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**Cover image:** “Marind elders at a land reclaiming ceremony in rural Merauke. Credits: Sophie Chao” by Dan McGarry.

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# In the shadow of the palms: More-than-human becomings in West Papua

By Sophie Chao, Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2022

## Sophie Chao

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In this inaugural TAJA Book Review Forum, we present a series of short commentaries from Australia-based anthropologists, offering insights and critical appreciation of Sophie Chao's new monograph, *In the Shadow of the Palms, More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* (2022 Duke University Press). The Book Review Forum includes a written contribution from participants in the University of Queensland Ethnography Reading Group,<sup>1</sup> and articles by scholars from the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, drawn from a public book launch in 2022 and a considered closing response from the author.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The UQ Ethnography Reading Group meets bi-monthly in person and on zoom. It comprises some 25 ECR and experienced anthropologists as well as anthropology-adjacent scholars. On August 5th, 2022, ten of us met to discuss Chao's work, and she joined us for the final 30 min, for which we thank Sophie for her time and generosity. Those named authors contributed writing and editing labour (order of authors according to order of document contribution) to this short response, a necessarily partial attempt to render our combined and diverging interests into a coherent text.

# Affective propositions, the plant turn, and critiques of development

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A good number of critiques of the ontological turn literature have been directed at its apolitical effects. By contrast, Chao's overtly political ethnography examines how Marind people with whom she worked articulate their ontological commitments within and against a diversity of worlds in West Papua; plantation industrial, militarised, city, village, and forest. Below we draw out just three dimensions of Chao's compelling book as these arose in our discussion and collaborative writing; matters of morality and agency associated with the 'plant turn', affect as methodological claim to the incommensurable otherness of ontological difference, and the rejection of development imaginaries in the Anthropocene.

For some, other-than-humans are implicated in the politics of social relations and may be construed as *actants*, possessing a kind of embodied catalytic potential (without the capacity for intentionality). Thinking with Marind and the 'plant turn', Chao casts plants as full agents, possessing the capacity to enact their own trajectories. Marind perspectives are generated in interspecies intersubjectivity drawn from 'skin and wetness' shared among forest kin. Marind share wetness by rubbing their skin with sago and through the loving sweat of communal labour to produce sago flour. While some Marind see oil palm as a cousin or 'kind of kin' to sago, and oil palm forges kin connections with some residents of the Upper Bian through shared wetness, overall, this individualistic monocrop refuses symbiosis. It extends over seized and cleared land, is removed to be processed, and returns as non-native food, cosmetics, and toiletries. Its agency is violent, similar to the gold extracted from the Amazon (in Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert's *A queda do céu* 2015), and it is compromised by what Ailton Krenak (in *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, 2019) refers to as a false unity of nature. Marind relationships with plants transcend a mere recognition of similarity as spatially proximate lifeforms. Rather, it is a relational similarity based on shared personhood. While some Marind may pity oil palm as a capitalist actor and tool, others like Chao's friend Darius deny its moral personhood; it is a being with 'no kin'. Oil palm is not free in its agentive destruction but created for and by capitalism. A common question is, if the other-than-human is indeed agentic, how does one hear their voice and seek consent? Further, if plants are considered persons, how is their morality determined as against



others, either individually (for example, sago as against oil palm) or collectively and emplaced, as in the ecosystem of the Upper Bian versus the incursion of highly industrialised monocrop plantations? In Chao's work, one clue to such moral questions may be the ethos of 'restrained care' employed by Marind. More broadly then, this ethnography got us thinking about how plant agencies fit into the complex problems of an unequal and ontologically plural planet.

The author's background as an NGO activist in West Papua provides stimulus for her intellectual insights into Marind worlds and personal experience of ethnographic fieldwork in a violent landscape. Uncomfortably for some, in the epilogue, Chao provides an account of her own dream of being mutilated by an Indonesian plantation field manager as he mutilated a sago tree. Beyond a direct account of feelings, the dream is the author affected by Marind peoples' relational logics; it proposes an immersion and comprehension of their worlds. The dream, and the many aspects of Chao's style of writing, provokes a parallel to Viveiros's (2002) question, what happens if the author betrays their language? Epistemological terms change when one *takes seriously* Other's worlds, modifying the researcher's speech. Chao's ability to dream is a claim to her achievement of this change and a betrayal of colonising anthropology. It is a mode of politicisation, promoting a decolonisation of anthropological thought and practice through affective, substantial, and symbolic shifts toward a Marind project. However, in telling us of her dreams of kin-making with sago and referring to and speaking for Marind 'friends' and 'companions' (rather than 'interlocutors' or other terms used by anthropologists), does Chao thereby subsume Marind ontological commitments into her political project?

