put in a language of “crossing.” Boundary crossing is an apt image because it suggests the idea of a person engaged in practical action of movement, oriented reflexively toward the margins he or she lives within and across. The social landscape I describe in this chapter is a space of boundaries and boundary crossings. People cross conceptual margins in actual concrete events of bodily movement. They also cross these margins linguistically and intellectually, even when not crossing them in body. For Korowai, “To practice space is . . . to be other and to move toward the other” (Certeau 1984: 110, original emphasis).7

Interaction between hosts and guests is an area where we can see crossing of ownership boundaries lived out practically. This interaction exemplifies how Korowai systematically join together qualities of otherness and close involvement as the positive substance of social bonds. The category “guest” is very prominent in the day-to-day politics of spatial life. In speech, “owner” (giomanop) and “guest” (xuolanop) are paradigmatically contrastive reciprocals. These roles are usually defined in relation to a house. Korowai speak of “house owners” (xaim giomanop) almost as much as they speak of “place owners” (boliıp giomanop). Persons who build a house are by definition its owners. Coreident spouses, children, parents, siblings, or other close relatives of builders are also readily categorized as owners, even if they did not help with construction. At least one of the focal adult owners of a house is typically also an owner of the place on which the house stands. Houses are smaller, denser sites of the same questions of belonging and estrangement posed by landownership on a broader spatial scale. Being a house owner involves being politically and sensuously at home in a space, as well as at home with others sharing that space. Guests are nonowners of a house who are in it temporarily.8 Approaching house space initially through the “guest” category, we can appreciate how
strongly houses are charged with questions of boundaries, belonging, and people’s mutual involvement across separations.

“Guest” is a paradoxical category describing a category mismatch—the presence in a space of belonging of someone who does not belong there. Visiting and hospitality are avid Korowai pursuits. People embrace the collisions and reconfigurations of mismatched categories that arise in visits. They travel across the land to visit others for many different reasons, all generally involving the desire for engagement with unfamiliar lives. Often people visit to pass on news, express opinions, or make plans. Guests might come to talk about a death, a work party, or a marital intrigue. People who live separately are highly aware that they do not know what others elsewhere are thinking, doing, or saying. There is thus a basic link between mobility and talk. People also visit to trade, to give or receive gifts or payments, and to seek the services of healers or other specialists. Korowai frequently explain travel in terms of curiosity to see new people and places. Above all, people travel to be with relatives, despite residential separation: as one man put it in explaining his presence to house owners soon after arrival, “I have not carried words [i.e., a specific political controversy]. I just wanted to come so we could chat together, and then I’ll go.”

The tenor of interaction between visitors and owners varies according to their relational history. Some guests are well known to house people; others are more alien to a household they visit. Yet almost all host-guest encounters are systematically contradictory in their interactional logic. One reflection of Korowai people’s egalitarianism and their deep valuing of social connection as an intrinsic good is that people take mere physical copresence as a social state of some consequence. Korowai usually feel that it is extremely important to be interpersonally polite and harmonious. In a situation of host-guest encounter, two sets of people are in each other’s presence, and this alone creates and confirms a sense of connection between them. But their presence to each other also focuses attention on their mutual strangeness.

Guests’ presence is an interruption in the time that housemates are steadily at home together and separate from others. When guests describe their presence somewhere as “transitory” (laux), they are highlighting that their time there is not self-contained but part of a trajectory of movement. The time is a marked period, when they are beyond boundaries that they will cross back over on return to a place where they are not transitory. Visits also have a temporal quality of unexpectedness. Often owners do not know visitors are coming until they hear
them singing or whistling as they approach; this is a deliberate way to dispel any air of furtiveness. (Korowai men and women sing, or call out musically, a great deal across many different contexts of daily life, both for aesthetic motives and as a way to publicize their presence and position amid the dense vegetation of the forest.) House people might even learn of guests’ arrival only on seeing them enter the house clearing or seeing them rise into view already on the house’s veranda. Owners now often place a tin can upside down on the pointed top of their house’s ladder so the can will clatter lightly when someone is ascending the pole. Symptomatic of owners’ valuing of guests’ visits and their reflexivity about their lack of foreknowledge of visits, they often wonder spontaneously whether guests might be coming, and they interpret certain bird calls and dream events as omens of strangers’ arrival. In one convention dreaming of a domestic pig portends arrival of guests from nearby, whereas dreaming of a wild pig portends the arrival of guests from far away. This is typical of the way otherness is the crux of host-guest relations: animality and wildness are here figures of successive degrees of social distance and interactional riskiness.

The mismatch of proximity and distance that guests embody is highly visible in the interactional tensions surrounding guests’ entrance into domestic space. House owners express and address this tension by falling silent, particularly when the guests who have arrived are not routine daily visitors. If owners talk at all they only talk quietly among themselves about other topics, even though they are usually curious about why the guests have come. It is up to the guests to initiate conversation and give news. Guests often wait some minutes before doing so. Meanwhile, house owners speak through their food stores and hearths. They hasten to roast sago and press it on the guests, or they give the guests other food on hand. Sometimes owners’ passing of food to guests is the first positive sign by which the parties acknowledge each other’s presence.

