

Book Review | *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-than-Human Becomings in West Papua*, by Sophie Chao (Duke University Press, 2022)

Fionna Fahey
Purdue University
faheyf@purdue.edu

Sophie Chao's brilliant ethnography *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* chronicles multispecies worlds in the way they demand (2022, 11). She brings us through the Upper Bian landscape in West Papua to the other-than-human worlds of the Marind Peoples, sago (dakh in Marind or Metroxylon sago Rottbøll), and oil palm (sawit in Indonesian or *Elaeis guineensis* Jacquin). Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and human rights activism in West Papua, Chao's analysis and body of work reinvigorates established theoretical conversations in feminist science studies and emergent concerns in multispecies and plantation studies. Importantly, this book doesn't promise multispecies utopias, because "alongside care and love, violence, too, can be a multispecies act" (208).

This book changes shape across its introduction, eight chapters, and conclusion. In between chapter groupings the reader is planted into a dreamscape interlude (28). Importantly, Chao weaves thick ethnographic attunements alongside queries with landscapes and other-than-human beings. She refuses the dominant Western ethnographic gaze, which focalizes on constructed differences and extracts knowledge from Indigenous People(s), often in the Global South, in order to theorize *with* Marind companions among the groves, sprouting sago, and oil palm. Chao opens Chapter 1 with a moving drive through Upper Bian landscapes to Merauke, where lands are traditionally animated by stories, songs, and care. However, oil palm plantations discipline these lands through a network of roads, monocrops, checkpoints, and clearings, what she calls "pressure points" (38). Pressure points describe the impacts of state violence that "extend across physical

Fahey, Fionna. 2024. Review of *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*, by Sophie Chao (Duke University Press, 2022). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 10 (2): 1–5.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312.

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and geographical bodies like nodes of a complex nervous system that is at once omnipresent and opaque” (38). These pressure points are not only materialized in the land, but on Marind bodies and inert maps (51–73). The uncertain futures of Marind relations and forests that accompany these pressure points reflect Chao’s expansion of the Marind concept of *abu-abu*—uncertainty or grayness—that is central throughout the text (14). Thus, *abu-abu* is evocative of Chao’s overall praxis of this book: to story both haunting realities and refusals (24). Furthermore, she pushes against the confines of ethnographic authority and static description by nurturing Marind livingness in photographs, embodied relations, and co-theorizing (28).

Skin, flesh, and wetness are central to understanding Marind being and becoming. In the third chapter, Chao articulates how becoming human (*amin*) is intimately involved with fleshy embodied relations and fluid exchanges between other-than-human kin (*amai*) across one’s lifecourse (79). In contrast, the flows involved from oil palm plantations harm the wetness and nourishment of the Marind, where human and “the all-too-porous bodies of rivers, soils, and living organisms” are exposed to new state-sanctioned toxicities, extractive economies, and militarization (94). As Chao recalls, feminist science studies scholars have long unsettled the colonial separation between humans and the environment purportedly drawn by the skin (Haraway 1990; Star 1995). For instance, Donna Haraway posed the question, “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (1990, 61). Regularly throughout this book, descriptions of the bodies and skins of humans and landscapes are enmeshed together. Crucially, Chao generously engages with abundant literature from Black studies scholars who have advanced theories of the flesh, (non)human, and plantation within the book and in detailed footnotes (222). Many of these scholars have criticized environmental scholars for foreclosing or “[ignoring] praxes of humanity and critiques produced by Black people, particularly those praxes which are irreverent to the normative production of ‘the human’ or illegible from within the terms of its logic” (Jackson 2015, 216–17; see also Chao, Bolender, and Kirksey 2022; Davis et al. 2019).

