

Book Review: *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*. Sophie Chao. Duke University Press, 2022

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ABSTRACT

In the Shadow of the Palms offers a haunting and novel perspective on themes of dispossession and alienation wrought by the expansion of oil palm agribusiness in Indonesia. Drawing on fieldwork with a Marind community in the Upper Bian in West Papua, the text endeavors to describe such dispossessory dynamics from an embodied Marind ontology. Meticulous descriptions of interactions with various animal and plant species evidence a profound intersubjectivity of human and environment in the Marind world. Moreover, these encounters with multi-species entanglements often reveal how the Marind accommodate and assimilate the spiritual and material incursions inflicted by expanding oil palm production. Chao's argument takes issue with recent theoretical trends in multispecies studies for their failure to engage "with Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, its limited consideration of the "human" category in the context of racializing assemblages, its uncritical celebration of interspecies entanglements, and its insufficient attention to unloving (rather than loved species, and its failure to approach violence itself as a multispecies act)." The evidence Chao provides in the form of thick ethnographic description and songs translations, stories, and dream accounts convincingly complicates the tendency to generalize plant-beings as either benevolent helpers, enigmatic tricksters, or passive, neutral fixtures. The reader is forced to reckon with oil palm as a causal agent implicit in the devastation of forests and rivers fouled by chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and the haunted dreams and bodies of the Marind people.

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KEYWORDS

Marind; oil palm; plant turn; posthumanism; multispecies relations; dark anthropology; community-led participatory mapping; plant-human entanglements; multispecies violence.

Sophie Chao's *In the Shadow of the Palms* offers a haunting and novel perspective on themes of dispossession and alienation wrought by the expansion of oil palm agribusiness in Indonesia. Drawing on her fieldwork spent with a Marind community in the Upper Bian in West Papua, Chao endeavors to describe such dispossessory dynamics from an embodied Marind ontology. The book focuses less on routine themes: the loss of access to customary lands, the material violence inflicted by plantation-style monocrop production, or analysis of the neocolonial drivers of capitalist accumulation as they manifest in a particular community and place. The text addresses these, but quickly peels open, invoking a katabasis that attunes the reader to the corporeal: wetness of skin and forest, shapeshifting animals, dreams haunted by oil palm, the meaningful day-to-day presence of more-than-human beings. *In the Shadow of the Palms* brazenly traverses the territory of environmental anthropological literature on plant-people relations, quickly arriving at notions of interspecies entanglement and the so-called "plant turn" (a trend of posthumanist thought that foregrounds the agency and intelligence of vegetal-beings), only to penetrate that already remote conceptual horizon with her central claim that oil palm is a plant-being with a capacity, and a will

for destruction, and that “violence itself is a multispecies act.”

Chao aptly describes her approach as a combination of “ethnographic description and conceptual abstraction.” Her prose is at times lyrical and descriptive. She offers embodied narrative delivered with poignant imagery and an intimacy borne of sustained attention in the field. But the writing also takes sudden leaps, ricocheting up from the world of sweat and sago, leaving behind the languid imagery of the plant-induced dreamworld, and catapulting up to a realm of sublime abstraction. In these moments, a meditation on a particular aspect of Marind ontology will ascend into a dimension of near-blinding ideation, where lines of Foucault or Haraway give way to novel conceptualizations that assume the near manic tone of a raving pianist bashing out an exercise in musical counterpoint. Such propulsions, however, (and thankfully), give way to the artfully crafted ethnographic narrative that ground the book’s conceptual inventiveness. Haunting descriptions of nightmares of oil palm are also interspersed throughout the text as interludes, acting as transitions between the book’s eight chapters, which themselves each possess a unique thematic and tonal identity.

These artfully arranged episodes of description and contemplative commentary found in *In the Shadow of the Palms* hang together in an atmosphere of abu-abu, a Marind concept that evokes a slippery refusal of dualistic conceptualization, an admission of the ambiguous quality of things that requires a functional kind of ambivalent perception and response. Abu-abu is woven throughout the stories of the Marind and their various encounters. And, even as Chao launches into her most pyrotechnic contemplations, she proceeds with a measure of opacity, of abu-abu, that permits her to describe and wonder without collapsing into reductive analysis, generalization, or epistemic shortsightedness.

