



Vembri Waluyas
Remains of a cassowary salvaged from a monocrop plantation by Marind villagers, photograph, 2021
© Vembri Waluyas

In the shadow of the palms

Centered on Sophie Chao's new book, *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*, this conversation between the author and *Antennae* Editor Giovanni Aloï considers the empirical and intellectual context and contributions of the work, its ethical and conceptual insights into the moral subjectivity of plants as actors and resources, and the forms of radical imagination, hope, care, and justice offered by Indigenous philosophies, practices, and protocols of interspecies relationality in the midst of plantationocene disruption and planetary unraveling.

in conversation: **Sophie Chao**
and **Giovanni Aloï**

Palm oil is the world's most ubiquitous and versatile vegetable oil, present in over half of all packaged goods on supermarket shelves. It is also one of just four commodities driving the majority of tropical deforestation and the second largest driver of global warming after beef production. Across the Global South, oil palm plantations dramatically reduce biodiversity, threaten endangered species, and undermine critical ecosystem services. The adverse consequences of monocrop expansion on the livelihoods, food security, and land rights of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities have also been widely documented. These impacts are particularly pronounced in Indonesia, the world's top palm oil producing country today and home to the first oil palm monocrops, established in the early 1900s.

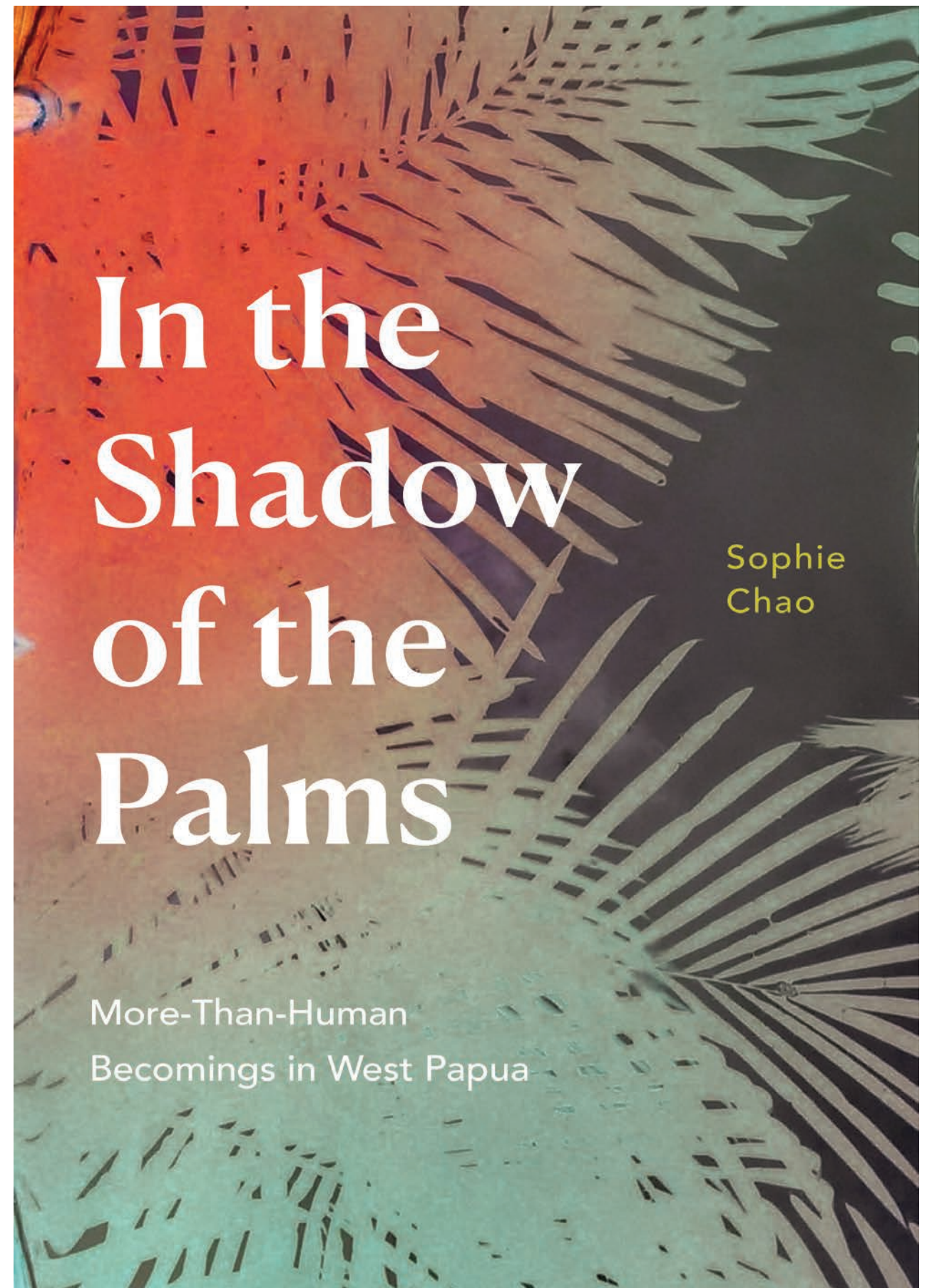
But how is oil palm, as plant and product, understood by Indigenous Peoples in the places where it is introduced and industrially cultivated? How might Indigenous views of this proliferating plant shed light on larger questions about the relationship between human and other-than-human life? And how can Indigenous epistemologies inform scholarly attempts to grapple conceptually and empirically with the lifeworlds of more-than-human entities, like oil palm, whose ontologies are both lively and lethal?

