Introduction

The Mysterious Incident at Jalan Chan Ah Tong Field

Jalan Chan Ah Tong field was the only public open space remaining in Brickfields by early 2002.[1] Although not officially a park or space designated for recreation by the Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (City Hall), the vacant lot was used by neighborhood children for pickup soccer games and by the nearby Vivekanenda School for its physical education activities. Despite its abandoned appearance, the field had a strong place in Brickfields folklore. Elderly residents claimed that the field was the site where Nehru spoke during his visit to Malaya in 1937.[2] Middle-aged residents told tales of the legendary football players who honed their skills on the Jalan Chan Ah Tong field by competing in the resident-organized Deepavali Cup tournament. Many of these neighborhood legends went on to become members of the Malaysian national football team. Younger inhabitants merely claimed that they liked to have an open space to hang out, caring less about the legends than about the fact that the open field at Jalan Chan Ah Tong was the closest thing Brickfields had to a public park. Bordered on two sides by the Hundred Quarters, one of the oldest remaining government apartment complexes in Kuala Lumpur, the field was a locus of intergenerational neighborhood activity.

Residents of the Hundred Quarters awoke one morning in January 2002 to find that half of the field had been paved over with asphalt the night before. Although some neighbors noted that they heard a great deal of noise throughout the night, they thought nothing of it, as it was normal to hear the noise of construction in the middle of the night in Brickfields. Neighbors were aware of the activity, yet remained unaware of precisely what was going on right outside of their flats. By morning no visible signs of who had constructed what appeared to be an illegal car park on the field remained. The new parking lot had simply "appeared" on the site.

The audacity and speed of the event stunned those who lived around the field. The initial reaction was a numb blankness in the face of this sudden effort to convert the space into a parking lot. The event was simply unbelievable, and yet there it was. This initial shock and inertia was quickly replaced by anger over the violation of the neighborhood by strangers who felt that they could manufacture a fake development project in order to turn a quick profit. Furious Brickfields residents converged on the Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur and demanded to know who held the license to develop this space. DBKL claimed to know nothing about it and confirmed that no building license had been issued for the construction. Responding to the angry protests, DBKL sent out its investigators. By afternoon the matter was splashed all over the local newspapers, provoking outrage from Brickfields old-timers. Although the mysterious construction had only taken place the night before, football legends from the 1960s and 1970s had already emerged from the obscurity of their present to denounce the car park to reporters. Residents congregated around the field throughout the day, keeping watch. The sentries told me that they intended to catch whoever did this when they returned, presumably to set up shop and begin collecting parking fees. Those keeping watch claimed to be angry, but their demeanor was one of stunned disbelief. "This happens all the time," they repeatedly told me.

Illegal land developers read the papers and the culprits never dared to return and carry through with their plan. The labor and asphalt was a dead loss for whoever did this, but taking this loss was presumably better than being beaten up by local residents while trying to make good on the investment. Whoever laid the asphalt was clearly unaware of the history of this seemingly vacant piece of land and, in the context of the building frenzy in Brickfields that was taking place, figured nobody would really notice or care if they set up a little parking lot. In most other cases, this assumption would

have been correct. The calculated risk that this mode of ad hoc development entails normally works out fine, at least for a while. Only the aura of a threatened, fading past prevented the blacktopping of Jalan Chan Ah Tong Field. DBKL, sensing a public relations opportunity, quickly sent some crews out to tear up the asphalt and then planted several trees and bushes around the perimeter. This official effort was the first time in the field's long history as a social space that City Hall had recognized it as a recreational site and contributed materially to its upkeep. The field was essentially returned to its previous state by the end of January, although some of the poor-quality asphalt remained visible under the hastily laid sod for months afterward. Despite their best efforts, the landscaping crews sent by City Hall could not fully erase the evidence of this strange event.

DBKL's quick action on the matter was appreciated by local residents, but at a distance. Many whispered among themselves that someone within the municipal bureaucracy knew about this all along. One local businessperson summarized the widespread suspicion held by local residents:

Although I don't have proof, I think DBKL knows who tried to put the car park in. I think someone down there said "go ahead, but if you get caught we don't know anything about it." It is just too suspicious. They moved too quickly afterwards to have not known something. Within a few days they had gotten rid of the asphalt and planted trees. That *never* happens in KL!