In these sensitive transitional interactions, Korowai confront contradictions between egalitarianism and the prerogatives of ownership. By not speaking first and not remarking on the guests’ arrival, owners defer to guests’ autonomy. Travel is motivated by the intentions of guests themselves, and owners do not obstruct or dictate what guests are doing. During the entire course of a visit, owners do not speak about whether guests will stay overnight (not even to invite them to do so), because it is not the owners’ place to determine what guests will do. The interactional stakes are high in the first place, though, because owners
do have the prerogative to determine what goes on in their houses. Guests put themselves in a position of vulnerability by entering a space where they do not belong. They worry about their status there. Together, guests and owners tiptoe around the asymmetry between them. People avoid traveling to houses of marked strangers, out of a deep fear of feeling socially out of place and being directly or indirectly rebuked for their presence. Most people describe themselves as having few regular travel destinations. Even when visiting houses of close relatives, guests do not take for granted where they stand with the house people. Welcoming silence is the best way owners can avoid any hint of impinging on guests in this situation of vulnerability. Occasionally an owner does tell a newly arrived guest not to come to his or her house, prompting the guest to leave. This is an extraordinary breach of decorum and occurs only rarely, when travelers badly misjudge the state of their social relations. That it does occur testifies to insecurities beneath the respectful silence normally prompted by guests’ sudden arrival (cf. Shryock 2004: 37 and citations there). People let bodily copresence and expectant silence get them through the initial mismatch between guests and house space.

By giving food, house owners extend to guests forms of caring typical of domestic intimacy. A house is in major part the cooking and eating that goes on in it. Between owners and guests, as between housemates, giving and sharing of cooked food are practices of making close contact with one another’s subjectivities by providing bodily sustenance and pleasure. Often guests are presented with a comical flood of roasted sago cakes and other snacks offered by the various house occupants. When a traveling party is large, owners work efficiently at roasting batch after batch of food to feed all visitors. Through bodily gestures and halting verbal interjections, guests express surprise and reluctance about the gifts pressed on them. In part the force of this giving follows from the fact that guests are weary and hungry from hard walking, if they have come far. Travelers endure fatigue, foot wounds, chilling rain, mud, dangerous stream crossings, confusing paths, and uncertainty about whether they will reach shelter by nightfall. By giving travelers food, owners answer to guests’ dependence on others for bodily help and partially recategorize the new arrivals from intruders to persons who belong. The more plentiful the gifts, the more delight the givers are expressing. If house owners do not move to prepare sago at all, this is taken as an overt statement that the owners do not want the guests in their house. Such a sequence of events is again a rare, severe breach of
social amity but does occur. To ward off an extreme social rupture, owners who do not have food on hand or who do not want to share what they have hidden away are careful to tell guests apologetically that they entirely lack sago.

A convention of leave-taking also makes visible the contradictions in guests’ presence. It is another mark of Korowai egalitarianism and extreme sensitivity to acts of boundary-crossing demands on other people that in Korowai discourse there are no routine verbal greetings (akin to English “Hello,” “Good morning,” or “How are you?”) and no conventional valedictions uttered on parting. People navigate transitions of copresence silently or by nonritualized conversational openings. When guests leave a house they often do so in nonchalant silence, similar to the silence of arrival. However, there is one regular conversational routine that guests and owners often perform when parting after a long visit. The departing guests say that the house people are going to fall ill. The house owners deny they will fall ill and in turn suggest that the guests will get sick. This the guests also deny, and walk away. The logic here parallels health-focused valedictions cross-culturally, such as “Take care!” or “Drive carefully!” except that Korowai express concern for others through worry about what will befall them rather than through exhorting them to be well. They count on the other party to complete the conversation with a reassuring denial. To explain these parting conversations, people say that sharing domestic space with residential strangers is medically dangerous. One concern is that when strangers sleep overnight together, the house owners or guests might be invisibly assaulted by a male witch among the other people. But there is a more general range of ways in which people think it is possible to get sick by being too much in the company of residential strangers. Even when no one is showing signs of illness, Korowai are sensitive to the potential that someone in a visiting or hosting party could later fall ill and die. Following such a death, the person’s relatives would scan the deceased’s recent history of interaction with strangers for possible causes of the sickness. These relatives could retrospectively read silence at a time of parting as a sign of malice and blame the silent people for the death. By speaking up about fears of future sickness, guests and owners express care for each other.

Rituals of transition reflect anxieties that are felt over the whole time that mutually unfamiliar people share domestic space. Throughout visits, guests strike poses of restraint that signal worry over the space, food, and attention they are taking up. They even voice aloud their concerns about whether owners want them there. For example, at a house where
I was once staying, a nephew of two owners showed up one morning to retrieve a steel ax he had accidentally left behind the day before. The house residents were butchering a wild pig, and they enthusiastically brought the visitor into their activities. Some time into his visit, the nephew mused aloud that he had been anxious about coming, because guests are not supposed to come day after day but should only visit once in a while. His hosts assured him they were not thinking this at all.

There is much more to say about variations in how at ease different guests and owners put each other through conversation, food-sharing, and other media. Here I have only sought to make clear that people’s interactions in host-guest encounters are highly reflexive: the focus of these interactions is the interacting people’s own ambiguous relational standing with each other. Participants carefully scan the interactional signs for messages about that relational standing. This reflexive sensitivity is fueled by the double quality of host-guest interaction, in which people recognize each other as sharers of an intimate space while also marking each other’s strangeness and the guests’ lack of ownership status. In hospitality, Korowai create unstable but pleasurable structures of belonging and togetherness of a transient kind, across disparities of ownership.