Drawing on eighteen months of fieldwork in the Indonesian-controlled region of West Papua, *In the Shadow of the Palms* explores how oil palm's arrival reconfigures the landscape, interspecies relations, notions of time, and dream experiences of Indigenous Marind communities. The book examines the conflicting moral, symbolic, and political meanings that Marind attribute to the introduced oil palm, and how these contrast with the form and attributes of the native sago palm. It situates the social and environmental transformations wrought by deforestation and monocrop expansion in the context of West Papua's violent and volatile history of political colonization, ethnic domination, and capitalist incursion. Working with and across species categories and hierarchies, the book analyzes how the proliferation of industrial monocrops subverts the futures and relations of some lifeforms while opening new horizons of possibility for others.

By approaching cash crops as both drivers of destruction and subjects of human exploitation, *In the Shadow of the Palms* makes a compelling argument for rethinking capitalist violence as a multispecies act. Its empirical grounding in Indigenous experiences and modes of analysis offers a critical counterpoint to the primarily Western-centric and technoscientific focus of posthumanist studies to date. Taking oil palm as its central protagonist, the book makes a timely contribution to our understanding of changing human-environment relations in an age of planetary unraveling.

Giovanni Aloï: Sophie, your extremely timely and thought-provoking book titled *In the Shadow of the Palms* examines the multispecies entanglements of oil palm plantations in West Papua, Indonesia, showing how Indigenous Marind communities understand and navigate the social, political, and environmental demands of the oil palm plant. Can you tell us how the idea for this book came about and what you hope the book will do?

Sophie Chao: Firstly, immense gratitude for being in conversation with me, Giovanni, and for engaging with my work. The idea for *In the Shadow of the Palms* germinated over the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the Indigenous Marind People of West Papua whom I have had the immense privilege to think with and learn from this last decade – first in the capacity of human rights advocate for the UK-based NGO Forest Peoples Programme and subsequently as a doctoral and postdoctoral researcher. My initial engagements with the Marind communities whose experiences and theories are centered on the work brought to the fore how industrial oil palm expansion is undermining Indigenous Papuans' rights to lands, resources, and livelihoods. And



yet over time, as I shifted positionality from activist to ethnographer, I came to realize that this story of Indigenous dispossession under the plantation regime was also a story of *more-than-human* loss, endings, and violence. Plants and animals mattered to this story because they too were caught up in chains of living and dying that were being radically reconfigured by the introduction of oil palm monocrops into Marind's customary forests and groves. Marind thus brought me to expand my understanding of the animacies and actors who affect and are affected by large-scale agribusiness developments, in ways that I had not anticipated.

In foregrounding these more-than-human dynamics, as they are lived and understood by Indigenous communities themselves, I hope the book can invite readers to reimagine themselves within broader, multi-scalar systems of violence and power, within which non-human entities play important if often under-acknowledged, roles. These entities might appear remote or out-of-the-way and yet they are very much present in our own everyday lives. Oil palm, for instance, might be grown in distant resource frontiers of the Global South like West Papua – and yet it is found in over half of all goods on our supermarket shelves. This substance, together with its systems of production and labour, thus connect us to people like the Marind in all kinds of destabilizing and therefore consequential ways. Staying with the trouble of these partial connections matters, I think, in reimagining more-than-human relations in this age of ecological unravelling, when industrial activities are undermining conditions of life at a planetary scale. Another related aim of the book is to foreground the complex, creative, and critical ways in which Indigenous Marind themselves understand and theorize the socio-environmental transformations reshaping their more-than-human worlds. This is as much a conceptual as a political move. It seeks to push away from a theory-ethnography divide, and instead acknowledge Indigenous People as active producers of knowledge – as people whose ways of knowing and persist despite the attritive effects of global industrial capitalism and its entrenched colonial genealogies.

GA: What does it mean to be an environmental anthropologist today and to write from “a place of grief and loss”?

SC: There are so many ways to approach these two important questions and their equally important interconnections. For me, being an environmental anthropologist today involves attending to the specificity of everyday social life and ecological relations, as apprehended through immersive ethnographic fieldwork, in their relation to broader processes and forces across disparate scales and locales. One such broader force is, of course, the Anthropocene – this epoch of intensifying industrial activity that is reshaping the Earth at geological and planetary scales. An environmental anthropological approach to, and in, the Anthropocene, seeks to think-with the universal or planetary, but without sacrificing the granularity of situated biocultural lifeworlds and their equally situated human and more-than-human actors. Thinking across different scales of matter and meaning is challenging, but necessary. It works hand in hand, in my view, with the need to acknowledge critically one's own positionality as dwellers of a wounded planet, and also in the case of anthropologists specifically, as the inheritors of a discipline that has itself been instrumental – or instrumentalized – to serve the ends of racial colonial capitalism and its enduring social and environmental impacts. This means studying and writing from a place of non-innocence and impurity – not as realities that pre-empt the possibility of meaningful anthropological research or engagement, but rather as realities that invite, or rather demand, an explicit recognition of the kinds of complicities that make this research and engagement all the more necessary.