The perpetrators remain unknown.

An Introduction to Urban Life in Brickfields

I begin with this seemingly insignificant local scandal because in it we find a rich illustration of the issues of urban life and transformation that form the central concerns of this book. Specifically, these issues are the following: (1) the law and the gap between legality and local understandings of justice and relatedness, (2) the ability of local residents to form a mental image of the world that is believable and provides the possibility for action in the world and the formation of an ethical life in the context of possessing an ambiguous legal and social subjectivity, and (3) alternative avenues of engagement with the state that are generated in an environment where urban subjects find themselves formally excluded from the authoritative discourses of law and development and the

formation of what are believed to be ideal, ordered urban spaces. This book addresses these issues by asking how the right to public space and community is imagined and articulated in urban Malaysia. The questions that drive the inquiry are: Who has the right to the city and public space? How, through the law and local realities, is that right determined? How is such a right legitimized or contested? And how does this right give form (or not) to urban spaces that are experienced as orderly, just spaces that generate the possibility of action in the world for individual residents?

The trajectory of events surrounding the incident at the Jalan Chan Ah Tong field unfolded in a manner that illustrates this set of complex issues in a condensed fashion. The fact that residents living near the field were vaguely aware of the construction going on right next to their homes but did not notice it as unusual is the first significant aspect of this incident. In January 2002 Brickfields was undergoing a radical change due to the ongoing construction of the KL Sentral Train Station complex and the KL Monorail public transportation system. These projects, undertaken as part of a coordinated plan for urban development in Kuala Lumpur, had generated a palpable sense of uncertainty in the neighborhood due to the speed and scale of change demanded by such a large project. Plans for KL Sentral were first made public in 1994, although major construction on the project was delayed for several years due to the Asian economic crisis during 1997 and 1998. The initial phases of the project opened in March 2001. Anchored by the station itself, designed by Dr. Kisho Kurukawa, the KL Sentral project consists of fourteen separate land parcels situated immediately west of Jalan Tun Sambanthan in Brickfields. The overview of the project offered by its developers is worth quoting at length:

KL Sentral is being developed as a futuristic self-contained city, providing the perfect live [*sic*], work and play environment. Office towers, condominiums, hotels, restaurants, retail malls and entertainment and leisure centres are all walking distance from each other within the 72 acres that is KL Sentral. Adding to this, the transport facilities offered are on par with the best the world over. Not only is Stesen Sentral the country's rail transport nucleus, and an extension of the KLIA [Kuala Lumpur International Airport], but road access to KL Sentral has been carefully thought out so as to offer the highest convenience to motorists entering and leaving the development.

KL Sentral supports fully the vision of the KL Structure Plan 2020, namely creating a metropolis that is efficient, harmonious and spiritually inspiring. Blending cutting-edge technology with soothing surrounds [*sic*], KL Sentral offers a fine, and rare, balance between fast-paced urban living and the very human need for leisure, relaxation and comfort. It is a place where you can truly exercise your body, mind and soul. But KL Sentral is more than a development that seeks to improve the quality of life of Malaysians. It is also a prominent landmark in our evolving city that symbolises national pride and prestige.

KL Sentral is being developed in phases, and is expected to be completed by the year 2012.[3]

This carefully constructed description for public consumption is accurate in its references to KL Sentral's modernity and its place in the national imaginary of development. Unintentionally, it also clearly signals the dramatic absence of Brickfields as a place within this imaginary. Explicitly designed to exclude the neighborhood surrounding it ("a futuristic, *self-contained* city"), KL Sentral, along with the related construction of the KL Monorail system,[4] had nevertheless come to define the experience of living in Brickfields between the years 2000 and 2002. While these projects sought to ignore the neighborhood, the neighborhood could hardly ignore the transformations that the projects had brought to the area.

