



## Review of Two Books

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**Sophie Chao**, *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human-Becomings in West Papua*

Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 336, ISBN: 978-1478018247

**Suzana Sawyer**, *The Small Matter of Suing Chevron*

Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 432, ISBN: 978-1478017950

Creating appropriate languages of description is one of the tasks that social-cultural anthropologists set themselves. It does not go away even when they are faced with the most apparently obvious circumstances, and ones likely to be already familiar to their readers. The calamities of environmental degradation are a case in point. Reported upon so often, the effects (say) of oil exploitation on tropical forests seem all too well known. Here are two accounts of highly profitable oil ventures that have left their mark on the landscape, the one in the Pacific, the other in South America. It is how they have set about to describe the situation that stands out in what these anthropologists have done. Quite different from each other, and based on almost contrasting research practices, between them these two books show something of anthropology's horizon-shifting possibilities.

### In the Shadow of the Palms

Sophie Chao's concern is with palm oil, that ubiquitous ingredient of industrial food, cosmetics, and so much else, whose ecological effects have passed into general knowledge. We all know about encroachments of oil palm

plantations on the biodiversity of the landscapes they displace. Yet Chao's account of what this has been like for the Marind people of West Papua, to many of whom oil came not much more than a decade ago, does not simply add local detail or the poignancy of personal experience. It adds an unlooked-for contrast, turning oil palm into one of a duo, which becomes the heart of this compelling narrative. These Melanesians live in a wet, low-lying, and tree-covered area where sago was the staple food; sago is also a palm, of not dissimilar proportions. What the Marind offered to the anthropologist was their intimate knowledge of the sago palm, their observations of its growth and maturation, of the life that coursed through it, of what it shared with other species, and of all these elements as parts of a being from which they also drew an understanding of themselves. In fact there was a perceived intimacy between people and palms, to the point that palms were not just like themselves but in effect one of themselves. It was this indigenous insight into palm life that gave Chao the descriptive springboard from which to conceptualize the arrival of another kind of palm.

Indonesia prides itself on satisfying over 60% of the world's demand for palm oil. Before she studied anthropology, for some years Chao worked in West Papua with the human rights organization Forest Peoples Programme. She was helping document what it took to transform several hundred thousand hectares of previous forest into oil plantations, and its diverse impacts. Now writing as an anthropologist, in this book she leaves to one side a general ethnographic account in order to focus on the two palms. This mirrored a choice she had to make in the field. The new plantations, patrolled with security guards, split the local populace. For some Marind, they were a source of life, cash wages, for others the harbingers of death, the destruction of—among other things—their subsistence base. Open and frank about the extent and limits of her enquiry, Chao says she had no option but to align herself, and did so with the latter. Her analysis of what was happening drew on the comparisons these particular Marind were themselves making. The exposition spares the reader much that was harrowing for the fieldworker. But the reader sees enough through her companions' eyes to glimpse devastation.

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The impact of homogeneous plantings of a crop that allows no undergrowth, and little life in its foliage (although people sometimes remark on infestations as their allies), cannot only be grasped in terms of ecological impoverishment (“loss of biodiversity”). Vanished is the sociality of forest and swamp, with its waters, shelter, beings, history—even time itself has gone. And that is shown directly in people’s well-being; never mind the pesticides, people’s sense of being nourished by the sago palm was also a mental map of the manifold excursions they made to harvest the palm and prepare its pith for food, as well as all kinds of other kinds of journeyings and encounters with human and other-than-human entities, who might or might not be sources of well-being. As the sago palm has been displaced, so the devouring, people-eating oil palm becomes a present-day incursion into nightmarish dreams that were once about black magic.

Chao talks of the responsibility of telling a story well and of the choices she made. The chapters here, interspersed with dreams people told, take us back and forth between the different life worlds of sago and oil palm. But if a reader might have expected contrasting topographies of sago groves and semi-militarized boundaries, or the deep history of forest life cycles laid bare by the reduced interactions of a monoculture, this intense and highly focused account also brings fresh insights at every turn. Two instances of the Marind subtleties at stake must suffice. First, while Chao sees this work as a contribution to multi-species studies, she draws on Marind engagement with the two palms to criticize the misplaced sentimentality writers often show towards plants: there is, after all, such a thing as multi-species violence. Marind regard oil palms not only as detrimental to themselves but as wilfully “destructive actors” (p. 207). Yet their own reciprocal animosity towards oil palm is tempered by curiosity and compassion, imagining what its backstory might be and how it sadly came to be what it seems now. Such care, as Chao calls it, is borrowed from their care of sago. And here is the second instance: there is a sense in which Marind share kinship with sago insofar as they are part of the same cycle of growth and depletion (of oneself and for others) that exudes circulations of vitality and nurture. Sago is not alone here—for a newborn child to be considered human, it must come into contact with life around it and absorb the vitalizing wetness of palms, soils, streams (p. 80), be part of the “shared skin” (p. 163) of forest landscapes and life forms. Oil palm ruptures that skin, refusing relationship, resisting embrace. For all that, a woman told her, perhaps one day there will be new skins to be shared with the oil palm and time will “become alive again” (p. 217).