Development as a material and temporal endeavour proposing a linear trajectory is at the forefront of the book's critical narrative. Counterposing her analysis of translations of Marind perspectives with oil palm company narratives featuring promises of economic growth, job opportunities, and progress, Chao highlights the incongruity between government and corporate views and Marind values relating to the forest and aspirations for a nourishing future. This difference is an argument for the prominence of peripheries, how 'out-of-the-way places' and peoples, subject to the resource frontiers of development, produce necessary commentaries on the gaps in and alternatives to globalising political economies. Escobar's (2015) proposal for a political project of 'relational ontology', encompassing 'a great network of interrelationships between minerals, microorganisms, aerial life (roots, trees, insects, birds), aquatic life and amphibians (crabs, shrimps, other mollusks and crustaceans, fish), and even supernatural beings that sometimes establish communication between the diverse worlds and beings' (p. 93) is a comparative example of alternatives. In this view Indigenous Peoples, from whom such perspectives emanate, have anticipated the 'pluriverse' as a rejection of development's violence in distilling a singular world from multiples (see also de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). Likewise, Chao considers the material, affective and temporal effects of extractive capitalism from the perspective of diverse beings (humans and other-than-humans) experiencing its violent intimacies. Her work invites us to reconsider categories of violence, kinship, domestication, time, and plant agencies, as these are cast in the political anthropologies of the ontological turn. The latter is an anthropological literature that, as we have only just had space to intimate, has been committed to thinking with Melanesian and Amazonian words. Chao's depiction of the Marind world of greyness and uncertainty (using the Indonesian-Malay term, *abu-abu*) recalled for some of us Tsing's (2012) proposal for attending to 'slow disturbance', how 'disturbed' or anthropogenic ecosystems still foster life for multiple species. While Marind are represented as 'rejecting hope', repudiating the temporalities of development and modernity, Chao's own dream projects a kind of dark hope, where the violence of the axe leaves human blood to mix with vegetal.

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# Picking our way through modernity

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There is so much to learn from *In the Shadow of the Palms*—but let me focus here on just a couple of reasons why I find the book so compelling and important. In shining a light on a particular social world, one over-shadowed by burgeoning oil palms, Sophie Chao reveals the multiplicity and complexity of the relations of Marind people of West Papua with what we would call their environment—though the distinction of self and environment is meaningless in their cosmology. With impressive panache, Chao positions the enchanted life worlds of the Marind against the simplifying, violent plantation regime. But then she shows us the intricate ways in which the lives of the Marind might become entangled in oil palm plantations, enmeshed with that invasive species and avatar of settler colonialism.

Chao could have presented us with the facile binary of the Marind versus the plantation; or nature lovers versus the violent culture of the Plantationocene; or local heterogeneity and situatedness versus globalising homogeneity. Instead, she shows us the complexity and messiness of interrelations and meaning-making on the plantation borderlands. Thus, what might have been a conventional exploration of multispecies relations—the connections and disconnections of sago palms and oil palms, of cassowaries and humans—is transformed when viewed through the powerful and complicating lens of Indigenous knowledge. Even so, Chao refuses to structure this as an ontologically enclosed space, an absolute difference in mindset and lived experience. We learn how the Marind theorise their own world, how they find a place for predatory oil palms within it, how they might even come to care for the intruders. Issues of concern and care come to shade a narrative structured more openly around threat and danger.

*In the Shadow of the Palms* takes us beyond the standard binaries of modern and primitive; culture and nature; acceptance and rejection. Based on her sensitive rapport with Marind, Chao is able to reconstruct their sense of the possibilities of being in the world, without resorting to temptations of ontological monism. As she puts it, a sensitive hermeneutic engagement allows us to dwell in ‘the generative spaces that lie *between* the counterpoints of good and dark’ (p. 13). She conjures for us what Marind call *abu-abu*, which encompasses, in her words again, ‘ambiguous affects and atmospheres, things and beings, and spacialities and temporalities’ (p. 14). It is an enigmatic, polysemous world inhabited by plastic cassowaries and anthropophagic oil palms.