I have focused on interaction within the time of a single encounter, but Korowai also evaluate visiting as something done repetitively. A visit has histories and futures of other visits. People take reciprocity of visiting, in particular, as a measure of the quality of relatives’ bonds. A pattern of mutually entering each other’s houses creates egalitarian relatedness across inequitable ownership divides. Across cycles of reciprocal visiting, persons alternate their roles as powerful “owner” and vulnerable “guest,” like the shifting adoption of roles of “I” and “you” in a conversation. Whether existing stably across reciprocal visits or in a more emergent way during one encounter, though, the force of a bond between people of different places rests in the risks and vulnerabilities they overcome together by relating across the spatial and ownership divide between them.

CONNECTION AND SEPARATION IN PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF HOUSES

The physical features of Korowai houses also illustrate how a quality of belonging is a central concern of Korowai people’s spatial lives, densely intertwined with their concern with boundaries of otherness. Forms of bodily copresence and sharing that prototypically occur in house space
are basic to Korowai experience of being “together” (*lelip*). In houses people do most of the resting, sleeping, cooking, eating, healing, and talking of their lives. These are activities that depend on and create feelings of belonging. People carefully plan their movements so they will never stay in a house alone, even for a single night, a hint of how thoroughly houses are defined as spaces of shared living. Yet while dwellings signify and foster closeness, there are numerous ways in which close connections between persons in houses are based on boundaries of otherness and on houses’ links to what lies beyond them. Dwellings can be read in much the same way Simmel reads doors, in the essay from which I earlier quoted. A house is an ambivalent “boundary point” (Simmel 1997 [1909]: 172) of simultaneous isolation from surrounding spaces and integration with them, and a boundary point of simultaneous belonging and estrangement between persons.

Forms of belonging felt in domestic space, besides being shaped and organized by the social boundaries between those who are owners and those who are not, are also organized by the tangible, visible boundaries built into houses. The most obvious of these is the severe architectural separateness of houses from the surrounding world. Korowai build dwellings in many shapes and sizes, but the variations fall into two categories. A *xaim* stands high above the ground, supported by topped tree trunks. A *xaii* stands at ground level with the earth as its floor, or it is built a bit above the ground, atop a felled log. About two-thirds of dwellings are of the high type, and people generally regard high houses as superior to ground-level ones. Vegetal materials out of which houses are built dry quickly, so houses stand out sharply as brown bodies against the green of gardens and forest. To build a high house, people select a patch of forest with one or more good standing trees available as a foundation, build scaffolds, top all trees within the house’s planned outline, add extra posts, build the floor platform at the level of the topped tree trunks, and then build walls and a roof on this base. Men usually do the work of assembling house parts, but women often undertake some of the heavy labor of gathering materials.

The height of Korowai houses is extraordinary. Extending into the present, the colonial promotion of “treehouse” photographs as iconic of New Guinea people and their supposed primitiveness (Quanchi 1994: 112–30; 1999), travelers to the Korowai area have seized on tall houses as objects of particular desire and fascination. Tour guides and mass media professionals often portray single, spectacularly tall structures, up to a hundred feet aboveground, as representative (e.g., Steinmetz 1996),
but these houses are unusual. They are now typically built by youths for clubhouse camaraderie or for tourism income but not for use as living spaces, because they are hard to enter and are quickly blown apart by wind. However, Korowai do take moderate heights of about fifteen feet aboveground as a normal feature of domestic life. Tellingly, a single verb means both “climb” and “enter,” and the “climb” meaning is more basic. To enter is by definition to climb.

Korowai are well aware that elevated houses are harder to build than ground-level ones and that living in them on a day-to-day basis is laborious. As I noted in the introduction, people’s greatest motive for living high above ground is the fear that otherwise they will be attacked by two kinds of monsters: the demonic dead (*laleo*) who prowl about as walking corpses in search of reunion with their relatives and male “witches” (*xaxua*) in the Korowai population who compulsively and invisibly eat other people’s bodies, causing all deaths. Korowai are acutely anxious about these monsters’ presence in their lives. A good indication of the monsters’ day-to-day prominence is house elevation itself. All across the land the physical height of houses is a direct expression of people’s fear of the demons humans become after dying and the witches who cause humans to die.

In Korowai understanding, house space thus materially embodies not just questions of mutual political impingement but also questions of life and death. In chapter 6 I detail how ideas about demons are exemplary of Korowai cultural concern with alterity as a focus of social life. Here I only wish to make the basic point that *separation* is the goal of house architecture. People live high above the ground in an effort to draw a boundary between domestic space and beings connected with death. As with other projects of separation, this height marks the centrality of feared others to people’s domestic lives as much as it keeps those others out.

House height also creates *sensory* qualities of separation. To enter and exit houses, people climb notched poles hung from one or both of a dwelling’s ends. The poles are not fixed at the bottom, and owners often swing a pole’s base to one side and tie it off when they leave their house so as to discourage others from entering. During a night of unusual fears, house occupants can tie back the top of their entry pole, leaving the ladder’s base suspended beyond the reach of anyone on the ground. But in a more constant way, the vertical climb into a high house strengthens the sense of separation between domestic space and the world, more powerfully than a horizontal transition can do. Seen from the edge of a clearing or from another house in the same garden, domes-
tic space has a quality of stagelike flotation, at a remove from what is beneath and behind it. To clamber up into someone’s house is to enter a space apart from the surrounding land. The moment when a person’s head and then body rise above floor level at a house’s end is visually dramatic, for the climber as for anyone inside.