Although they seldom articulated their goal as a slogan or organized political platform, the citizens of Brickfields consistently attempted to assert their right to the city in the face of the dislocating effects of urban development in Brickfields. This right was not fully invested in the rules and procedures of the Constitution or the Land Acts governing property ownership and transfer (although the specific operation of these statutes remained critical factors), but was predicated on the notion that the city is a space that arises out of the relationships that exist between its residents. In this conception of the right to place, local concepts of justice and proper relatedness must engage the state and the formal institutions of law. With an understanding of rights resembling those articulated by Lefebvre (1991, 1996), Mitchell (2003), and Young (1990), Brickfields residents sought engagements with the state and its proxies and among themselves that produced a sense of place commensurate with the history of the neighborhood and the moral understanding of proper living held by members of the community.

According to Lefebvre (2003), the right to the city implies the right

to inhabit city spaces. I understand this to mean not only that individuals have the right to enter and circulate in a particular space but also that these spaces must be experienced as open and stable within the larger geography of the city. The experience of stability does not exclude change, but does imply that the pace and trajectory of change must be anticipatable and that the process is to some degree open to action initiated by the community itself. In this sense the right to the city is established through the possibility for individual urban dwellers to actualize an ethical, social, urban self through repetition or habits in relation to space. During the time of extensive transformation that took place in Brickfields, however, such a possibility was often blocked by interventions of the state and its proxies. This lack of possibility made living in Brickfields an uncertain, ambiguous experience for residents during the time that I conducted fieldwork there. The concrete attempts of members of the neighborhood to address their experience of uncertainty in relation to the law, the state, and the space of their neighborhood is the subject of this book.[5] Within this uncertain context of aggressive spatial and demographic changes driven by the modernizing efforts of the state, members of the community sought to establish their "right to the city" through discursive and practical strategies of dwelling in the space and using it on their own terms. Such ways of imagining the neighborhood serve to oppose the experience of being denied one's right to "place" through state practices that frame modes of habiting space that empower certain groups and alienate others (Lefebvre 1996, 2003).

Lefebvre's notion of right must be distinguished from the juridical or scientific concepts of "human rights" or "rights of citizenship" that are largely invested in the authoritative discourses of the state, the empirical judgments regarding normalcy and causality of science, or the orthodoxies of religion. Unlike such notions of rights "granted" based on axiomatic criteria of identity, Lefebvre's concept specifically refers to an ethics of establishing spaces that are not only ordered and safe but also allow for action and a concrete sense of being able to create an ethical life. This "right to the city" is not invested in the stable certainties of identity, but rather in the *potential* of individuals to realize an ethical self from a host of presubjective possibilities. This concept of right runs counter to the notion that the law can do justice through the careful recognition of identity and the subsequent creation of legal and subject categories that "recognize" or "allow for"

difference. The "rights through recognition" model is insufficient to Lefeb-vre's concept; the self in this model is endowed with an essential nature that is understood as stable, singular and, if properly understood and cultivated, in harmony with nature and the world.

A number of anthropological works related to South and Southeast Asia elaborate existing local concepts of recognition and self that are tied neither to notions of rights or identity as it is commonly understood in the West. Strongly influenced by Clifford Geertz's description and theoriza-tion of the *slematan* community feast in Java as an essential space by which individuals can "see and be seen" and the centrality of this feast in the con-text of Javanese sociality generally (Geertz 1960), the work of James Siegel has consistently engaged everyday notions of recognition in Indonesia. Emphasizing domains where appearances are unrecognizable, uncanny, and mistrusted, Siegel has elaborated the complex notions of self, identity, and recognition that exist in Indonesia through an engagement with how Javanese domesticate the "strange" (*aneh*), how recognition and domestica-tion are critically linked in the Indonesian national context, and how de-sire and the uncanny circulate and serve to structure engagements with criminals, counterfeiters, and witches in contemporary Indonesia (Siegel 1986, 1997, 1998, 2006). Consistent in all of these works is a close engage-ment with precisely how one can form a sense of self that is experienced as unitary and moral, and that indexes oneself in relation to others in a world marked by appearances that are never in actuality singular, transparent, or whole. Siegel's definition of "identity" clarifies this point:

I have used the word "identity." I do not mean to imply, however, that identity is ever fully achieved. My view is contrary, therefore, to the stream of current thought that sees identity as achieved, negotiated, crafted, and in other ways the product of a self which, knowingly following its interests, invents itself. I think of it in the tradition of Hegel. There, to find a place of self-definition is to be thrown off-balance unless one can be convincingly self-deceiving. Identity exists only at the price of enormous confusions and contradictions. (Siegel 1997, 9)

While emphasizing the critical importance of forms of recognition, Siegel insists that appearances are never understood as given or singular in Indonesia. In my view, this perspective regarding the centrality of "seeing and being seen," even in contexts where appearances are mistrusted, mis-recognized, or not recognized at all, holds true in the Malaysian context as

well. As I demonstrate in the present work, Siegel's insights regarding recognition and identity are very useful in understanding the complex social spaces that exist in urban Malaysia.