The first chapter opens the book with a multi-dimensional foray through the landscape of the Upper Bian. The Marind sense of place, with its dynamic realms of relationality and other-than-human presences, finds itself entangled with a militarized network of plantation agribusiness infrastructure. Roads, guardhouses, and military garrisons disfigure the landscape, provoking various forms of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance. The next chapter describes an attempt to map this mutable and contradictory landscape; improvised mapping techniques simultaneously utilize and rupture conventional Western cartographic praxis. Chapter 3 shifts onto the body, exploring the somatic reciprocity central to Marind relationality. The Marind notion of *wetness* explains an important correspondence between sweating skins and a refined sensitivity to interspecies entanglements which must be negotiated with intelligence and care. The ambiguity of Marind interspecies relationships finds memorable characterization in the next chapter, “The Plastic Cassowary,” featuring Ruben, a domesticated bird who becomes host to a variety of projections regarding the fate of the forest and of the Marind themselves. Chapter 5, “Sago Encounters,” describes the ecstatic labors of harvesting and processing sago, the beloved native palm that provides sustenance, belonging, and a means of reproducing collective identity. These life-generating qualities of sago are then countered in chapter 6 by a stark inversion of the theme; oil palm is cast within the field of violence plaguing the landscape, and central to Chao’s argument, is described as possessing a destructive will of its own. The final chapters culminate in an atmospheric apex of abu-abu as time itself and the Marind dreamspace become liminal battlegrounds where oil palm is both an incursion and an orienting object from which spring novel forms of collective resistance and meaning.

In the Shadow of the Palms stands out for its courageous attempt to apprehend and translate the internal experience of the Marind community. Meticulous descriptions of interactions with various animal and plant species evidence a profound intersubjectivity of human and environment in the Marind world. Moreover, these encounters with multi-

species entanglements often reveal how the Marind accommodate and assimilate the spiritual and material incursions inflicted by expanding oil palm production. For instance, the cassowary displaced from its forest habitat becomes a domesticated bird who lives in the village among the Marind. He becomes a “plastic bird,” tolerated and cared for, but never embraced as a pet. The cassowary, according to the Marind, belongs in the forest, and should be encouraged to return there. The cassowary also serves as a reflection of the Marind’s own alienation from their multi-species kinship with the forest.

The second chapter, “Living Maps,” recounts a community-led participatory mapping journey which reveals insight into the somatic, multi-sensory ways the Marind experience and conceptualize space. Interspecies entanglements come to life here as the mapping group pursues a particular bird through the forest as it shows them the important locations to include in the map. Sounds, stories, and more-than-human perspectives conjoin with GPS coordinates to produce a multimedia immersive map that resists “the cartographic illusion of geographic fixity” of conventional Western maps, provoking fascinating questions regarding temporality and representation. The community mappers, for example, discuss whether the map should depict what was or what should be. Issues of power—who uses the maps, and for what ends—are critically scrutinized, revealing a sophisticated political acumen which the Marind employ in creative resistance to the destructive forces of oil palm and its attendant transformations.

Chao’s argument takes issue with recent theoretical trends in multispecies studies for their failure to engage “with Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, its limited consideration of the “human” category in the context of racializing assemblages, its uncritical celebration of interspecies entanglements, and its insufficient attention to unloving (rather than loved species, and its failure to approach violence itself as a multispecies act).” The evidence Chao provides in the form of thick ethnographic description and songs translations, stories, and dream accounts convincingly complicates the tendency to generalize plant-beings as either benevolent helpers, enigmatic tricksters, or passive, neutral fixtures. The reader is forced to reckon with oil palm as a causal agent implicit in the devastation of forests and rivers fouled by chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and the haunted dreams and bodies of the Marind people.

The argument, however, proceeds to account for the next logical query; How did oil palm get in this situation? What does it want? Where is it from? *In the Shadow of the Palms* engages with these questions at the scale of the local community and at a broader scale, situating global agribusiness within sweeping processes of historical and material planetary unraveling. The most rewarding answers, and perhaps the most disturbing, are those that Chao reveals in “the small places,” that is, in the everyday encounters with the Marind and the flora and fauna with which they relate. These threads are indispensable to the literature regarding the impacts of global production markets on indigenous peoples and landscapes, multispecies studies, or even critical cartography. If the reader can indulge Chao’s extensive tangential theorizing, which is spectacular in its own right, *In the Shadow of the Palms* is sure to bend one’s gaze upon a situated vision of robust humanness persisting amid profound changes, and of particular relational, ontological, and material entanglements that seem to tug on the broader planetary fabric in these calamitous times.

Competing Interests: The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Chao, S. (2022). *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*. Duke University Press.