Figure 4. Sel Nambul carrying the carcass of a domestic pig into a house, 2001.
Clearings around houses also foster a sense of separation. They range from ten to one hundred yards across, and their openness and brightness contrasts with the close visual horizons that surround people almost everywhere else on the land. People open clearings in order to grow bananas and other foods, as well as to be able to view the land, the forest wall, and the sky. People often site houses so that a stand of a specific very tall, slender palm species will be at the clearing’s edge because they appreciate looking across and up at the swaying fronds of these palms. Korowai also associate visual openness with security. They push back the forest margin to make it difficult for witches, demons, or human prowlers (gawaanop) to approach houses furtively. The physical openness of a clearing, like house height, concretely indexes people’s perception that their world is populated by hostile others.

These gestures of separation from the surrounding world support the forms of social closeness that occur inside houses. House height, clearings, and the distance between houses throw housemates’ domestic intimacy into contrastive relief and free housemates from the presence of more people, allowing them to give their food and attention to each other. Yet domestic enclosures are also systematically permeable to the
surrounding world. Houses have ladders and doorways, and clearings have paths leading into surrounding forest. House residents themselves climb in and out of dwellings repeatedly in their daily rounds of looking for food, attending to their bodies, gathering water and wood, and traveling to other places. Within a house even close relatives stage questions of separation and contact by keeping their bodies, articles, and food apart, or by running them together.

The internal organization of house space, like the relation between house and surrounding world, is also focused on otherness and boundary crossing. Elevated houses have two roof slopes and a rectangular layout. The roof peak runs along the middle of the house’s length, at a height of eight or nine feet above the floor. High houses vary in size, but the largest are roughly twenty feet wide and thirty feet long. Elevated houses usually have an open or semiopen veranda at one or both gable ends. These outer verandas are divided from a house’s middle chamber by a lateral panel wall, and people enter the internal chamber through doorways where the lateral wall approaches the house’s sidewalls (figure 6). Near these sidewalls the house’s ceiling is at its lowest, so adults must bend down to pass through the doorways. The inside of a house is less bright and breezy than the verandas, and the enclosed interior is also slightly more marked as a space of separate belonging. Unfamiliar visitors to a house sometimes never enter beyond the veranda but remain seated in the outer spaces. Clay hearths in houses’ floors are centers around which people roast food, warm themselves, sleep, and talk. A medium-sized house might have four hearths in the internal chamber and one or two on each veranda.

House space is strongly associated with shared eating. The sight of a house’s ceiling is one indication of how much a house and the social bonds of its residents are defined by the giving, cooking, and consuming of food. Rather than throw bones away, Korowai habitually insert them in the roof thatch of the house in which the animal was eaten. House ceilings are arrayed with mammal and bird bones, turtle shells, carefully reassembled snake vertebrae, and whole fish skeletons. Large bones such as pig skulls, pig leg bones, and cassowary pelvises are often suspended directly over veranda hearths, where they blacken. In this way a house’s interior becomes a museum of the meals eaten there. The longer a house has been dwelled in, the more cluttered the ceiling grows with animal parts, and the blacker it becomes with soot. Looking at a house interior, one sees the duration of residents’ presence there.

Asked why they put meal traces in ceilings, Korowai say it is so “other people will see the prosperity” (yani-yanop folul imoxate).
House occupants understand food bounty as what is “good, prosperous” (folul) in domestic life. They think of guests, or here generically “other people,” as an audience whose reactions of wonder at displayed bones confirm the desirability of that domestic life. This is an example of outsiders being important to housemates’ social closeness—here housemates’ understanding of one another as literal companions, persons who eat together. The difference between veranda and enclosed interior and the difference between those who have eaten an animal meal in a house and those who only see traces of that meal later begin to hint that a house interior is itself subtly composed of internal boundaries, similar to the boundaries between house and surrounding world. The hearths of a house are also sites of complexly orchestrated solidarities and separations. By sharing a hearth or passing food cooked on one hearth to someone elsewhere in a house, people within a house create links of closeness, just as by observing formal or informal commensal separations the residents create qualities of otherness even between persons sharing the same roof.

The most obvious separative boundary within house space is a solid panel wall dividing houses into gendered halves. This “middle wall” (wali omn damon) runs underneath the roof peak, splitting a house’s interior symmetrically into two sides. People give three reasons for the division: men’s fear of contact with menses, the need for mother-in-law and son-in-law pairs to avoid each other’s sight, and concern of house owners to prevent men and women from forming mutual sexual attraction through sight or propositioning each other by touch. In practice, small children and some elders move between the sides with little restraint. Visitors observe the gendering of space more thoroughly than house owners, and men among house residents tend to cross onto women’s sides more readily than the reverse. Particular persons, couples, or households have their own styles of emphasizing or deemphasizing boundaries. Whatever the variations in stringency, this splitting of houses into masculine and feminine halves puts at the center of domestic space a gesture of separation similar to that built into house height and dispersed living. People refer to the two sides of a house as “men’s place” and “women’s place,” using the same word bolun “territory, place” that is more ubiquitously used to speak of clan-owned segments of land. This is a good indication of how the regions of a house are saturated by concerns of belonging centered on gender categories, parallel to saturation of the earth’s regions by concerns of belonging centered on clanship. When owners describe a “middle wall” as intended to block people from
Figure 7. Meal traces tucked in one part of the ceiling of the house of Alemun Yengel and Baxuom Xayaanop. Among the pictured objects are fish skulls, fish skeletons, a pig leg bone, eighty crayfish carapaces, and leaf wrappers in which meals were cooked. The nylon fishing line at middle left has been stretched out for unkinking.
forming sexual desires, they often portray this as an issue of keeping male visitors from trying to initiate affairs with house-dwelling women. Spatial divides of gender within a house are in part transpositions of boundaries between that house and the wider, sexually politicized landscape. But the architectural division also means that even relations between close coresident kin are conducted through the marking of people’s mutual strangeness, especially their otherness of gender.