Grief and loss are important starting points in the practice of envi-

ronmental anthropology, because they are so much part of the lived experience and everyday dynamics of the communities and peoples whom many of us study. The Marind People of Merauke, for instance, know deforestation and oil palm expansion through their devastating impacts on sentient forest ecologies, whose destruction gives rise to profound sadness and desperation among those who have traditionally sustained and lived from them. To write from a place of grief and loss forces one to stay with the enormity of what Anthropocenic ruptures mean for communities who are most deeply and directly mired in the fraught predicament of interspecies violence and loss. At the same time, other kinds of affective dispositions animate the story of loss in places like the West Papuan oil palm frontier. Rage. Anger. Frustration. But also refusal, resistance, survivance, and wonder. Together, this affective weave serves as the grounds for action and protest, alongside mourning and grieving. The biggest challenge in writing *In the Shadow of the Palms* was to strike a balance between narratives of destruction and defiance, and suffering and survivance, because both are equally central to Marind ways of being and knowing and acting in the plantation as a necropolitical assemblage. The question then arises: how do we do justice in our scholarly writings to the ravages and ruins produced by industrial activities, while also bringing to light the possibilities for more-than-human caring, coexisting, and coalition-building that endure despite everything working to undermine these possibilities? In what ways can loss and grief be harnessed in anthropological narratives to activate ways of being in the world that are more just, accountable, and responsible? And just as importantly, whom are we undertaking these intellectual and engaged projects in the pursuit of environmental justice about, with, and for?

GA: Which researchers and books have come to define your professional positioning and authorial voice?

SC: I cannot presume to do justice in my answer to the astoundingly rich and diverse ecology of scholars and scholarship that have and continue to inspire me, but let me name just two. Anna Tsing's call for critical descriptions of more-than-human sociality, and in particular, her monograph *Mushroom at the End of the World*, helped me immensely in trying to craft narratives that made space for vegetal and animal beings as fleshly, consequential beings, caught up in often uneven relations with their human counterparts.¹ Anna's more recent collaborative work on the plantation as a “patchy landscape,” replete with ecological simplifications but also feral proliferations, was also incredibly useful in moving away from black-and-white representations of the monocrop as a space of extraction and extinction only. This work further helped me approach the topic of more-than-human relations through a phenomenological, or multisensory, methodology – one that is invoked and invited by other scholars including Thom van Dooren, María Puig de la Bellacasa, Donna Haraway, and Robin Wall Kimmerer.

I've also been hugely inspired by the work of Māori political theorist Christine Winter, whose latest book, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, is anchored in the lived and embodied intergenerational coexistence of humans and nonhumans.² In this work, Christine invites crucial reconsiderations of some of the most fundamental elements of social flow and flourishing – from personhood, time and subjectivity, to groundedness, relationality and more-than-human dignity, all within a totality that includes more than the now, more than the individual, more than the human and, indeed, more than the living. *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, to me, is vital in the way it powerfully and poetically dismantles entrenched assumptions within Western justice theories, both delegitimizing and undermining these theories' presumed universality. Such assumptions include exclusionary and hierarchical ideologies of individu-



Sophie Chao
Oil palm concession
in rural Merauke,
photograph, 2019
© Sophie Chao



Sophie Chao

A group of young Marind men in the sago grove of the Basik-Basik (pig) clan, photograph, 2018
© Sophie Chao

ualism and anthropocentrism, reductionist and instrumental understandings of materiality and property, and linear and progressivist logics of temporality. But rather than simply reversing the power asymmetries at play between Western and Indigenous theories and practices of justice, Winter makes the compelling argument that all members of settler societies can benefit from embracing aspects of Indigenous philosophies and values that push against the fictive and impoverished separation of the human from the non-human, and of the individual from its constitutive relations.

As for my own authorial voice, I think this is something I'm still working on! In one sense, the way in which *In the Shadow of the Palms* is written, and the way I present this work in talks and conference, is inspired first and foremost by the ways in which my Marind companions themselves narrate and story their rapidly changing lifeworlds. These narratives often involve repetitions, rhythms, and refrains – a kind of incantatory style that is at once poetic and political, conceptual and impressionistic, critical and creative. These are narratives that would often begin strong, but then trail off into silence and uncertainty, and that therefore remained in many ways open-ended and speculative, rather than conclusive or final. They are narratives that bring to life forest worlds not just through their ideational meanings, but also through their sounds, sights, smells, and textures – through the practice of being there and in the process, possibly becoming otherwise. I tried to do justice to these Indigenous modes of expression in the work, while also weaving into the fold the ways and words of scholars like Tsing, Winter, and others, who are revitalizing environmental knowledge in distinct yet complementary ways.

GA: I am particularly interested in your conceptual approach to plants and how

it may or may not align with current trends in the mainstream field of plant studies. I am more specifically referring to the anthropomorphic poeticizations of some books like *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and other authors who are trying hard to cast plants as wholly benevolent beings. In your book, you propose that “we take seriously the possibility of plants [...] as immoral subjects”. Can you tell us more?

SC: This invitation – or perhaps, this provocation – stems from the ways in which my Marind companions in West Papua understand the being of oil palm, an introduced cash crop that is proliferating across their lands and forests in the guise of mega-scale, industrial plantations, to the detriment of native human, plant, and animal communities of life. While Marind are well aware of the human actors and institutional forces driving agribusiness expansion, their understanding of the plantation form often centres on oil palm itself – a plant that, like the organisms it displaces, Marind consider to be a sentient, agentive being, endowed with its own particular dispositions, desires, and effects. Yet unlike native forest beings, who know how to live symbiotically with each other and with humans, oil palm is often described by Marind as a destructive, greedy, and foreign entity. The plant devours land and drinks up rivers, its insatiable appetite obliterating the ecologies necessary for Marind and their nonhuman kin to thrive. It is these and many other experiences that bring Marind refer to oil palm as an immoral “assailant”, a “killer”, and an “enemy of the forest” – one who, alongside the Indonesian state, settlers, and soldiers, perpetuates the colonization of West Papua in a vegetal guise.

