

REVIEW OF Sophie Chao - 'In the Shadow of the Palms' (Duke University Press, Durham, 2022).

Sophie Chao's book - 'In the Shadow of the Palms' (Duke University Press, Durham, 2022) is a beautiful read, a brilliantly executed thesis. From a theoretical point of view, I learned much about the growing interest in conjoining ecology with anthropology; the so-called 'plant turn', 'sensory ethnobotany', and the developing 'multispecies' anthropology. More and more, these concepts are shaping and becoming central to the idea of our epoch as a 'plantationocene'. That is, if climate change is affected by human activity, it is capitalist human activity specifically, and at the core of that capitalist human activity, is 'the plantation' materially and historically.

That is to say, if 'farm' leads to 'market', in other words, if the produce we find and purchase at markets comes from farms, the soil-dirt and activity of fertilising, planting, growing, nurturing and harvesting fruit and vegetables, then it is 'the plantation' (historically and materially) which led to Marx and Engels's Manchester and to William Blake's 'dark Satanic mills', and which encapsulate and define capitalist exploitation. The cotton products we have taken for granted for centuries were derived from cotton grown on slave plantations. Human suffering for some gives profit and life-style consumption for others.

And, as Chao suggests in her study of Papuan palm oil, enslaving plantations continue in form and affect on Papuans of Indonesia where the Marind people, the focus of her study, are found. In sum, the connection between human production on 'the plantation' is as persistent as it is strong today as it was when Europeans ventured out to 'new worlds' to massify, subjugate and control the labour of others through plantation enslavement five hundred years ago. Only today, we can find examples of this in Merauke among the Marind. The impact is as Chao makes clear, both ecocidal and genocidal- as she observes:

“Plantation toxicity thus disrupts certain levels and kinds of socioecological orders in order to maintain others. It too constitutes a pharmakonic force that alternately enables, enhances, restricts, or terminates different forms of life and their constitutive relations, enhancing some worlds and bodies at the expense of others” (page 85).

The book's ethnographic narrative, and Sophie's participatory observations, were/are fascinating, but open to variant interpretation. Unpacking the worlds of others as seen and lived through their experience, is always conjectural and 'getting it right' is fraught. Nevertheless, Chao's interpretations are both deep and meaningful. There are too many to comment on here, suffice to say, her

explanations of the Marind life-worlds are grounded thoroughly in lived-experience shared through cohabitation, active-listening, and situated entangled interaction. For example, Chao is not fooled for a second by “government and corporate representatives in Merauke” who “routinely label Marind ‘backward tribes’” and whose “racial stereotypes are then invoked by the state to justify the very kinds of agribusiness projects that, for many Marind, are causing time itself to grind to a halt” (page 180). But neither are the Marind themselves fooled – as one of Chao’s informants put it:

“we have been forced to hope (by) the government, by oil palm companies, by NGOs – we had no choice. Now we want to be free from hope. Fighting for our land is our right. But refusing to hope is also our right” (ibid).

How refreshing, and Chao makes good sense of this when she concludes, with insights from others, that “Hope, in other words, can be toxic” (page 181). Yep.

And these kinds of insights are littered throughout this important volume. What they should do for the reader is alert us to the density of solidarity that we, as non-Papuans, must recognise, appreciate and build upon with indigenous peoples if we are to be of any use to them. And we must acknowledge that a multi-species approach to understanding our precariously shared planet is the only way we can divvy up responsibility for all life-forms fairly and openly, historically and in the present. Or there is no future.

In this regard, Sophie Chao’s book provoked reflection on my part about my own background experience within my own Fijian extended family whose wealth and status as 19th-early 20th century slave-traders, and whose employment of slave workers, was based on the ‘copra plantation’ economy of colonial Fiji - rather than oil palm/palm oil, but the parallels are there. During my childhood I sailed the waters of the islands aboard my uncles’ copra boats seeing so many formerly indigenous possessions under plantation - rows and rows of coconut trees extending from coastal beaches up into hilly hinterland jungle edges - and wondering to myself what it all meant. And how it came to be.

Sophie’s important book opens up forgotten rooms like this. It causes me to think about how so-called land alienation inquiries in Fiji during the colonial era (1874-1970) came to conclusions about the legitimacy of white-settler-planter claims. Back in the day (early 1990s) while undertaking my own doctoral research in Fiji, I combed the archival records and found the island properties of my own Australian ancestor were never subject to contest; he seems to have gotten away with keeping his claims - i.e., his transactions and

transfers with local indigenous Fijian tribes were deemed legitimate and fair to both parties - where others were less fortunate.

My Australian ancestor had gone to Fiji (in 1870) to grow cotton - the original slave economy - but converted to coconut for copra plantations when cotton and climate could not be matched. Copra succeeded with the result that planters like him were satisfactorily incorporated into the UK-administered colonial economy with its demand that it be self-paying/sustaining. Obviously, the governors of Fiji would be sure not to upset the economic basis of the colony by excluding/discounting too many white-settler land claims less they undercut the economic foundations of their administrations. Win-win for foreigners but lose-lose for locals - as Sophie finds in Merauke.

And hence the architecture of 'empire' and 'colony' were themselves planted in self, soil, and the ecology of plantation, by foreign interests in foreign soil. All to be undone in later days. We – I speak as a Pacific islander - are in those days and the maps of those defining years are written all over us, still making us – unless we take note of the kinds of issues Chao raises and become cartographers of truly new ways of doing and being.

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