## The Small Matter of Suing Chevron

Of course, there are other oils too. Suzana Sawyer is interested in hydrocarbons, the oil we think of as a source of energy, the one that is drilled for, not planted. Crude is among its names, and Sawyer has been writing about crude and petro-capitalism in the Ecuadorian Amazon for more than 20 years. The particular oil extraction to which she pays attention lies in the past (1964–1990), the lapse of time since created by years of litigation that began with trying to make the oil company Texaco–Chevron admit liability for what to the eye looks like the devastation they left behind them in the rainforest. This book is about how to describe the legal process. Hers is a devastating re-telling of a story on which millions of words have been expended: how the Ecuadorian government successfully sued Chevron in Ecuador only to have its verdict challenged and Chevron’s suits and counter-suits upheld both in the USA and in the Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Ecuadorians indigenous to the network of old oil sites speak in this book, but not so much to the legal process. So from where does Sawyer find descriptive inspiration? She looks to those who observe crude with the exactitude that Marind apply to the character of palms, that is, to the generations of chemists who have analyzed the make-up of hydrocarbons in loving detail. This is the principal conceptual resource on which she draws in her re-description of what those years of litigation have brought. A formidable feat.

Interludes between the chapters present tantalizing glimpses into some of the many elements—individual narratives, accounts of meetings and discussions, records of observations, pieces of propaganda, transcripts—that flowed into the overall story; a trio of distinct but related concepts organizes the main body of the exposition. “Dissociating bonds,” “spectral radicals,” and “delocalized stabilities” are her understandings of certain chemical interactions, mediations, and tenacities of being. In the face of the huge outpouring of data over 25 years of litigation, this trio afforded insight into how the behavior of crude now seemed evident in its seeping complexity, now eluded comprehension, now presented aspects that occluded others. The trio simultaneously provided her with a language of description for approaching arguments as already relational and diverse “compositions” (p. 25), gathering up or slithering through the evidence such that, as entities in legal narratives, facts appeared and disappeared.

While the chemistry belongs generally to the bonding and de-bonding of subatomic particles, and the changing capacities that come from particular combinations, the third concept (“delocalized stabilities”) culminates in an exploration of a prime example: benzene. As a molecular species, benzene is “dramatically more stable and potent”

than its compound would suggest (p. 217), insofar as bonds are formed over the expanse of the molecule instead of just between atoms. Sawyer does not have to point to what has already been made obvious in terms of the persistent sheen of oil in today's earths, pools, and sometimes still stinking waste pits. Rather, she turns benzene's particular molecular qualities into a model for a contrast that also runs through the book. This is between the rulings of the Ecuadorian court of justice and US/international determinations that the Ecuadorian rulings were based on fraudulent linkages of evidence (the latter being part of a series of judgments against Ecuador). On the Ecuadorian side, what stabilized the many factors—not least from numerous site visits—into the legal synthesis that found that Chevron had not properly cleaned up after themselves was the judge's grappling with an equivocal, dispersed phenomenon that could not be reduced to isolatable events. Chevron's transgression was delocalized in this sense, occurring across a complex and ultimately indeterminate whole. The stability of Chevron's counter-claim, in turn, rested on the de-localizing ability to repeatedly detach expert analyses from their original locations, raising what therefore seemed a multitude of queries. These formed cohesive bonds with one another under the ubiquitous mantra of corruption: equivocations in the Ecuadorian ruling melded together as signs of "a new unshakable relational configuration" (p. 294), namely the accusation of conspiracy, extortion, and racketeering.

The anthropologist makes it clear that her stance is not that of the usual Chevron critic. Not content to accuse Chevron in turn of conspiracy and racketeering, her focus is on how, as with the "valence" of chemical agencies, the combinatorial power of law, science, and oil created worlds of greater or lesser plausibility—and capacity to remediate.

Thus, the American and international courts, guided by Chevron's lawyers, delved into the chemistry to the extent of breaking down the notion of crude into its varieties and components, which then became amenable to a statistical re-grouping through the individual units thereby brought

into being. (This set the conditions, among other things, of what could be proved as cause and effect.) Sawyer equipped herself to comprehend the complex chemistry of contamination, and then found in the verbal/conceptual models by which people describe molecular processes unforeseen possibilities for analytical re-description. Applying herself in this field also gave her the confidence to assert that, in relation to diverse interests, the adverse verdicts on the Ecuadorian rulings were not inevitable. Turning her phrasing a little, one could almost put it that one day, perhaps, comparable law courts with a "deeper understanding of crude, a better grasp of the logics of [other countries'] legal assessment . . . , a richer appreciation for the presence and distribution of contaminants" might "reach different conclusions" (pp. 262–263).

## Coda

Needless to say, I have been able to give little more than a flavor of these two thought-provoking works, or of the detailed workings of their arguments. Nor have I commented on the theoretical forays that inform Chao's account or on Sawyer's deep understanding of oil operations. However, putting the pair into a relation of sorts affords a simple conclusion. Detaching oneself from familiar habits of description becomes as much of an anthropological imperative in present times as it always was in the past, and inspiration may come from what might have seemed the most unexpected quarters.

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**Reviewer:** Marilyn Strathern is an emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. She is most widely known for her writings on Melanesia, and more recently for her broad address to the concept of relations.