To be sure, there are moments in the book, especially in the early chapters, when the oil palm plantation seems to be more a death zone than a contact zone. We learn about the ‘dystopic effects’ of the plantation, the devastation and monotony, the logic of colonial mastery, its ecological simplification. Marind tell the anthropologist that oil palms do not hug back. They gain little value from their encounters with the intruders, the invasive species. Chao confirms that ‘not



all plants are necessarily good to *live with*' (p. 206). Indeed, Marind experience dreams of being violently consumed by the oil palms—which reveal both human anxiety and desire for proper relations. But as the author shows us time and again, it's far more complicated than we first imagined. Marind in practice manage to reanimate the foreign, invasive creatures, bestowing on them, Chao tells us, 'manifold heterogeneous meanings in transition and friction' (p. 211).

*In the Shadow of the Palms* represents, above all, a deeply ethical project. Ethical in the sense of giving voice to otherwise marginalised and silenced people; and ethical in its broader existential ambitions. Chao feels, in her words, 'the ethical urgency of reimagining interspecies entanglements in an age of planetary undoing' (p. 9). Her book therefore explores 'the meaning of the good life in light of [Marind] conceptions of morality, relatedness, and interspecies care' (p. 12). It's hard to overstate the ethical force of her narrative. This is a book we all need to read: it speaks to the current predicaments facing all of us. It is a story of how, as Chao says, 'an out-of-the-way Indigenous community "make do" in the context of a slow and more-than-human omnicide' (p. 213). *In the Shadow of the Palms* should cause us to reflect on our own responses to the same growing challenges—and to imagine what could be learned from Marind.

Like all good books, *In the Shadow of the Palms* left me wanting even more. I hoped to find out more about what Marind made of the fledgling anthropologist among them, what they thought she might be doing. And what do they make of the book? What relations has this new foreign object created among them? Also, at times I thought the plantation-adjacent ethnography was a little too distant from the plantation itself, which lurks in the background as an obscure and threatening presence, with its own (not necessarily Marind-inflected) multispecies relations, labour regimes, and gendered or racialised dynamics. We need West Papuan or even Kalimantan labour ethnographies and agribusiness ethnographies situated in the midst of the plantation, not alongside it, to supplement this wonderfully stimulating and provocative book. Evidently, palms are good to think with...

In lighting up the area of darkness under these particular oil palms, Sophie Chao has revealed possible new routes out of the environmental degradation afflicting our vulnerable planet—or at least, other means of inhabiting and surviving our despoiled earth. She is showing us the paths we might take, following Marind, as we pick our way through modernity. For this we should be grateful.

# The place of dreams in *In the Shadow of the Palms*

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Sophie Chao's *In the Shadow of the Palms* incorporates discussion of dreams. In this short response to Chao's powerful and gripping book, I focus on the place of dreams in this work. Chao uses dreams, I argue, to further illuminate Marind relations with oil palm, which is the central focus of this book. Dreams also provide insight into the subjective transformations that ethnographic research might wrought as the anthropologist becomes absorbed into another reality, which in turn is absorbed into the anthropologist's body and psyche. Further, the presence of dreams in this work underlines the lingering disturbances that often accompany anthropologists back into their other lives.

In opening, Chao writes of flimsy 'dreams of "modernity"' (p. 9) alluded to by the Indonesian state, which talks of developing West Papua, which is imagined in racialised terms as primitive. There are vague promises of wage labour and compensation, of infrastructure, education and a greater stake in the cash economy. Instead, Indigenous Marind experience the loss of access to their forest home, increasingly subsist on nutritionally deficient instant noodles and are burdened with the poisonous externalities of large-scale monocropping. Any dreams of prosperity and 'progress' are just that, and the reality of contemporary life in Marauke is often frightening.

What has a larger and, I think, super stimulating place in Chao's work, are actual dreams; as in, creative night-time activity. Chao writes that oil palm expansion 'was radically reconfiguring Marinds' sense of place, time, and personhood—their bodies, their stories, *even their dreams*' (pp. 4–5, emphasis added). *In the Shadow of the Palms* details this reconfiguring.