Thus far, in outlining ways in which the physical features of houses give material form to dialectically intertwined social projects of unity and separateness, I have focused on ways in which a house is a scene of social closeness made out of spatial boundaries and people’s movements across them. Yet these aspects of houses overlap with patterns of house duration, abandonment, and remembrance. In other words, as part of their character as physical structures, houses are also very literally temporal events, composed of a complex set of links to and separations from other times. Houses vividly illustrate the directness with which Korowai spatialize time and see objects as temporal.

A major physical feature of houses is their transience. About a year after they are built, houses begin to sway, leak, and break too much to live in, at which point owners abandon them in favor of new dwellings. Any single house is a transitional phase in its occupants’ orbit from one residence to the next. Thanks to this periodicity, houses are used as units of time reckoning, and they provide the main armature of temporal succession around which people locate other events. Rainfall and other environmental facts are not markedly seasonal, such that Korowai do not make much use of atmospherically based “year” categories in speaking about time. Rather, speakers routinely quantify duration using the unit “house falling apart” (*xaim-demun*, from the infinitive of *demi-* “fall apart”). A length of time is measured by the number of houses that fell apart across it. Similarly, people often say “the time of this house” (*i-xaim-alüp*) to situate an event as contemporary rather than long ago, and they speak of the “era” (*-alüp*) of specific previous houses to locate events historically. Residents remember each house they have lived in by the species name of its main supporting tree. The simplest way I could elicit an ordered account of the births, marriages, deaths, killings, feasts, and other major events that had shaped a certain person’s life was to organize our conversation around the sequence of houses in which he or she had lived. Many adults can list fifty or more houses they have lived in. As they list each house, speakers readily mention the people with whom they shared domestic space and the life-changing transitions that
occurred during their time there. People live the events of their lives as the spaces where those events occurred. A sequence of houses is a geographic memory palace of life events. The metonymic standing of houses as signs of whole times of social relating underscores that houses are foundational scenes of living. The space of a house and the forms of belonging created in it are basic to people’s understanding of what it is to be, historically and socially, in the first place.

Anna Tsing, learning from Meratus people in Kalimantan, similarly collected “swidden biographies,” or “narrations of the consecutive swidden sites of each household” (2005: 201). Tsing’s interlocutors readily told their lives to her in these terms “because the narration of personal history through the landscape has been [for them] an ordinary genre for speaking about one’s past” (201; see also Schieffelin 1976: 142 n. 5; Rosaldo 1980: 42; Wagner 1986: 21; Fox 1997). These modes of knowledge and narration construe forest spaces as people’s social relations. The concatenation of spaces in sequences of living means that a forest location and the social state of people’s lives at that location are not self-contained, but coexist with histories and futures of other places and social states different from the present one. Tsing uses the apt expression “shadow communities” to describe the way forest society is lived temporally as well as spatially. People stop living together, they move around, and they let some bonds attenuate while firming up others. Yet histories of past affiliation and co-living remain in consciousness as shadows, bearing on the present as its alternatives and underpinnings. Any residential present consists partly of its intertemporal links to other arrangements of living. Houses are their own times, but they are also temporally permeable, in coordination with their permeability in space. People living in a house are often preoccupied with their separation from dead former coresidents and might work strenuously to commemorate those dead or stay apart from them. More generally, people’s practices of moving between different houses and households, visiting houses temporarily, and building houses in different locations or on different clan places are often allochronic activities of contact with other times or separation from those times. Through house-crossing motion, people are in contact with the time of an earlier history of parents raising a child, the time of a now-deceased woman’s displacement from her natal kinspeople to her husband’s place where she bore many children, or the time of a past gift or injury now being recompensed. A house is not only internally diachronic, in displaying meal traces or other signs of the length and character of its occupation; it also bears a diachrony of external links to
other spaces and times. Houses’ temporality is another way that these dwellings point beyond themselves to work as social boundaries of otherness that are at once enclosing and connective.

VILLAGE FORMATION AND THE EXPANDED RANGE OF STRANGERS

This chapter has documented Korowai people’s otherness-focused, relationship-focused approaches to the practice of space. I have argued that Korowai spatial experience is permeated by social qualities of belonging and otherness and that the boundaries across which people experience each other as mutually strange are also points of relatedness. Developing this theme with reference to place ownership and houses, I have indicated that to understand these kinds of spatial forms we must look also at the ways in which spaces themselves are diachronic and intertemporal. What an owned place or a house interior is rests partly in the temporal trajectory in which that space exists (such as histories of generational succession or emigration and return in relation to a clan territory, or sequences of past and future houses with different configurations of living coresidents in relation to a current house). Another important but quite different level of geographic intertemporality—or geography embodying history—consists of changes that have unfolded across the Korowai lands since about 1980, following involvement with new social forces and new strangers. These processes illustrate further the finding that Korowai take space as a medium of otherness-focused relating and that this involves expecting spaces to be sites of change and abandonment, as well as identification.