To take seriously the notion of oil palm as an immoral actor, as I do in the book, invites us to reconsider violence as a multispecies act – one in which, as I write, “humans are not always the perpetrators, and non-humans not always the victims”. As the experiences of Marind with oil palm poignantly convey, not all plants are necessarily good to live with. In staying with this claim, the book aims to push against uncritical celebrations of interspecies entanglements as necessary life-sustaining and mutually beneficial. It holds back from dressing these relations in the warming aura of emergence or generativity. Rather, it highlights the importance of distinguishing wanted from unwanted relations across species lines, both imposed and impossible, loving and unloving, and loved and unloved.

At the same time, it's important to note that the framing of oil palm as an appropriative and immoral being is only one part of this story. Marind resent and fear this plant for its destructive effects, but they express pity and compassion towards oil palm in light of its own subjection to industrial and human control. Oil palm's existence, my friends often reminded me, is regulated through countless biological and technological manipulations that dictate its development, form, and uses from seedling to commodity. It is artificially bred through controlled pollination, with seeds stored in plastic bags in urban laboratories, far removed from the plant's native soils. The plant's oil is forced out of its body through high-heat, high-pressure processes of mechanical extraction, which people would list to me and describe as forms of “violence” – sterilization, threshing, steaming, mulching, boiling, cracking, filtering, stripping, winnowing, crushing, diluting, purifying, clarifying, fractionating, churning, pressing, and more.

Marind's animosity towards oil palm as an immoral plant-being thus works hand in hand with a recognition on their part that oil palm, too, has a fleshly, storied existence—with other beings, in other places, and at other times. Rather than “either or” between different states of being, oil palm exists to Marind as a series of opposite yet accretive “ands” – assailant and victim, plant and person, alien colonist and potential near-kin. There is something immensely powerful in the way Marind refuse to reduce oil palm to any one



Sophie Chao
*Oil palm seedlings
ready for transplant-
ing into an oil palm
concession, photo-
graph, 2019*
© Sophie Chao

identity. It constitutes a form of resistance to the simplifying regime of the plantation itself – a material formation and enduring logic that is rooted in the pursuit of homogeneity, singularity, and mastery over plants as resources and plantations as systems.

GA: Your book offers an important methodological blueprint for the foregrounding of the chain of interrelations between more than human beings, humans and land. I am particularly interested in the opportunities this model may bear. I understand your book in the context of contemporary multi-species ethnography, and I think that it is extremely successful in that context. The assimilation of information often results in a process of fetishization that other than western cultures are very vulnerable to. I say this in relation to a review I read last year of Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* that I found heart-breaking. The reviewer admitted that Kimmerer's book made her feel a sense of irreparable loss in the sense that her western/capitalist focussed upbringing had led to a radical distancing from nature that impoverished her life. It was clear that she could get a sense of the gravity of her loss through Kimmerer's words and yet it was not quite clear how she intended to make up for that loss in her own life based on what she had learned. If we can't extract life-changing tools from the books that currently recover histories of interconnectedness then there is a serious risk that these histories will remain stories—fables of a better world that exists or existed for someone else in a remote place to which we have no access.

SC: I want to go back to the very first thing you said about the story being heart-breaking. I was discussing this book recently with Craig Santos Perez, a brilliant Chamoru (Chamorro) poet, activist, and scholar from Guåhan/Guam, who talked about how stories can be heartbreaking, but not hopeless. At the time, I couldn't figure out what Craig meant – I couldn't quite wrap my head around how stories of destruction and loss could be devastating, but nonetheless still hold an aura of possibility. As you rightly say, so many of these narratives can end up having a paralyzing effect when they bring to the fore the often quite impoverished ways in which dominant ways of knowing and being shape how we interact with the more-than-human world. In that respect, I can totally relate to the reviewer's point.

I do however think there is the possibility of transposing or bringing in Indigenous concepts or analytics to other sites and scales and subjects. I'm thinking, for instance, about Marind theories of skin and wetness, which I explore in the book. This is the idea that all beings, including elements like earth and water, partake in a shared surface of the skin and that their survival and thriving is enabled through the transfer of life-sustaining wetness. Wetness takes all kinds of different forms – from blood, tears, sweat, and grease in humans and animals, to sap, starch, and resin in trees and plants, and also the wetness of raindrops, clouds, rivers, and mud. Taken together, skin and wetness are substances that connect us all. They are central idioms within Marind culture – but they are not limited to the Marind lifeworld in terms of their stretch, both literal and semantic. Skin and wetness, then, are good to thinkfeel with as we attempt to navigate changing realities and relations in the midst of planetary unravelling. They speak to ideas of embodied relationality that are at the core of so many Indigenous worldviews. They invite us to consider: how might we take on ideas of skin and wetness to rethink and rework our everyday material and bodily relationships to each other, within, across, and beyond species lines?

Fetishization is always on my mind in thinking through these questions, in particular, the risk of essentializing or romanticizing – and therefore reducing in a very plantation logic sort of way – the modes of being and of knowing



Sophie Chao

A group of young Marind men in the sago grove of the Basik-Basik (pig) clan, photograph, 2018
© Sophie Chao

of Marind people. But I think it's important to remember that romanticization can also constitute a political tool. Some Indigenous scholars, for instance, have argued that the perceived romanticization of Indigenous lifeways has to be situated and understood in contrapuntal relation to the attritive violence of settler-colonial rule, as a form of refusal and resistance.³ The question then arises as to how non-Indigenous scholars like myself should approach the question of romanticization. I've always found it most generative to consider this issue in conversation with my Marind companions, and also with Indigenous scholars whose works continue to challenge and nourish my thinking in equal measure. And yet still, it's always difficult to find a balance between acknowledging the differences that matter between Indigenous and Western worldviews and seeing the possibilities for coalitional thinking that exist across distinct cultural, historical, and social divides. Ultimately, we all inhabit this one Earth – and therefore all earths are rare earths. So again, we're back to the ethos of thinking through relations, connections and situatedness, and of acknowledging the genealogies of thought and action that undergird whatever philosophy or theory we draw on in this thinking – whether it is Indigenous onto-epistemologies, post-humanist approaches, or other intellectual and engaged currents and attendant communities of practice.