Literary critic Mireille Juchau's arresting 2019 essay about dreams in Nazi Germany describes the dreams that were collected in the early 1930s by the Jewish writer and journalist Charlotte Beradt. Authoritarian society, Beradt showed, shaped the collective unconscious; she noted recurring symbols and preoccupations. Beradt quietly, carefully, and privately inquired after the dreams of people she trusted: recording these dreams was a dangerous activity. Beradt, Juchau writes, referred to these dreams as 'diaries of the night' (Juchau, 2019). Chao emphasises a very different practice of dream interpretation than that available to Beradt. Together, Marind pour over their own 'diaries of the night', which contain recurring symbols and preoccupations. The disturbance that dreams now represent is widely known among Marind and dreams are discussed and analysed collectively in the sago grove, in the forest and around the fire.

Chao documents terrifying dreams of becoming disoriented and lost in an oil palm plantation; dreams featuring screaming; dreams in which the life-sustaining waters of a river turn

black and oily and are choked with dead bodies. This is all highly sensate dreaming, and Marind describe being thirsty, extremely hungry, hot, and dry, and becoming immobilised. Being eaten by oil palm is a common mode of dreaming. Chao describes this as 'dysphoric' (p. 31). 'In the day,' Chao elaborates, 'oil palm ate the land as bulldozers razed hectare after hectare of forest.' She continues, 'In the night, oil palm consumed the bodies of slumbering men, women, and children haunted by its ghostly visitations' (p. 187).

Chao's attention to dreams also reveals the way anthropological commitments might reach deep inside of us and rearrange us. Chao eventually comes to dream in the forest like Marind. It's her capacity to also have these terrifying dreams of *sawit*, oil palm, that represents the culmination of the transformation of her own embodied being. That is, the culmination of a process where Chao shifts from being an outsider—originally an NGO worker, who returned as a PhD student—to become a part of the Marind world. Chao pounds sago, listens and learns to hear birdsong and the voices of rivers, and eventually begins to have menacing dreams about oil palm. The book closes with a very disturbing dream of Chao's, in which she is being bodily dismembered alongside a sago tree that is also being hacked into with a machete.

Finally, this close attention to the elusive, psychic, unbidden, uncontrollable phenomena of dreams throughout *In the Shadow of the Palms* underlies the hauntings of which Chao writes. There is no leaving behind this research. The Indonesian National Intelligence Service sent threatening messages to Chao after she left West Papua and returned to Sydney and a world awash with oil palm, present in so many of the everyday foodstuffs and toiletries we all consume. Many of Chao's interlocutors are deceased and many 'remain incarcerated for their activism' (p. 24). Others now work in the plantations they formerly opposed, 'eking out a precarious existence' (p. 24). Unable to return to West Papua, Chao is left to wonder at the Marind reception of her book, which has been translated into Indonesian. Chao is still visited by oil palm in her sleep, she tells us, and writes in the company of 'haunting thoughts and traces' (p. 24). As do we read.

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# Reflections

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The first thing that struck me about this book was the evocative title and cover illustration, both immediately drew me into a 'story' and a 'yarn', a deep listening moment. Sharing story and yarn-ing 'an Indigenous cultural form of conversation' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) is a well-established Indigenous research practise in Australia, coming from our own community experiences of sitting and engaging with each other sharing knowledge and thinking deeply about what each person is saying. I bonded with this book at first sight as it spoke to me of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in a place, Marind Country in West Papua, that I would travel to through the stories and yarns it would share. I am using Country as we, Aboriginal Australians use the word, capitalised for respect, it means our own place, our territories with whom we have an embodied relationship.

This is a book with profound scholarly messages delivered in a readable, engaging text. It is ethnography at its best, a deep journey into a world rich with meanings explained in accessible language that will engage and yarn with any reader whether they are an anthropologist or someone who just wants to meet the Marind and their disturbed palm oil damaged community. This is the deep anthropology aspired to by many but not often achieved. A text that shares the personal and familiar world of Chao in the Marind community, written involving the environment of the people being studied and their relationships with all that is in it. As we enter the book there is an image of palms reflected in water held in a stretched leaf, for me it is a metaphor for the Marind environment reflecting its own gaze back at the viewer inviting humans to engage with all that is in our world in an open dialogue. We are encouraged to look deeply into our environment and find ourselves within its systems. To engage with the other-than-human to obtain a deep understanding of our place as part of everything around us, not as a controller and certainly not as a destroyer.