The new cultural forms Korowai are now involved with include Christianity, Indonesian state institutions, international primitivist tourism, and monetized trade in factory-made exogenous commodities. An adequate examination of current intercultural processes would take a book of its own. Here I focus on people’s involvement with a new residential form, the permanent, aggregated village. Villages are the single most consequential cultural phenomenon of the new epoch because they engage Korowai life on its own primary terms, the terms of geography.

Village formation has followed patterns widely preceded across the southern lowlands of New Guinea over the past seventy-five years. In this region, as elsewhere, state authorities, religious organizations, companies, and traders have considered people’s aggregation at fixed residential sites a necessary condition for having effective social links
with them. In the hard-to-reach Korowai region, it was the Dutch Calvinist missionaries of the Mission of Reformed Churches (Zendings Gereformeerde Kerken) and their Papuan assistants who, in the late 1970s, entered into sustained interaction with Korowai in their own lands and initiated the creation of villages in the region (de Vries 1983; Bakker 1996; van Enk and de Vries 1997). By the late 1980s the mission center of Yaniruma consisted of a central lane of two expatriate residences and a dozen other metal-roofed, sawn-lumber buildings, surrounded by three lanes of forest-material houses built by local families: one lane of Korowai houses and two lanes of Kombai ones (figure 8). More than twenty other villages have also been formed in the region at different times. Most villages are sited near rivers and in border regions near the edges of Korowai landownership. All villages have taken their names from adjacent streams, another indication of the prominence of waterways in Korowai experience of geography. Many villages were brief experiments, but about twelve are occupied today (see map 1). A village lane might consist of between five and thirty houses in diverse states of partial construction, fresh completion, disrepair, or abandonment.

Figure 8. Yaniruma village, looking east, 2007. The Korowai houses are along the dogleg lane at left above the airstrip, parallel to the central lane of metal-roofed buildings.
The Dutch missionary families left Yaniruma in about 1990. One missionary, Gerrit van Enk, learned to speak Korowai, and he and the linguist Lourens de Vries coauthored a monograph on Korowai language and culture (Van Enk and de Vries 1997). A Papuan-staffed sister church now oversees the mission-established physical facilities. Several families of nonlocal Papuans connected to the church or to the Yaniruma airstrip, originating from the highlands or from the upper Digul watershed to the east of the Korowai area, live full-time in Yaniruma or sometimes in other southern villages. More recently, Papuan church workers originating from the highlands, serving with two other Protestant denominations, have begun to live in newer villages in the eastern and northeastern Korowai region. In part because of the occasional Cessna flights to Yaniruma by mission aviation organizations, this village has remained a major conduit of involvement with foreign people, institutions, objects, and spatial practices. Indonesian government personnel have generally visited Korowai villages only transiently, and they have rarely traveled to forested clan lands. Since 1992 about five of the largest settlements have been made official “villages” (desa) in the government’s administrative hierarchy. Village governments are subordinate to regional administrative centers (kecamatan) several days’ travel to the southeast or southwest (though as of 2007 Yaniruma itself was beginning to be made a kecamatan). In the period of my research the villagers’ connections to the administrative centers were maintained through local bureaucratic officeholders’ occasional travel to the centers. Travel to these distant centers for purposes of shopping in trade stores has become an increasingly routine activity for village-oriented Korowai men and women alike. Itinerant non-Papuan traders have also occasionally lived in villages for extended periods, drawn by a regional boom in the extraction of eaglewood (Ind. kayu gaharu), an internationally valuable aromatic resin deposit found in some fungus-infected specimens of a particular tree (see Momberg, Puri, and Jessup 2000; Gunn et al. 2004; Sekretariat Keadilan dan Perdamaian 2004). Most prominently, in the 1990s tourists from Europe, North America, and Japan began visiting Korowai and Kombai lands, to meet and photograph people who fit their stereotypes of primitive humanity. It is a paradox of economic and cultural globalization that Korowai live on the extreme fringes of motorized transport and mass-commodity trade, yet for exactly this reason hundreds of tourists come to them each year, creating opportunities for lucrative short-term cash income unavailable in most other places in rural West Papua.
Korowai people’s ambivalent orientations toward villages provide additional evidence in support of the point that dispersion is a method of egalitarian social life. A village is exactly what Korowai say is socially unworkable when they explain (about their traditional practice of living far apart) that if they lived together in one location they would not be able to procure food and raise families in peace but instead would get in frequent fights. As these routinely invoked rationales for residential dispersion would predict, villages are in actuality often fractured by conflicts over theft, sexual affairs, and deaths. Even when no obvious feuds are unfolding, people often say that villages are uncomfortable because people in them are so visible and answerable to each other. Village houses are built in a foreign style, with closable doors, windowless walls, and little exterior veranda space. These architectural features are techniques for limiting visual and physical openness, but walls are much less effective at impeding access than the old system of place ownership and physical distance. Food, for example, is one common focus of difficulty. In matters of food, as in matters of geography, there is an extreme directness in how people perceive relational truths of autonomy and belonging to be at stake in material facts. The expression “It’s not your eating, I’m going to eat it” (gəlunda, nəlep) is a standard critical description of the village-associated pattern of people indiscriminately entering one another’s houses, such that owners lose control over who sees their food and are compelled to share it. Conversely, the statement “They don’t give to me” is a reason people frequently give for why they have left a village behind after a period of trying to live in it. For a person to be in the presence of others who have food or other good objects while being left out of the circle of possession and enjoyment is a humiliating and relation-denying experience, by the same token that being given to is pleasurable and relation-affirming. When people live together in one place, it perturbs an already delicate economy of interpersonal access, recognition, and exclusion. More people are in each other’s presence more of the time. Matters are made worse by food’s greater scarcity in villages, due to depletion of surrounding resources and the long distances between village sites and people’s patrimonially owned sago groves.