GA: Yes, I agree with you. What was heart-breaking to me about your book, especially in the introduction, was the sense of irremediable loss of so much. I think that what you capture extremely well in the introduction is a web—parts of which material and others that are invisible and yet extremely charged in an agential sense. Biological or ecological, these webs are all overlaid and intertwined, and once they are gone, they're gone. That's what I found particularly terrifying about your introduction, the way you described the sounds and smells of the devastation and loss. It reminds me of other minor, if you like, in comparison, moments of destruction that I have experienced in my life where I felt something of value was gone forever and that there was nothing I could do to change that. This is a very different story, but I think it's part of my interest in how we



Sophie Chao

Marind villagers listening to the multispecies sounds of the sago grove, photograph, 2015

© Sophie Chao

somewhat align our sensitivities, again, in my case not as an Indigenous person, but as an LGBTQI+ migrant from Italy. To me the question becomes about the possibility to read your experience not as simple information but so that I can partake in your experience in a way that can help me to better understand mine too.

While reading your book, I suddenly thought about this experience as a child when my parents would travel to the south of Italy in summer where they were born. We would drive from Milan to the southern tip of Calabria and at one point, on the freeway, a few miles of the highway's median section was planted thick with oleanders of different colours. They were huge—large shrubs covered in blooms. My mum would always say: “look, look—the oleanders!” It was a landmark moment that signalled the end of our trip and the true beginning of our holidays.

The other day I asked my parents if they remembered those beautiful oleanders. They haven't driven south for many years now because, of course, they're elderly and my dad can no longer drive, 16 hours straight. But it prompted me to do some online searching. I quickly found an article that was condemning the destruction of the oleanders in 2018. They were all cut down and replaced with a concrete wall. The author of the article claimed that there was absolutely no need for it, that it was an expensive thing to do that was probably motivated by some political/financial speculation. The article pointed out that the oleanders provided an important base for a unique ecological niche essential to pollinators in otherwise arid and flower-poor area. The plants also helped with water absorption in ways a concrete wall never could. Reading the news was a blow—it

felt like so much was lost for no good reason and that the loss was irreversible. Of course, there is no comparison between the devastation that you describe in your book and the oleanders that once grew on the Calabrian highway, but learning about this event while reading your book allowed me to think about scale, destruction, and the importance of destructions of all scales.

SC: Thank you so much for sharing that, Giovanni. If the book can spur this kind of response for one out of every hundred readers, if it can resonate with something personal that they've experienced, and even if it does mean taking the reader into the often harrowing spaces of finality and endings, if it can do that, then that's already something. In many ways, your anecdote conjures to me the Anthropocene as an epoch of loss and of the destruction of loss. By this I mean that loss in this era has become so generalized – indeed, planetary – that we can sometimes lose sense of its specificity because it is happening everywhere, anyhow, and everywhen. Our capacity to mourn particular, situated, and meaningful losses is undermined in the face of the seemingly unfathomable and insurmountable scale of destruction rippling across the earth. And this, as we discussed earlier, can be deeply paralyzing.

I was really marked by what you said about the beauty of these oleanders and the fact that they too are conducive to more-than-human thriving in all forms. The enormity of the destruction of these life-sustaining beings reminds me of the ways in which Marind speak about the importance of mourning the untimely death of non-human beings. The rubble of a felled forest, for instance, is something that Marind mourn through all kinds of emergent practices that have, paradoxically, flourished in the wake of the plantation.⁴ These practices include weaving sago fibre bags together in the forest, planting bamboo shoots on the outskirts of oil palm monocrops, singing the storied pasts and relations of roadkill, and offering these animals some kind of dignity and peace through ritualized burials and regular pilgrimages. Each of these acts of collective remembrance constitute forms of reckoning with death and loss, at the same time as they constitute forms of active resistance. By this I mean that in refusing *not* to grieve plant and animal deaths, Marind are also refusing a possibly even more tragic kind of death – the death of mourning itself, or the inability to mourn things deemed ungrievable under technocapitalist regimes. So perhaps there's something to be said about the power of mourning as form of resistance in an age of ecological endings.

Another thing that struck me when you were talking about the oleanders is the question of what multispecies violence looks and feels like, and for whom. Because I've spent so much time trying to understand Marind eco-philosophies and eco-praxiologies through long-term participatory immersion, I have come to perceive and respond to oil palm plantations through what they have destroyed and replaced – that is to say, a multitude of shared human and other-than-human skins and wetnesses, now substituted with the deadening and silent singularity of an industrial monocrop. But of course, not everyone perceives plantations in this way. For instance, I remember flying into Kuala Lumpur next to a group of British tourists who were coming to visit orangutans in a national conservation zone in Malaysia. Looking down below during the last stretch of this flight, one beholds a sea, an ocean of oil palm for miles on end. My companions exclaimed with admiration how incredibly neat, orderly, and beautiful the forest below appeared – so green and lush and vast. I had to break it to them that this wasn't in fact a forest at all, and instead an industrial oil palm plantation. I could read the shock on their faces. They became flustered, then a bit annoyed. Eventually, one of them responded, “Okay, sure, it's not a traditional forest – but it's still trees. Lots of trees. It's a modern forest”.