Chao's approach is exemplary as a model for working with Indigenous people. She has had a long connection with the people with whom she collaborates. She practises deep listening not only to people but to everything in an environment. She shares the human practises that bring new other-than-human agents into Indigenous communities, sometimes lethal and wreaking total devastation. These are oil palms in vast plantations in the case of the Marind (p. 5). I feel the connection through my own grief about Snowy Hydro 2.0's activities in my own Ngarigu Country, the Snowy Mountains of Southeastern Australia. Snowy Hydro 2.0 is our 'other-than-human' actor deforesting, blasting, and coring the heart of my community, our Country. Snowy Hydro is not natural, it is a corporation, but it has taken on the character of an other-than-human agent in Ngarigu Country. It is a destructive life force that is changing our Country forever, damaging

it beyond repair. I see myself and my Ngarigu community in this statement of the experience of the Marind as they fight the other-than-human in their Country:

Upper Bian communities resist and refuse the darkness of the present and the precarity of futures both imposed and arrested through their daily interactions with human and other-than-human beings, their involvement in land rights campaigns and participatory mapping, and their emergent sense of solidarity as collective victims of the violence of oil palm (p. 12).

The relationship with palms and the Marind is a complex one, not of hate but one where the people must find a place in their world for palms. Not as destructive intruders, outsiders, but as confusing, destructive insiders. In the future will Marind women press their pregnant bodies against palms as they do to the sago. Sago is more than a staple. Its sap is like mother's milk and sago and unborn babies are given this chance to connect. Sago is the revered member of the community and babies live a life of interconnected mutual dependency with sago. Palms are never going to be lifegiving, but they are a part of life. The Marind ostracise nothing in their world but how will they develop a relationship with this other-than-human actor that brings such catastrophic destruction? Chao asks how palm oil and deforestation can ever be incorporated into the Marind's philosophy of life sustaining engagement with the environment? This is the heart wrenching dilemma for the Marind, will they choose to utterly reject the palms and go against their core thinking that everything in the environment has a place in their world. The Marind response to the other-than-human makes me wonder how my people, Ngarigu, will respond to the other than human hydroelectricity machine and deforestation in our Kunama Namadgi Snowy Mountains. Deforestation contributes hugely to global warming. How will we save our trees, our bush our 'plants with soul' (p. 8)?

Chao (p. 7) introduces the theory she finds in 'small places' among the hidden spaces. She speaks back to Global North ethnography. I too am part of a small place, Ngarigu Country, 'Kunama Namadgi'. We are barely considered to have ever existed, wiped out by scholarly discourses that are taken up by other Indigenous people who would prefer we do not exist. We are an inconvenient truth like the Marind who do not want their world destroyed and try to stand between the plantations and their own world. Against this theoretical background the destructiveness of the palm oil industry is poignant we can feel the pain of the environment. The world has agency, everything is animated. How do we support the agency of our own other-than-human that have been with us beyond time? We Ngarigu, like the Marind, also feel no 'Great Divide' (p. 9) This is how Indigenous people worldwide speak, think and live. This is what the Global North needs to learn from the Global South. The poem/story that serves as a prologue for the book sets this premise from the start. The 'interludes' continue this theme. Chao and her Marind collaborators in presenting their own stories, evoke a world of tender engagement and terrible dilemma. I am left asking myself, as an Indigenous person, how can a world that is so much a part of us, that nurtures and cares for us, include destructive forces that can never be managed and are beyond our capacity to include and engage? These introduced other-than-humans will be our end if we cannot find a way to stop their progress.

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# Multispecies violence, ontological murk, epistemic resistance: Insights from the West Papuan plantation frontier—A response

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Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the settler-colonized region of Merauke, West Papua, *In the Shadow of the Palms* examines how Indigenous Marind communities experience, conceptualize, and contest the adverse impacts of industrial oil palm expansion on their intimate and ancestral relations to the landscape and its diverse human and other-than-human lifeforms. Grounding its analysis in Indigenous Marind philosophies, practices, and protocols of multispecies relationality, the work engages with broader questions surrounding the necrobiopolitics of the plantation as a fraught contact zone, where introduced cash crops like oil palm come to embody and perpetuate the extractive and disciplining violence of “colonial racial capitalism” (Koshy et al., 2022).