The sense that villages contradict received understandings of how to live socially in space is summed up by the contrast Korowai draw between “village” and “forest” as entire cultural environments. The main word used for “forest” is du-lebul “tree trunks,” evoking the
image of people walking and working amid the bases of tall hardwoods and their large buttress roots. The main words for “village” are xampung and kelaja, borrowed from Indonesian kampung “village” and kerja “work.” (The jump from “work” to “village” followed early experience of land clearing and grass cutting as the defining activity of village space.) Korowai often speak of themselves as “forest people,” in contrast to foreign “village people.” Alternatively, speakers identify some Korowai as “village persons” or as regular travelers to “village side” and others as “forest people.” The coexistence of “village” and “forest” as whole contrastive arrangements of living is a central preoccupation of Korowai consciousness today.

The antipathy between the village form and received approaches to space is also evident in the fact that villages are usually empty. Absence of people is Korowai villages’ most striking characteristic. Almost everyone who maintains a village house also owns at least one house far away on clan land, or regularly stays far away with forest-dwelling relatives. Residents usually sleep in villages just one or a few nights at a time, between periods of living on clan places. Even when sleeping in a village, residents leave these spaces behind for most of each day. People’s major orientations toward villages include avoiding them, staying in them only briefly, leaving them after a few months or years, or collectively abandoning whole village sites.

Yet the idea that villages invert existing Korowai sensibilities about space is only part of the story. I have argued earlier that in Korowai people’s distinctive sensibilities about social boundaries, judgments of spatial strangeness are also points of social involvement. Bending a term associated with Foucault (1986), we might say that heterotopia is a native Korowai way of life. If so, then villages as a strange type of space might not have only a negative relation to received ways of making and using geography but could also fit positively into people’s routine projects of crossing boundaries of estrangement. Village living is the antithesis of Korowai people’s historical system, but being involved with one’s antithesis was Korowai people’s system. This is another way to understand the phenomenon of the empty village and people’s treatment of villages as places of coming and going. Mobility is an endogenous Korowai way to make connections across boundaries of spatial otherness. Many people have readily adapted techniques of mobility to include the alien spatial form of the permanent, aggregated village in their lives. Paradoxically, village formation has increased residential mobility. Villages add more sites to people’s rounds of spatial alterna-
tion, and they add another type of episode to people’s lifelong sequences of living arrangements.

Even if villages are often empty, they exist. Korowai have avidly participated in village formation. While expatriate missionaries or Papuan church workers have had a direct hand in the founding of certain villages, the opening and long-term occupation of a village has only ever occurred if Korowai found the idea persuasive. Numerous villages have been founded with no outsiders’ encouragement. Many Korowai approve of the idea of living together collectively in one permanent place. People sometimes use village positions to criticize forest life, rather than the reverse, even on criteria such as food and morality. In an image of reconciling forest dispersion and village aggregation, one person mused to me that people should build a village lane down the middle of the entire length of the Korowai lands, so they could all live on their own clan territories but also be joined in the aesthetic and political unity of a single open residential space. This compromise is not physically feasible, but in a figurative sense it is exactly what Korowai have done by forming villages in different areas, by alternating between village and forest houses, by practicing kinship-based divisions of residential labor (in which one relative maintains a forest house and the other a village house), and by otherwise closely involving themselves with the charged boundary between village and forest.

On this argument, the Korowai sensibility of otherness-focused social relating has a major role in shaping cultural change. The sensibility also means that there is no absolute distinction between endogenous and exogenous cultural forces (cf. Rumsey 2006). People’s endogenous cultural pattern is one of seizing on what is marked as exogenous and engaging closely with it in modes of hostility, embrace, or ambivalent crossover and return.

This pattern is also apparent in other strands of Korowai intercultural engagement with new historical presences across the past three decades. For example, in practical involvement with actual foreign persons, Korowai have dominantly portrayed these foreigners as strange and repulsive. This is clear from their use of the word demon (laleo) as a label for all new strangers who have come to Korowai lands in recent times, including whites, Indonesians, and nonlocal Papuans. Sometimes speakers have applied this label in a mode of literal, full identification of foreigners with the malignant walking dead. Increasingly, some speakers describe the usage as “merely idiomatic” (mofu filo-), and laleo is coming to have two explicitly distinct senses, “dead nonhuman monsters”
versus “foreign humans.” Yet the two senses resonate figuratively, and “merely idiomatic” usages participate in an intertextual series with more literal-minded ones.\textsuperscript{12} What the word signifies, even in its most ironic uses, is repulsive monstrosity. To Korowai, a first principle of the world is that humans and demons are supposed to stay mutually separate. Advent of the demonic dead among living humans is a long-standing image of apocalypse. People sometimes refer to the epoch before foreigners’ intrusion as “when the world was good,” by contrast with the present “bad” epoch. The most basic way in which the world has gone bad is the violation of humans’ separateness from monsters through village formation and associated traffic of unfamiliar people and technologies into the land.