Although I largely agree with Siegel regarding identity and recognition, his emphasis on "confusion" and "contradiction" requires elaboration, particularly in light of Veena Das' recent work regarding the essential role of silence and disavowal in the context of returning to everyday life in the face of the catastrophic, the traumatic, and the unnamable (Das 2007). Bearing Das' insights in mind, Naveeda Khan has argued for a concept of the self as emergent from a realm of presubjective possibilities in her recent work regarding the complex relationships between the self, the domestic, and the everyday aspects of religious sectarianism in Pakistan; these possibilities are singularities that exist and, when brought to actualization, produce a "Self" or an "I." Strongly building on Deleuze's notion of the self as generated out of singularities that exist within a plane of immanence (Deleuze 2001), Khan argues for difference as being internal to being and highlights the critical importance of affirmative potentiality and the ability to move between these qualities in response to the world as an essential aspect of subjectivity. Thus, rather than understanding the self within the negative operations of crafting a unitary self out of perceived social norms (Mahmood 2001, 2005) or the presentation of multiple selves based on manifold everyday contexts (Ewing 1990, 1997), Khan effectively demonstrates how the multiplicity of potential selves ("impersonal, preindividual singularities" in Deleuze's terms) is neither evidence of a "split" self nor a condition to be masked or fully domesticated in relation to authoritative, disciplinary discourses (Khan 2006; see also Deleuze 1990, 1994, 2001). Building on Siegel's insights regarding identity and recognition in Indonesia, Khan's work serves to engage these issues without an emphasis on contradiction or confusion; this elaboration is crucial to my own argument here as to how the often disjointed experience of living in Brickfields was nonetheless reenfolded back into the everyday and notions of self as articulated by local residents.

What is under question in Khan's formulation is the notion that the self or the subject can arise out of a given state of the world. This is an important issue in relation to the question of rights and legal subjectivity raised earlier. "Recognition," even recognition of certain states of diversity between legal subjects, is granted according to a transcendental value

assigned to the law in relation to nature and the real. This presumption gives rise to the notion of a "preestablished" harmony between justice, the law, and ethics that assumes that the law can properly order difference between stable, discrete subjects. When applied to specific ethnographic situations (such as Khan's example), Deleuze's notion of difference as internal to being casts doubt on the efficacy of analytic models that privilege recognition, as the detection and ordering of discrete subjects becomes a secondary operation in relation to the process of becoming through difference that Deleuze strongly asserts as the key to the production of self. Although diversity in the world can lead to multiple legal systems that are legitimate within frameworks of recognition, the idea of the *Law itself* as the guarantor of justice and ethical living is what is universalized and endowed with a transcendental status in models of recognition. Engaging with writers as diverse as Hume, Kant, and Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze consistently reminds us that we should never confuse the Law with justice or ethical forms of life and raises the uncomfortable possibility that it is *impossible* for the Law, purely by virtue of its own operation, to do justice (Deleuze 1989b, 1991b, 1997).

Considering Deleuze's consistent antagonism towards orthodoxy and opinion, it is unusual at first glance that he would turn to concepts of immanent belief and what he termed "nondogmatic" images of thought as an alternative. For some, this turn has left Deleuze open to the charge that his philosophy is "outerworldly" and out of touch with the "real world" (Hallward 2006). To the contrary, I assert that through a careful consideration of Deleuze's concepts in relation to the ethnographic evidence that constitutes the bulk of this book, such concepts provide a rich basis for the analysis of empirical data generated out of concrete engagements with this "real world." At the center of my engagement with Deleuze is his understanding of *belief* as immanent and always linked to a "brain/body/culture" nexus of experience; this is a critically important insight in relation to understanding the transformations that took place in Brickfields over the two-year period that I lived and actively conducted research in the neighborhood. I maintain that this specific example (including the analytic frameworks deployed within the study) has a generalizable value in relation to other similar sites and situations. Foregrounding belief in the manner in which I do in this book is as essential for secular modes of living as it is for the religious. For members of a specific religious faith, belief is an essential

