

RECENSIONI

Sophie CHAO | *In the shadow of the palms: More-than-human becomings in West Papua*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 336.

Sophie Chao's *In the shadow of the palms* is a brave, compelling piece of ethnographic work, cleverly structured and delightful in its elegant yet accessible prose, offering a new, powerful take on the longstanding issue of agribusiness expansion in Indonesia.

Centrally, the book is an exploration of the many, unsettling ways in which the lifeworld of the Upper Bian Marind people is becoming – in the words of Chao's "companions" – *abu-abu*. The Upper Bian Marind are an Indigenous Papuan group residing along the Bian River, in Indonesia's West Papua province. Over the past centuries, a range of exogenous forces have worked to undermine their lifeworld – from the Dutch occupation of New Guinea and related missionisation, to the incorporation of West Papua into Indonesia. Most recently, the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) scheme has opened Marind customary lands up for grabs by domestic and international corporations. Vast areas of forest have been felled or burned to make space for oil palm plantations. Most literally, *abu-abu* – meaning "grey" – refers to the sky turning hazy and dark from the smoke raised by forest burning. Figuratively, *abu-abu* has come to encapsulate the mood of uncertainty surrounding the possibility of life for the Marind, and for the nonhuman lifeforms with which they share skin.

The book, then, tells a bitter story – "written from a place of grief and loss". Although the author does not deploy dispossession as the primary lens for the analysis of her material, this is a story of how the Marind are increasingly becoming dispossessed not only of their land, but, most importantly, of their way of life. Indeed, dispossession here is not chiefly material, but follows the logics and mechanisms that Amitav Ghosh (borrowing from science fiction writing)

has described as “terraforming” (*The nutmeg’s curse: Parables for a planet in Crisis*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021). Through terraforming, the settler eradicates the more-than-human webs that give nourishment and sustenance to Indigenous people – both physically and culturally.

In an astute theoretical move, in this account the settler is the nonhuman, i.e., the oil palm. Leading to her main argument, Chao “demands that we take seriously the possibility of plants [...] as immoral subjects”. Indeed, the oil palm “kills” and “eats”, and drives out, and dries up, destroying everything in its wake. In contrast to the native sago palm – which provides the Marind with their staple starch food as well the ability to socially reproduce – oil palm does not want to make (s)kin, either with them or with other species. In this sense, Chao offers a sobering counterpoint to the default celebration of “entanglements” in posthuman anthropology as inherently benign and life-giving. On the contrary, *In the shadow of the palms* alerts us to the politics of exclusion in which plants may themselves partake, e.g., in relation to communities positioned as subhuman under colonial and technoscientific regimes. Through Chao’s work, “violence reveals itself as a multispecies act”.

At the same time, the book also seeks to pluralise talks of plants. The palms in whose shadow the Marind endure, are plural not only in that oil palm plantations are encroaching on sago groves; most notably, they are plural because the Marind themselves refuse to deny oil palm the chance of becoming otherwise. Indeed, Chao’s companions, while resenting the plant’s voraciousness, also pity it for its enslavement and segregation in the plantation. The Upper Bian Marind ultimately regret not “knowing” the oil palm – i.e., not being able to relate to it in generative ways. Chao’s politically engaged anthropology, then, avoids superimposing (Western) theory atop ethnography; instead, it strives to do justice to the conflicted yet creative ways in which the Marind engage with the settler plant. Chao’s account, thus, is not of the ontology of Marind, but “of Marind as ontologists of their own changing worlds”.

The book is cleverly structured into four sections, each consisting of two chapters standing in contrapuntal relation to one another. The first chapter explores how the movement of humans and nonhumans across the landscape – central to the process of becoming rooted in the Upper Bian (and generally in Melanesia, see Catherine Allerton, *Potent landscapes: Place and mobility in Eastern Indonesia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2013) – is curtailed by roads purportedly built to facilitate people’s mobility. The second chapter focuses on the maps’ fixedness through which the state and corporates see the

forest and contrasts the fluidity with which the forest is rendered in the context of participatory mapping exercises conducted by the Marind. The third chapter – about how the forest provides the space for the Upper Bian Marind to be socialised as humans (*anim*) through the sharing of skin and wetness with human and nonhuman others – relates to the fourth one, which explores the straying into the village of cassowaries and other forest beings, following their dispossession by the oil palm. The fifth chapter describes more-than-human sociality in the sago groves; knowing sago and its many, human and nonhuman stories, figures centrally in the process of making (s)kin with this plant. The sixth chapter, on the other hand, describes the lack of sociality characterising the plantation. The question – what does the oil palm want? – stands in contrapuntal relation to that which the sago palm gives. If sago nourishes, oil palm eats; if sago shares space, oil palm takes it; if sago sings, oil palm silences. The last two chapters are also in relation to each other. The first explores a changing sense of time among the Marind and hopelessness as resistance, while the second takes dreams to be both the latest frontier of dispossession and violence, as well as the site of hopeful possibilities.

The rhythm of points and counterpoints is in line with Chao's project of letting the Marind tell their own stories; in a world that is becoming *abu-abu*, stories are not straightforward. As people struggle to make sense of their own changing worlds, multiple and even conflicting interpretations are offered – counterpoints to counterpoints. For example, in the second chapter, the fixedness of government maps is questioned by Chao's companions, in that inconsistencies are often found in these maps – is the state supposedly trying to confuse them? Or is the state itself confused? At the same time, participatory mapping exercises – while truer to the way the Marind see the world – do not seem to work as an activist tool: if they want to be seen by the state, the Marind too may have to see like the state. In specific *abu-abu* ways, then, the ambiguous effects of oil palm developments generate ambivalence and inner conflict. The *abu-abu*, in other words, is as inside as it is outside – an all-pervasive greyness that enfolds the lifeworld of the Upper Bian Marind. In the refusal to dissipate this greyness into black-and-white narratives of good vs. bad – i.e., indigenous people vs. the oil palm – lies the beauty of Chao's work.

All in all, *In the shadow of the palms* is an urgent and nuanced piece of ethnographic work, enriching previous anthropological accounts of agribusiness expansion in Indonesia with an original focus on the nonhuman. It also offers a compelling resource for the study of climate change, which – as Kathryn Yu-

soff reminds us (*A billion black Anthropocenes or none*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018) – lies in historical continuity with the racializing geo-logic of the plantation.

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