However, in the categorial logic of the human-demon duality (which I explore more carefully in chapter 6), repulsiveness also involves closeness. “Demon” is an intimate other to “human,” even more than “village” is an intimate other to “forest.” In addition to calling foreign persons “demons,” Korowai use “demon” as a prefix for forming hundreds of compound words designating new material artifacts. Rice is “demonic sago,” metal roofing is “demonic thatch,” and so on. Speakers also use “human” (yanop, mayox) as a prefix to form compounds such as “human sago” or “human thatch,” referring to endogenous cultural objects. This pattern portrays demonism as a deformed but coherent cultural ensemble, parallel to the human ensemble. By categorizing outsiders as demonic, Korowai fit the outsiders into their own sensibilities about the sublime value of shock and their expectations that other beings will occupy a social existence parallel and inverse to their own. In beliefs about demons as after-death monsters that predate the use of “demon” to speak of foreigners, Korowai portray the dead as an ethnoterritorial group. The dead have their own “demon place” (laleo-bolüp), far downstream from Korowai lands. (This is typical of people’s geography-led approach to defining persons and events: even monsters are defined by a “place,” and death is a territory on the land.) Calling new outsiders “demons” is a way to categorize them as ethnic others comparable to the human ethnic others at the edges of the Korowai lands. The demons come from farther away in geography and in category of being. They are beyond the pale of humanity but still recognizable as a territorial population.

Consistent with this way in which the concepts of human and demon are at once closely joined and mutually strange, ties with foreigners have in actual practice been marked by mercurial ambivalence. In the first twenty-five years of church presence in the area, only a handful of
Korowai converted to the new religion, due to the stringency of Calvinism’s requirements for baptism and many people’s construal of Christian theology as being both parallel to and incompatible with their existing cosmological narratives. At the same time, missionary families have affected some persons’ lives very intensely and are widely portrayed as major agents in collective history. Single events of interaction and mutual giving with outsiders are often remembered as poignantly valuable. Many Korowai are especially enthusiastic about interaction with tourists. Today “tourist” (turis-anop) is a major ethnic category. People talk avidly about past tourist visits or potential future ones. Yet they also find tourism intensely frustrating and see tourists themselves as frightening, bizarre actors. Tourists and other new foreigners have become subjects of aesthetic fascination because they are so strange.

Another area of intercultural involvement that has unfolded as a process of simultaneous othering and appropriation is the embrace of foreign commodities such as shorts, T-shirts, skirts, steel axes, machetes, pots, knives, plastic bowls and bottles, plastic bags, soap, shag tobacco, fishing tackle, swimming goggles, fish spears, and matches, as well as foodstuffs such as rice, instant noodles, and cooking oil. Although these “demonic articles” (laleo misafi) are thin on the ground, they are integral to Korowai lives. Many people’s enthusiasm for village living is based on association of villages with access to these articles. Traffic in the new commodities has been central to people’s efforts to understand and engage with foreigners. Missionaries and other outsiders entered Korowai lives first by material gifts and trades. Korowai initially found the foreign objects shocking and fearful, and most articles retain an other-worldly aura even when their use is routinized, but the foreign commodities have broadly changed from objects of repulsion to objects of intense desire. The coexistence of intense valuing of imported goods with ongoing expressions of millennialist fear of them is characteristic of the mobility and contradictoriness of Korowai people’s approaches to what is radically other.

Beneath the sea change toward desire for foreign commodities, though, there are important undercurrents of continuity. Whether repulsive or attractive, the objects are attention-grabbing, and their otherness makes them so. The value of foreign objects draws on a broader Korowai disposition, linked to egalitarianism, to express identity by putting oneself down and others up. For example, the meteoric rise of Korowai enthusiasm for clothing in recent times was fueled by intense existing cultural anxiety about bad bodily characteristics being seen by
others; the possibility of making one’s body disappear from sight is welcome. Concern with alien commodities follows also from the way objects are focal media of social transformation and amelioration between Korowai themselves, across boundaries of nonbelonging. Possessing “demonic goods” is a way to relate to the new outsiders, because material exchange makes relations. One way in which the new foreigners are so culturally anomalous is that they violate the landownership system just by being present. The outsiders do not belong. Yet the possibility of eliciting goods from those outsiders is a familiar moral road to creating degrees of belonging, accommodation, and togetherness with them, despite the ownership difference. Korowai frequently report thinking or saying to tourists, traders, or government agents who are aggravating them, “This place is not your place!” as support for the sequitur that those foreign people should be forthcoming with material goods. By caring about acquisition and consumption of the new exogenous objects, Korowai pursue a familiar way to claim a position in a world that extends beyond their own sight and reach.

Writing about intercultural encounters in the nineteenth-century Pacific, Dening (1992) develops the figure of the “beach” to describe qualities of improvised, emergent social connection unfolding between newly involved people. The beach is a place “where everything is relativized a little, turned around, where tradition is as much invented as handed down, where otherness is both a new discovery and a reflection of something old” (p. 177). Korowai intercultural involvement of the recent era has very much had this quality. Yet what I have begun showing in this chapter, and will continue to show across this book, is that relations between Korowai and other Korowai also take place on “beaches” in Dening’s sense. Korowai society is endogenously a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992: 4–7), a social environment of close interaction between people “previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures,” who hold different kinds of power over each other, and who are grappling with each other as cultural strangers. In the contemporary era, Korowai society is located in the very motion of people between forest and village and in the heterogeneity of evaluative and practical positions people take in relation to the contrast between forest and village space. So too in forest space alone, Korowai society is located in people’s motions across a heterogeneous landscape and their disparities of position on that landscape.