Later in Chapter 3, one of Chao’s interlocutors, Oktavianus, lamented that “the problem with oil palm is that we do not know its skin” (94). His dismal remark came near his death following a number of shape-shifting cassowary events—shape-shifting is a practice known among Marind. For years, Oktavianus foraged in the surrounding forests demonstrating other-than-human cassowary behaviors and later appearances. Eventually, he lost his sense of humanness and was seen as something in-between—*abu-abu* (87). The stories of unsettled boundaries between (non)human, skin, and species continue in Chapter 4, with an undomesticated but not wild bird, Ruben. Chao’s keen thinking on bodies, kinship, and species broadens our understanding of human entanglements essential to plant and multispecies epistemic(re)turns.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore relationality with and (un)knowing of sago and oil palm. In Chapter 5 Chao builds on affective inquiries into human-environment relations and ways of “being-in-the-grove” (125). Here she recounts the sensorial practices and sounds involved in knowing sago. Conversely, in Chapter 6, the multiple ontologies of oil palm emerge (160). Chao argues, “the plant’s ontology, in other words, is not an ‘either or’ between different states of being, but rather a series of apposite yet accretive ‘ands’—‘ands’ that trouble the contrapuntal relation of oil palm to sago palm. At once lively and lethal, assailant and victim, plant and person, foreigner and kin, oil palm, too, inhabits plural realities across space and time” (163). Chao’s analyses in these chapters raise perspectives of onto-epistemology at the core of feminist science studies (Barad 2007; de la Cadena 2015). Importantly, Chao’s assertion that these ontologies are “multiply authored” emulates critical scholars at intersection of science studies and the environmental humanities, such as Kristina Lyons (2020) and Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) (2014), by conveying the ontological and embodied realities of and in resistance to capitalist violence (215).

In the Shadow of the Palms narrates how enduring colonial and capitalist legacies manifest across temporal and dream scales. In Chapter 7 Chao presents the history and “atemporality” of colonial capture of other-than-human beings (173). This chapter fits in conversation with pertinent analyses of empire building through sheep (Franklin 2007) and beaver frontiers (Ogden 2021). Some of the most distinct and uncanny elements of this book are oil palm’s creeping in Marind dream worlds. During Chapter 8 and in four interludes, Chao describes other-than-conscious encounters with and becoming(s) of oil palm. She hones in on the popular recurring dreams of “being eaten by oil palm,” writing, “dreamers do not dream so much as they are dreamed. The dream-as-relation evades the self-as-dreamer, even as it is imposed on individuals by the haunting being of oil palm.” (191). Furthermore, the dreams in this book are together affective and effective. They demonstrate the all-consuming violence of capitalism that haunts Marind lifeways. Consequently, the last interlude is a portal into her own nightmare of dismemberment and decomposition into the beckoning earth.

As Chao illustrates in this ethnography, dreaming is collective; dreams are shared, experienced, and interrupted together. In this book, thinking with the oneiric contrasts the radical imagining often associated with dreaming otherwise. The departure from hope in dreams aligns with Chao’s hesitance to portray certainty in multispecies futures. For ethnography broadly, dreaming offers powerful avenues of inquiry into the plastic divisions between geography, temporality, and consciousness. In their collective relevance, dreams are also sites of transformation. They convey the fluidity of people, kin, and place that complicates empirical attempts at universality. This sense of transformation is deeply relational with constant glimmers of change.

In the Conclusion, Chao brings her thorough engagement with Marind and other-than-human worlds to the scale “of planetary undoing” (213). Chao’s tending to feminist science studies and “fleshy” liveliness of Marind worlds provides a textured and exemplary ethnography for engaged scholars of human, plant, and other-than-human beings. Above all, her meditations on relationality and becoming pique radical ethics of regeneration. Finally, the close of this book leaves wonder for ways we might share and cultivate sago’s dreams, reminiscent of Chao’s loving question, “how, and who, should we love, in a time of destructive, other-than-human proliferation?” (210).

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Author Bio

Fionna Fahey is a PhD student in Anthropology at Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana, United States). Her work uses feminist science studies and environmental anthropology to study seeds, health, and social justice.