aspect in formulating an ethical life according to the will of the Divine; for secularists belief is crucial in that knowledge alone cannot make the world knowable or livable in a real sense. The internal character of this belief is the same in that its primary object in both cases is possible modes of existence in a world of difference and change (Deleuze 1986, 1989a; Marrati 2003).

This capability to act is certainly dependent upon an ordered present but also requires the creation of spaces where individuals possess the means to imagine future life and action. In Brickfields, the problem for local residents was not just that their legal rights or physical persons were being literally violated in the present, but rather that the transformation of the space had shattered the link between present experience and the possibility of future action. Not able to believe in Brickfields as their place in the world, residents lacked "resistance to the present" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Understood within Lefebvre's framework, the concrete outcome of this phenomenon was that Brickfields residents were largely denied their right to the city during the period of intensive transformation of the neighborhood between 2000 and 2002.

The transformation of the space of Brickfields was undertaken as a way of making the neighborhood safer, more orderly, more closely integrated with the rest of Kuala Lumpur, and better overall for its residents. The final outcome of these changes remains to be seen. It is clear, however, that the strategies deployed by the state concretely worked to rupture the sensory-motor links between Brickfields residents and their world in the present. Change always entails rupture; however, largely excluded from formal processes of law, state planning, and municipal decision making, Brickfields residents struggled to create other links with their world out of the radical, aggressive change that was taking place around them. Life in Brickfields was often intolerable for its residents during the period that I conducted fieldwork in the neighborhood. Bearing witness to changes that were sudden, unexpected, and perceived to be total, this sense of the intolerable arose from the fact that the trajectory of change and the potential for life in the new Brickfields was often literally unthinkable. For land developers, city planners, and government ministers, the process of reform was linked to a teleology of progress and "the Brickfields to come"; local residents generally had no access to this *telos* to be reached, despite official proclamations after the fact as to the future of the area. It was not enough for everyday life to be

understood and lived through authoritative institutional discourses; life must be thinkable for individual residents. The "unthinkability" of Brickfields often prevented residents from forming an image of the world that allowed for action based on knowable relations between oneself and others within sensible horizons of possible meaning. Such images of livable configurations must engage authoritative institutional discourses but are not necessarily the logical outcome of such discourses. In Brickfields the state, the law, and various religious institutions did not always produce vectors within everyday life that allowed for action or agency on the part of individual subjects, often liquidating the sensible reality of the world for those caught in it (Deleuze 1991a). The outcome was *not* that Brickfields residents came to believe that they lived in a "fantasy"; individuals did not lack information in regard to the present. Rather, the problem was that they could not imagine this new world as a world of possibility or becoming and therefore could not form an image of this world that they could *believe* in.

Belief in this context is not tied in an absolute sense to religious orthodoxies, practices, or a transcendent divine sphere, although as I demonstrate in the final chapter the supernatural world remains a strong factor within this general notion. Nor is belief in this sense an articulation of a transcendent project of a revolutionary world to come. The object of belief in this context is *the world itself*. This belief is not invested in grand tropes of salvation or deliverance, but rather in the ability to establish, sense, and live through concrete links to the world. An ability to imagine a future remains important in that individuals must believe that they can, in the face of transformation, forge new links with their world in response to change or difference.