As Warwick Anderson (2023) suggests, the Indigenous theories of life at the periphery of industrial monocrops presented in this work complicate seemingly facile binaries of all kinds – forest and plantation, human and non-human, near-kin and colonizer, among many others. This complexity surfaces most clearly in relation to the ontology of oil palm itself – a plant and person whom Marind resent as a threatening assailant of their multispecies life-world, but whom many also pity as a tragic victim to anthropogenic, institutional, and biotechnological manipulations that reduce it from lively organism to lethal capital. In reframing violence as a multispecies act, Marind thus push us to consider capitalism’s “biological allies” (Crosby, 2003) not just as destructive intruders but also, in Jakelin Troy’s (2023) terms, as “confusing, destructive insiders.” In rural Merauke, the presence and proliferation of these beings at once undermines and enlivens Indigenous communities’ speculations surrounding the form and possibility of multispecies justice (Chao et al., 2022) within plantations as landscapes that have and continue to be tethered to colonial imaginaries of modernity, development, and progress (Figure 1).

Grappling with the animacy of plants and animals, as Sally Babidge et al. (2023) note, raises challenging questions surrounding who gets to speak with, for, about, and against the more-than-human world in all its diversity, complexity, and situatedness. It points to the limits of the textual medium in conveying the richly sensory, affective, and kinesthetic dimensions of more-than-human relations.<sup>1</sup> Marind theories of change on the plantation frontier further prod us to expand the scope and subjects of an “anthropology of life” (Kohn, 2013) beyond



**FIGURE 1** Since 2008, Marind have seen vast swaths of their customary lands and forests converted to industrial oil palm plantations. Credits: Sophie Chao.

the realm of *bios*. In rural Merauke, these beyond-*bios* subjects encompass soils, rivers, and ancestral spirits, alongside corporate sorcerers, instant noodles, and aerial drones, who alternately sustain or threaten the Marind lifeworld. These entities do not fit comfortably with dominant secular scientific epistemologies of life. And yet, their effects and affects are also, if differently, central to what Felicity Schaeffer (2022: 2) terms “Indigenous sacredscience” – a scientific methodology of collective and distributed intelligence that “regenerates ancestral knowledges to sustain sacred intrarelativity with land” (see also Chao & Enari, 2021; Kimmerer, 2014; Stewart-Harawira, 2012).

Of equal importance within Marind onto-epistemologies is the power of dreams and dreaming that, as Eve Vincent (2023) evocatively draws out, diagnose the socio-environmental dis-ease provoked by the dismemberment and disfiguration of bodies and landscapes subject to the extractive, dispossessory violence of the plantation regime. Described by Marind as dreams of “being eaten by oil palm,” these harrowing nocturnal experiences constitute forms of “creative nighttime activity” (Vincent, 2023) that create unexpected oneiric solidarities among Marind and their forest kin as collective victims to the harms caused of relentlessly expanding monocrops. At the same time, dreams of “being eaten by oil palm” are replete with uncertainty, unknowability, and unintelligibility. They speak to a world of pervasive *abu-abu*, or “greyness,” whose dwellers’ fates and futures are shrouded in opacity. In this growingly grey world, uncertainty troubles the stability and continuance of everyday life. But uncertainty also represents a space of speculative possibility – a form of covert refusal that subverts the exclusions and erasures often produced by fixed or static classificatory schemes.

Distributed across the waking and sleeping realms, epistemic murk profoundly shapes how Marind thinkfeel their way through the wounded terrains and textures of the plantation as an ecological formation and affective infrastructure that is animated by sequential and synchronous processes of extinction, extraction, and emergence (Chao, 2022a). Epistemic murk makes space for uncanny, liminal entities who find themselves caught betwixt and between “tradition” and “modernity” – village-bound cassowaries, plastic foods, shape-shifting corporations, and



**FIGURE 2** Roadkill - one of many manifestations of multispecies violence on the Papuan plantation frontier. Credits: Vembri Waluyas.

animals-turned-roadkill (Figure 2). Epistemic murk also constitutes a form of resistance – that is to say, a refusal to reduce any particular entity (including oil palm) to any singular, static reality, and instead a recognition of any being or body’s positioning with broader systems of power and vulnerability, that in turn multiply their respective and relational morality, meaning, and mattering.

