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*The Last and First Place: How New Guinea Matters*

A common complaint heard throughout rural Papua New Guinea is “This is the last place”: a phrase that conveys abandonment, resentment, and powerlessness. Ironically, it is precisely the “lastness” of New Guinea that empowers the region in the Western imagination. This is especially so when New Guinea is simultaneously imagined as a “first place” whose diverse cultures embody an essential truth about humankind. In this talk, I review a number of popular and scholarly representations of New Guinea, ranging from Christian creationists to Jared Diamond to more recent debates about the “ontological turn” to illustrate a common pattern in how New Guinea is made to matter. I conclude with a discussion of how this dynamic affects even conscious attempts to represent Papua New Guineans as co-evals, notably in recent writings on Christianity.