This powerful and troubling statement – “it's a modern kind of forest” – got me wondering, are plantations the forests of the future? Clearly, these individuals

were reading a different kind of aesthetic in the regimented landscape below – one that spoke to orderliness as a kind of beauty to be valued and celebrated, even if that orderliness was replacing biodiverse lifeworlds. This was vastly different from how I or Marind would have read this landscape. It reveals that what counts as multispecies violence is, in many ways, perspectival.

GA: You say at the beginning that climate change, according to Indian novelist Amitav Gosh, is “nothing less than a crisis of culture and thus the imagination”. Then you disagree with that point. You say that it’s “not the failure of imagination itself that is the issue”. So, there is something of a deeper problem in this context. And you go on to say that “rather the problem lies in the exclusionary scope of voices and being needed and represented by current dominant climate imaginaries. Imaginaries that remain firmly anchored in and perpetuate the logic of human mastery over a nature recast as a passive material substrate meaningful only to the extent that it is useful to certain humans”. This is very beautifully and sharply put. And I think there’s an interesting question here about imagination and imaginary. The idea of what we can imagine is really interesting to me. I feel like there’s enormous potential there. But there’s also an authorial pressure. It’s that who am I to imagine? Where can I imagine? And I don’t mean that as necessarily a dismissive, self-reflective form of punishment or self-censorship or self-regulation, but also, as in part, questions of what are these imaginaries that are useful and productive that are essential to this future?

SC: You reading that sentence made me realize once more that I need to write shorter sentences! Thanks for picking up on this. As a bit of context, the quote comes from an article that was published in 2021 in the interdisciplinary journal *e-Tropic* and that I co-authored with a wonderful Indigenous Samoan colleague, Dion Enari, who is a lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology in Aotearoa/New Zealand and who holds the Ali’i Tulafale (High Talking Chief) title Lefaoali’i from Lepa, Samoa. Writing this piece with Dion in itself was a really wonderful apprenticeship for me.⁵ It meant having to learn how to weave our respective insights as Pacific scholars together, with the aim of coming up with a toolkit of sorts for reimagining the imaginary and the kinds of methods that we can use to that end. Central to this toolkit towards decolonial imaginaries are the principles of relationality, beyond-humanness, storytelling, multisensoriality, emplacement, reflexivity, transdisciplinarity, and radicality.

One thinker whom I cite in the article, and who has helped me think through the powers and perils of the imagination, is the critical race scholar Ruha Benjamin, who describes in a podcast the imagination as a kind of battleground.⁶ Ruha cautions against understanding the imagination as a lovely, rosy vision of what might happen next, and that will be better than what is now. The imagination, she notes, is also and often a space of conflict, violence, and friction where different imaginations and imaginaries vie or compete with one another to assert their relative supremacy or primacy. So, I suppose what the article was trying to do in relation to that was to point to the ways in which imaginaries are always accompanied by oft-neglected exclusions, erasures, and omissions. In other words, we need to ask ourselves not just *what* and *why* imaginaries matter, but also *whose* imaginaries matter. Here, I’m thinking of course with long-standing Indigenous and Black genealogies and visions of decolonial, anti-colonial, and anti-racial futures and presents. But I’m also thinking about more recent policy, legal, institutional, and judicial imaginaries that are calling for the recognition of rights beyond individual human subjects, to encompass plants, animals, ecosystems, and nature itself as a rightful bearer of rights. These imaginaries are shifting some of the most fundamental premises of Western ontologies of the subject and of the rights-bearer. The idea of taking seriously a plant or an animal or a river as a subject of justice is



Sophie Chao

An anti-oil palm land rights reclaiming protest in rural Merauke, photograph, 2018
© Sophie Chao

powerful. We’re talking about more than just care here. I don’t have to care for or about a river or a bug to treat it justly. Justice, then, goes beyond the bounds of the capacity to love and care. It demands more of us. It calls for other kinds of recognitions and reckonings, and more expansive accountabilities and obligations to our other-than-human co-dwellers.

This being said, there’s also a lot of critique of the idea of the imagination and of imaginaries as potent political tools. The Anti-Futurist Indigenous Manifesto, for instance, calls out the future and hope (itself an inherently future-oriented disposition) as objects of co-optation and exploitation under colonial nomos that can effectively pre-empt the possibility of just and reparative ways of imagining times and relations to come.⁷ We can also think about the future as something that has, in some ways, already happened – of the future anterior, if you wish. Actions we take today are already exerting a kind of latent force on futures to come, that may thus already be set in stone. I’m thinking here of the long-term impacts of chemical toxins, plastic pollution, and climate change. There is a politics of temporality involved in imagining what comes next which demands that we remain attentive to the ways in which the future is already here. As Dion and I tried to convey in our article, reimagining imaginaries could thus benefit from challenging the assumption of a linear past, present, and future arrow of time, and instead think-with Indigenous notions of time as cyclical or spirallic. This kind of temporality, I think, changes how we understand what time is across situated and interconnected sites, species, and subjects.

GA: Yes, absolutely. And the idea of the imaginary is being defined by legal boundaries as well as very pragmatic parameters. I think that’s also very important. There’s some imaginaries that reminds me a little of Donna Haraway’s *Fabulations*. It’s not necessarily about just forgetting and departing, but it’s about staying with the trouble, quite literally. And staying with the trouble poses important questions about care.