Troy powerfully captures this affective core in describing the Marind lifeworld as one of “tender engagement and terrible dilemma”. Engagements and dilemmas also haunt and heighten the ethical stakes of a work crafted over my decade-long relationship with Marind communities as a former human rights advocate and as an engaged anthropologist. In the book, I characterize this relationship in the language of friendship and companionship – but of course, it is a relationship replete with necessary conundrums surrounding what even the most deep (Troy, 2023) and decolonial-driven (Babidge et al., 2023) of ethnographic accounts can do *for*, and *with*, the places and peoples they describe. Over time, an anthropologist may learn to walk, eat, sing, and dream in time with their fellows in the field. The knowledges I was entrusted with by my companions in West Papua, both human and other-than-human, have transformed my modes of thinking and being in ways that vastly transcend the scope of scholarly practice. And yet, the risk of subsuming others’ onto-political commitments within one’s own remains with me as this work begins to take on a life of its own through the readings and responses of its diversely positioned and motivated audiences (Figure 3).

As the respondents to this work intimate, and as foregrounded in particular within Anderson’s (2023) commentary, *In the Shadow of the Palms* is an invitation to imagine more-than-human futures otherwise in an age of planetary unmaking. It is a call to centre the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples who are most deeply and directly mired in the fraught predicament of biocultural loss and destruction. It is also a return of sorts on the many and genuine risks that my Papuan companions faced in accepting me into their world – risks that they, as much as I, are acutely aware may be further heightened by the book’s distribution and dissemination.





FIGURE 3 Sharing dreams of being eaten by oil palm in the village. Credits: Vembri Waluyas.



FIGURE 4 Marind elders at a land reclaiming ceremony in rural Merauke. Credits: Sophie Chao.

Craig Santos Perez, a Chamorro poet, scholar, and friend, recently reminded me that stories of loss and destruction can be heartbreaking, but they need not be devoid of hope.<sup>2</sup> The Indigenous narratives presented in this book convey the complex, nuanced, and incisive ways in which Marind communities story the plantation through its two-fold ontology – as a ravaging embodiment of colonial capitalist modernity, *and* as a birthing ground, or fertile plot (Wynter, 1971), for the enactment of everyday and epistemic acts of refusal and resurgence. It is in this context that multispecies violence, ontological murk, and epistemic resistance come to constitute manifestations of Indigenous creativity, continuance, and critique. And it is in this spirit that *In the Shadow of the Palms* aims to tell “better, bitter stories” (Chao, 2022b: 25) about life and death in an epoch of intensifying anthropogenic activity (Figures 4 and 5).

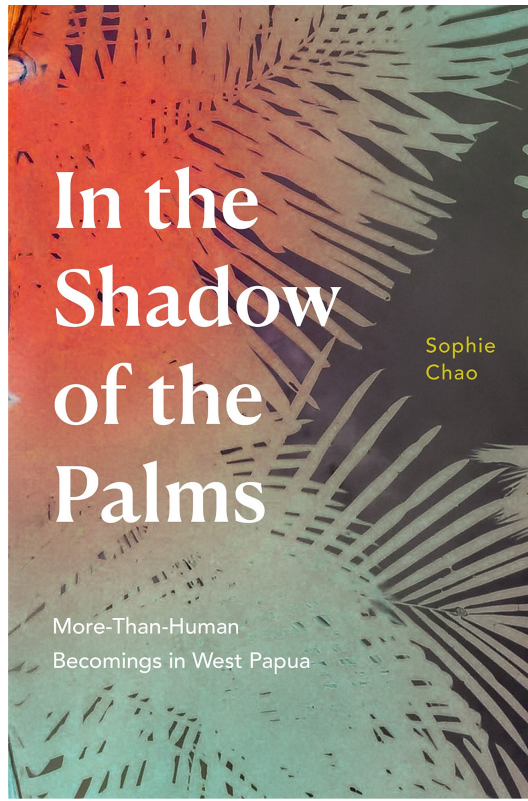


FIGURE 5 In the Shadow of the Palms. Cover. Credits: Duke University Press.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The trailer that accompanies this book seeks to offer to audiences a sense of these auditory and visual dimensions, thereby complementing the narrative encompassed within the text itself. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOn1dbxUa1k>.
- <sup>2</sup> Craig Santos Perez, Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Center (SSSSHARC) Ultimate Peer Review symposium, 15 September 2022.

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