

In the shadow of the palms: more-than-human becomings in West Papua.

By Sophie Chao

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A Book Review by

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The book *In the shadow of the palms; more-than-human becomings in West Papua* is written by Dr. Sophie Chao, a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award recipient and lecturer at the University of Sydney, Department of Anthropology. The book offers an account of Chao's 18-months of fieldwork in the Merauke region, Indonesia, and provides a vivid anthropological ethnography of the Marind peoples in one Papuan community. Chao's provocative research questions are presented on page 5, and the writing draws heavily on, and contributes importantly to, the environmental humanities, political ecology, posthumanistic, Indigenous, and critical race literatures.

The global industrial food system is a primary driver of biodiversity loss, and not unlike the encroachment of other agro-industrial products that threaten biodiversity around the world, the launch of the oil palm industry in the Merauke region in 2011 has rendered the once diverse and abundant landscape into a ravenous capitalist beast. Time in this region is measured by the arrival of the oil palm – life simply stopped as oil palm “devoured the forest” (p.4). While painting a vivid – if dark – scene, Chao beautifully describes not only the fraught landscape to which she arrived as a project officer for a human rights organization in 2011, but also how she began her journey into the ethnographic exploration of the Marind peoples in the region and their relationship to the oil palm.

In the introduction, Chao presents the socioecological and political landscape of the region without mincing words. Palm oil is enmeshed throughout our daily lives, often in invisible ways, from food products to cosmetics to detergents and fuel. Palm oil is present in about ½ of all packaged foods and is the most widely used vegetable oil globally. This means that, aware or not, many of us are complicit in the slow and daily violence of the palm oil agro-industrial complex.

However, in Chao's account, the Marind themselves do not point to “human actors, technologies, and market forces” as the main drivers of the destruction. Instead, the anthropocentric ontology is disrupted by centering the oil palm itself and its relations with the Marind peoples. Oil palm is resented as an invader, but also seen as an “exploited victim” to be pitied (p. 15). The story begins with a dense description of older (more-than-human) and newer (plant turn) epistemologies where “[t]he storied relations of plants and people ... speak powerfully to the ethical urgency of reimagining interspecies entanglements in an age of planetary undoing” (p. 9). Chao attempts to avoid “the colonization of ethnography” by “attending to the theory in

small places” which foregrounds the “vantage points held by communities at the margins” (p.7). In doing so, she successfully “reframe[s] the assumed human monopoly on violence as potentially yet another instance of human exceptionalism” (p.11) where “violence reveals itself as a multispecies act” (p. 5).

The book presents in sometimes jarring detail the kind of fieldwork experience many researchers can only dream of, fraught with tension, discovery, and life-altering experiences. Chao is forthright about her positionality and how she came into this work through her human rights advocacy. Even though Chao’s subjective lens is evident throughout the writing, through her “transformation from foreign friend to near-kin” – she presents a vivid and sometimes visceral window into the “embodied ways of knowing” of the Marind peoples in the region (p. 22).

In a few discomfiting descriptions, Chao’s methods include working under various guises and false identities, often for the purpose of safety and security (p. 23). Within the various false identities assumed during her fieldwork, Chao describes a necessary understanding with her hosts – having to choose “sides” in exchange for acceptance and cooperation.

In this way, Chao acknowledges the missing voices of many of the actors within this story; for example, the pro-palm villagers, state and corporate representatives, the military, and non-Papuan settlers. Rather than falsely bolstering the content, the transparency of the biases and deceptions add credibility and authenticity to the account. Engaging in activist-research assumes certain subjectivities. With that said, Chao involved the communities throughout the entire process from the “content of the book... what stories it would tell, in what order, and why” (p. 27). While engagement with the many actors who might offer alternative pathways into the topic of oil palm agriculture is missing, they would only have diluted the lived experiences of the Marind peoples that Chao has so richly described.

In Chapter 1 Chao continues to reveal the landscape, now from the Marind perspective. A graphic and haunting opening, in any other context, would come with a trigger warning. Chapter 2 explores the “power and politics” of representations of the landscape (p. 54). It counters hegemonic government map worlds with trajectories “guided by the movements and sounds of birds and mammals” (p. 58). In Chapter 3, Chao moves onto a description of the enmeshed nature of the “landscape itself ... as a source of nourishing wetness” (p. 80) and the body “anim”, or human, being in relation to the forest kin through various aspects of “wetness”.

In Chapter 4, the Marind grapple with the changing landscapes and relationships brought on and imposed by the oil palm industry, while Chapter 5 is presented as a “welcome hiatus from the oppressive violence” (p. 30) through an intimate view into the kinship between the Marind community and the protagonist of the prologue, the sago palm. Sago palms provide a staple food, but are also seen as sentient, ancestral spirits living in reciprocity with the Marind peoples. Chapter 6 provides a counterpoint of the oil palm; a source of resentment, curiosity, and pity. Chao navigates the tensions wrought by the alterity of the oil palm – both “near kin” through proximity and similarity to the native sago palm, and “alien colonist” by association with agroindustrial forces (p. 158). Chapter 7 explores the historical and new temporal landscape imposed by several historical colonial regimes and by the modern oil palm on Marind life worlds.

The final chapter is an intimate look into how the dream world creates alliances between all “oil palm victims” (p. 31) and how dream sharing is a collective, emancipatory, activity (p. 193).

Four of the eight chapters begin with interludes; dream stories of several Marind community members. These interludes are an important part of the story telling, each part of what Chao calls a “contrapuntal couplet” (p. 28). In poetry, a contrapuntal is comprised of separate but related poems which are independent but read together to understand – and enhance – the meaning of each part. As part of Chao’s intent to disrupt the colonization of ethnography, these dream stories are interwoven with theory and “scholarly concepts” to help her “grapple with the complexities of more-than-human worlds” and to help avoid “relegating Marinds’ words and deeds to mere anecdote or illustrative vignette” (p. 28).

Anyone new to posthumanist thinking, multispecies and more-than-human thought, as well as those already engaged, will be drawn in through an immersive description that foregrounds the oil palm itself as a “willful entity”. While the many adverse socioecological consequences of the oil palm industry have been extensively documented elsewhere, Chao provides a unique and important contribution through the voices of the Marind peoples.

Regardless of the reasons for engaging with this book - research purposes, general interest, understanding the destructive reach of palm oil, worldview exploration, etc. – Chao has provided something for everyone. While beautifully written, the language is at times dense, providing a veritable feast of ethnographic analysis, which reads like a dissertation in some places. Stories are interwoven with theoretical concepts – what Chao describes as nurturing “an ethos of intellectual inclusiveness and generosity” (p. 28).

The relevance to food studies, and particularly to this Food Matters and Materialities special journal issue, lies primarily in the wrought power relationships between capitalist palm oil producers, local and migrating farm workers, the regional and international anti-palm oil inhabitants and activists, and the complex and dynamic interspecies relations.

Evocative of the writings of Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway, and Michel Callon, Sophie Chao has written a striking ethnographic view of the Marind peoples’ entanglements with the palm oil industry in the Merauke region in West Papua, Indonesia. Whether we engage through conceptual thought or in a deeper, more visceral way that embraces “violence as a multispecies act” (p. 209), remains up to each of us.

About the Reviewer

Dr. Jennifer Marshman is a sessional faculty member and curriculum developer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her background as an Instructional Designer and a Registered Nurse allows her to bring a truly interdisciplinary lens to her community-centered, action-oriented research in urban political ecology and the environmental humanities. Her research has focused on a multispecies, whole-of-community, approach to creating inclusive and sustainable food systems.

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