SC: Yes, it does. In the book, I also talk about the sago palm, a plant that is intimately and ancestrally cared for and revered by Marind and whom they very much talk about as a victim of the impacts of monocrop expansion. I’m hearing

the birds in the sago grove as I say these words, because that was always what my Marind friends would tell me – that I needed to stop thinking and start listening, stop writing and start walking to the encounter of this deeply cherished and celebrated vegetal kin, spirit, and being. The sago palm exemplifies in all kinds of powerful ways the forms of interspecies care that persist in the Marind lifeworld despite the deleterious effects of deforestation and industrial oil palm expansion. Sago is a plant with whom Marind children share growth and often also the same name when they’re born at the same time. For this reason, children and sago are said to follow each other’s lives. The sago palm is also a plant that is said to be nourishing and feeding, not just because it provides sago starch – Marind’s staple food – but also because its presence sustains all kinds of avian, mammalian, and insect communities in the rainforest.

Marind talked about sago as a plant that knows how to share space and time with others, in ways that contrast starkly with the introduced oil palm. Care is absolutely central to Marind-sago relations, and it’s a very particular kind of care that I gloss over in the book as “restrained care”. It is restrained in the sense that Marind do not domesticate or cultivate sago palms. In fact, Marind are morally averse to domestication of any kind because it is said to undermine the autonomy and freedom of sentient plants and animals. Instead, restrained care means taking part in activities that will indirectly enhance the growth of sago palms, but that don’t entail direct forms of control or manipulation. These activities include, for instance, transplanting sago suckers to give the plants more space, churning soils in particular areas to aerate it so that the palms can grow better, occasionally thinning the canopy to allow more sunlight to reach the palms in the undergrowth, or redirecting streams to irrigate them. This kind of care isn’t about totalizing mastery or manipulation. Instead, it’s about making the environment itself more conducive to palms’ sympoietic growth, in the company of their own, diverse other-than-human companions.

These forms of care bring to mind María Puig de la Bellacasa’s notion of care as a practical labor, ethical disposition, and affective stance.⁸ It also conjures care as a relational and reciprocal practice – one in which caring for plants is also caring for humans, and vice versa. One context where this mutuality of care comes to light is conservation.⁹ In recent years, several oil palm corporations in Merauke have set up conservation zones as part of their efforts to offset the adverse environmental impacts of their industrial activities. But Marind are forbidden from entering these conservation zones because they are privatized and accessible only to plantation personnel and conservation experts. The sago palms within these conservation zones may be protected from destruction, and yet they are a source of constant sorrow and frustration among my companions. Why? Because these palms are no longer able to be cared for by Marind and Marind are no longer able to be cared for by the palm in return. This artificial severance of plants from people thus goes against the ethos of co-becoming that undergirds Marind relations to more-than-human beings, vegetal and other. Instead, it entrenches a mode of “conservation capitalism” that is itself premised on a nature-culture binary – one that is alien and incongruous to many of my Marind friends, and in some ways, just as violent and dispossessory as the plantation model that conservation projects purport to offset.

GA: Finally, could tell us briefly about the other book that came out this year, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, which you coedited with Karin Bolender and Eben Kirksey?

SC: Thanks for bringing this volume into the conversation, Giovanni. *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* brings together fourteen contributors from the fields of Indigenous studies, environmental justice, postcolonial studies, anthropology, theology, science and technology studies, feminist studies, philosophy, as



Vembri Waluyas

A juvenile sago stand in the rubble of a forest cleared to make way for oil palm, photograph, 2021
© Sophie Chao

well as less conventional producers of knowledge – from slime mold whisperers and activist-poets to science-fiction writers and artist-architects. Together and differently, we are trying to think about the ways in which multispecies relations in the Anthropocene can be decolonized through a reimagination of what justice is, feels like, tastes like, and sounds like, and a recognition that other-than-human beings have worlds that count and count in the world. Just as important as the human thinkers and tinkerers involved in this project are the array of non-human protagonists who animate it: from pesticides, stray dogs, and viruses, to rivers, nuclear waste, rodent traps, prison gardens, and more. Together, we ask: Who are the subjects of justice in our shared worlds? What is at stake when they are captured by juridical-legal systems and social movements? Who has claimed a monopoly over justice in the past, and in the present, and how might we contest their sense of propriety in the future?

What comes out strongly from the volume is the notion that justice is situated and specific, rather than universal or scalable. Justice is of and for some worlds more than others. It is partial, patchy, contingent, and in flux. In recognition of this situatedness, the project does not offer an exhaustive or prescriptive concept of multispecies justice. Indeed, the horizons of justice represented in the collection are often themselves in generative friction with one another. Some authors, for instance, call for justice through mundane ev-

eryday acts of care, others through radical and sweeping structural reforms, others through the transformation of legal paradigms, and yet others through micro-biopolitical modes of bettering, rather than ending, interspecies conflicts. In staying with this complexity, we’re trying to forge what Marisol de la Cadena calls “ontological openings” that unsettle assumptions of secure intelligibility, of and between more-than-human worlds.¹⁰

Taken together, then, the essays and poems in this collection offer stories of multispecies justice that jumps scales and domains. They move from abstract speculation to situated political action and material intervention, and then back again. They explore tactics for achieving multispecies justice in polymorphic situations where calculations are never perfect, and instead always open to reinterpretation. They also reveal that it is possible to care for particular forms of life and biocultural communities, while at the same time holding onto promises of sweeping change on future horizons. This is an approach to multispecies justice that is grounded in the ongoing practice of remaining open and alive to the generative possibilities of each and every more-than-human encounter – even if those encounters, as with oil palm and Marind in Merauke, can be deadly and diminishing. It is an invitation to imagine a field of justice where the oikos of the household is in dynamic equilibrium with interlocking ecological systems and economic circuits. Perhaps more than anything, it is “an invitation to renew our commitment to love, to live, and to fight for the possibility of flourishing in more-than-human worlds present and yet to come”.¹¹

Acknowledgement: This interview draws on a ‘Botanical Speculations’ conversation held online on 28 September 2022, hosted by Giovanni Aloï and featuring Sophie Chao as guest speaker.