Understanding belief in the manner that I am advocating requires a revised engagement with the issue of how institutions normally associated with secularism, such as the law or the state, come into play in everyday life. William E. Connolly, in reference to the work of Talal Asad, has described this revision of the "brain/ body/culture" network[6] as follows:

[T]he practices in which we participate continue to be organized in circuits between institutional arrangements and lived layers of human embodiment, but many secularists, theologians, and anthropologists interpret such practices within a cognitive framework that ignores them, diminishes their importance, or reduces them to modes of cultural manipulation that could in principle be surpassed. . . . [M]any still construe ritual to be only a mechanism through which beliefs are portrayed and

symbolized rather than a medium through which embodied habits, dispositions, sensibilities, and capacities of performance are consolidated. (Connolly 2006, 77)

My aim in this book is to address the issues that Connolly and others raise regarding the "fugitive circuit" that exists between embodied, visceral belief and the institutional configurations that shape, limit, and depend upon this circuit. *No* domain of human social life is "free" of belief, "above" faith, or can operate outside of this fugitive circuit linking experience of the world, thought, and the inevitability of change in the world at large (Asad 2003; Connolly 2005). I am not arguing that secularism does not exist as an organizing concept that operates concretely in the domains of everyday life; rather, I hope to call into question simple or fixed binaries between "secularism" and "religion" or "belief" that obscure the subtle, numerous, necessary connections that cut across each domain and link them to one another in everyday life and practice.

In this spirit, the revised understanding of the role of belief in everyday life that I am advocating does not seek to exclude or marginalize organized religious belief or concrete engagements with the supernatural and the Divine from the analysis. The final chapter of this book shifts the basis of this engagement away from a discussion of immanent belief in everyday life and engages how a Malaysian state that sought to explicitly make Islam a central aspect of rule shaped the everyday practices of a predominantly Malaysian Tamil Hindu urban community. This chapter directly addresses the specific outcomes of introducing an overt form of belief into the realm of modern governance. Dealing primarily with interventions made by the Malaysian state and civic actors regarding the problem posed by the presence of a number of unregistered Hindu temples in Brickfields, I contextualize these specific events with an analysis of how Islam's role in governance in Malaysia provided limited avenues of engagement and agency for these temples with agents of the state. Rather than quarantining faith within private domains, the explicit introduction of belief into governance produced unforeseen consequences both in terms of how non-Muslim faiths were present in the public sphere and in relation to how belief was lived at the everyday level. For Muslims and non-Muslims alike, "believing" became an essential aspect in the formation of a life within sensible realms of possibility and meaning, and operated as an important aspect of public life. By (re)introducing belief as an allowable basis for

ethical life and practice, the possibilities for engaging the state and form-
ing ethical lives at the local level often exceeded the formal boundaries of
authoritative discourse regarding proper or "true" belief articulated by the
state or religions institutions.

Efforts to locate Islam as a primary moral basis for rule in Malaysia
did *not* automatically result in the rejection of techno-rational modes of
governance, nor did these initiatives necessitate the rejection of laws and
institutions associated with secular governance. To the contrary, efforts to
morally ground the law and the practices of the state in Islam required an
active mode of engagement with secularist understandings of proper gov-
ernance. Brickfields residents struggled with competing notions of moral-
ity, justice, and the Good in understanding themselves and living ethically.
The state itself faced a similar problem in seeking to reconcile a desire to
"become modern" while also investing its authority to pursue such strate-
gies within the larger domain of a divine sovereignty.

The struggle over the introduction of Islamic concepts to governance
turned on the issue of how Islam could legitimately function as *authorita-
tive* within larger discourses of governmentality.[7] Suspicion regarding this
issue was not restricted to non-Muslim communities, as many Malays would
openly support the notion that "Islam" was an appropriate source of legit-
imacy and practical techniques for the government, while also struggling
with the fact that the orthodox governmental discourse of Islam generally
cast their own specific beliefs regarding the world into question (Peletz
2002). Following Asad, I argue that issues of authoritative discourses re-
lated to religion and ethical life must always refer to complex internal
structures that engage multiple material domains (Asad 1993, 2006). I un-
derstand such engagement as a set of possibilities that emerge out of what
Asad calls "the somatic processes that authoritatively bind persons to one
another, of discourse as a physical process" (Asad 2006).

Everyday practice, ethics, and belief together constitute vectors of liv-
ing not only though authoritative institutional discourses but also through
an experiential sense of the world as perceived by individuals. Inspired by
Deleuze's concept of immanent belief, I seek to understand how individuals
are able to produce a unitary image of *their* world that can be believed and is
essential for the production of ethical life and selves (Deleuze 1990, 2001). In
other words, how is it that belief itself comes to be a defining factor in the
creation of ethical subjects and spaces of living in urban Malaysia?