Endnotes

[1] Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
[2] Winter, Christine. 2022. *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice: Indigenous Philosophy, the Environment and Relationships*. London: Routledge.
[3] See, for instance, Coburn, Elaine, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, George Sefa Dei, and Makere Stewart-Harawira. 2013. “Unspeakable Things: Indigenous Research and Social Science.” *Socio* 2: 331–48; LaRocque, Emma. 2010. *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press; Stewart-Harawira, Makere. 2007. “Practicing Indigenous Feminism: Resistance to Imperialism” in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green, 124–39. London: Zed Books.
[4] Chao, Sophie. 2022. “Multispecies Mourning: Grieving as Resistance on the West Papuan Oil Palm Frontier.” *Cultural Studies*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2052920>.
[5] Chao, Sophie, and Dion Enari. 2021. “Decolonising Climate Change: A Call for Beyond-Human Imaginaries and Knowledge Generation.” *ETropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* 20 (2): 32–54.
[6] Benjamin, Ruha, and Eddie Glaude. 2018. “[AAS21 Podcast] Episode #12: Reimagining Science and Technology.” Princeton University, Department of African American Studies. <https://aas.princeton.edu/news/aas21-podcast-episode-12-reimagining-science-and-technology>.
[7] See <http://www.indigenousaction.org/rethinking-the-apocalypse-an-indigenous-anti-futurist-manifesto/>.
[8] Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 2012. “Nothing Comes Without Its World: Thinking with Care.” *Sociological Review* 60 (2): 197 – 216.
[9] Chao, Sophie. 2019. “The Truth About ‘Sustainable’ Palm Oil.” *SAPIENS*. <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/palm-oil-sustainable/>.
[10] de la Cadena, Marisol. 2014. “The Politics of Modern Politics Meets Ethnographies of Excess Through Ontological Openings.” *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights*, January 13. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-politics-of-modern-politics-meets-ethnographies-of-excess-through-ontological-openings>.
[11] Chao, Sophie, and Eben Kirksey. 2022. “Introduction: Who Benefits from Multispecies Justice?” in *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, edited by Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey, pp.1-21, quote pp.16–17. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sophie Chao is Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow and Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sydney. Her research investigates the intersections of Indigeneity, ecology, capitalism, health, and justice in the Pacific. Sophie previously worked for the Forest Peoples Programme, supporting the rights of forest-dwelling Indigenous peoples to their lands, resources, and livelihoods. Her publications include *Conflict or Consent? The Palm Oil Sector at a Crossroads*, *Divers Paths to Justice: Legal Pluralism and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia*, and *Oil Palm Expansion in Southeast Asia: Trends and Experiences of Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples*. For more, visit www.morethanhumanworlds.com

An ecocritical reading of the folktales from the sundarbans

The Sundarbans Archipelago is known for its fragile ecosystem. Mainstream literature and media often hold local people responsible for the islands’ ecological decline, or ‘erase’ human presence altogether. However, Sundarbans’ folktales tell a different story. This study critically reads these tales to examine the possibility of an alternative conservation approach. Conversation with fishers from Dayapur and Jamespur in Satjelia island revealed that their belief in the protective powers of Bonbibi (a guardian spirit of the forest) co-exist with scientific understanding of the forest. The folktales, likewise, show that conservation can be human-inclusive.

text: **Shambhobi Ghosh**

The Sundarbans, a cluster of forested islands at the southern end of the Bengal Delta, is known for its unique and fragile ecosystem. While there is pre-historic evidence of human presence in this area, large-scale conversion of forests into agricultural fields and increase in human population peaked during the latter half of the twentieth century, resulting in rapid deforestation and depletion of natural resources.¹ Some scholars view the increasing human pressure as a major threat to the area.² Others like Annu Jalais argue that both environmentalists and governments throughout history have sought to ‘erase’ human presence on these islands.³

Folklore of the Sundarbans has evolved through oral narration over the past two or three centuries. Most of these stories have originated in verse — later adapted into musical plays — and are collectively known as *punthi* or “manuscript literature”. These stories frequently depict ‘gods and goddesses of woodcutters, honey gatherers, beeswax gatherers, boat builders, and the most desperate cultivators,’⁴ and portray local perceptions of the landscape and biodiversity of the Sundarbans.

Whereas scientific ecology frequently relies on abstraction, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) leads to management based on locally formulated and implemented rules, and flexibility in adapting to the changes in resource use patterns.⁵ Rist et al. agree that TEK can be capable of adapting to ecological surprises, but also warn against unconditionally valorizing this system of knowledge on its own.⁶ These studies infer that in certain cases, TEK and scientific methods of forest resource management can be combined to form a more inclusive approach to conservation. Reading the folktales of the Sundarbans, then, becomes important to access the local ecological knowledge of its people.

The Sundarbans: an overview

The Sundarbans archipelago is the largest continuous stretch of mangrove ecosystem in the world, and the only one that houses tigers. The region (10,200km) is shared between India and Bangladesh, the Indian territory constituting roughly one-thirds of the total area (9,630km).⁷ The Indian Sundarbans contain 102 islands (52 of those populated), interconnected by at least 31 tidal rivers, numerous creeks, and estuaries. Mangrove forests cover