BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Of sago, songs, and stories

Alice RUDGE, *SOAS University of London*

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> I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks. I didn't say it was impossible.
>
> —Le Guin (1989) 2006

Palm oil has become a symbol, or perhaps a synecdoche, for planetary environmental crises. It is depicted as a toxic substance by international campaigners, is the subject of intense regulatory scrutiny, and yet is simultaneously hailed as uniquely sustainable due to its ready proliferation and abundant oils, and as a hero of postcolonial economic development. Like the tropical commodities that have preceded it in dominating international commodity markets—rubber, sisal, nutmeg, pepper, cinchona, sugar, cotton—it is deeply intertwined with colonial history, violence, land grabs, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and the marginalization of unfree laborers. Due to having been the subject of intense biotechnological and chemical research, this "flex crop" slips easily between its many names and uses. In the United Kingdom, where I am writing this comment, far from any oil palm plantations, children are even taught in school that they should not consume palm oil, for fear that it might cause destruction of the home of another synechdoche for planetary crisis, the much beloved orangutan Chua et al (2021).

It is into this landscape of divisive narratives that Chao's seminal work arrives, offering the reader a very different kind of story. Through her fine-grained ethnographic account of how her Marind friends in West Papua encounter, resist, but also feel pity and sometimes even desire and longing for the oil palm, Chao recounts a story of violence, destruction, and dispossession that refuses easy narratives of victimhood, blame, or heroism, instead forcing attention to creativity and agency in a situation that seeks at every imaginable practical and ideological turn to remove it.

In her essay "The carrier bag theory of fiction," a quote from which forms the epigraph to this piece, Ursula K. Le Guin bemoans powerful "Hero" narratives, writing

> it is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and I watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats … No it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood spouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through him through eye to brain. (Le Guin [1989] 2006)

Ool and Oob, the children and the oats, are all readily subsumed into the story of the Hero, and in the process, their own stories are often denied them. But the world needs space for stories of oats and children. Rather than heroic narratives of spears and vanquishing, of Men, Action (and Theory?), what place instead for writing as a container? A container, perhaps a carrier bag, a sack, a gourd, a net, or a sago bag, which like those used by Ool and Oob to hold their oats, leaves space for stories, songs, and time to watch newts.

In her vivid ethnography, Chao fashions such a container through her use of "thick description and distilled abstraction" that is "in the manner of the barks and filaments that my Marind sisters artfully fashion into woven sago bags" (p. 7).[1] This contains songs, and dreams, the sounds of sago being pounded, of cassowaries singing (and crying). Perhaps, even, this woven container might itself be made of the "living ribbons of braided words, thoughts, and feelings" expressed in creative verses and songs and their "auditory chains of affect" (p. 138). This careful work of curating the contents of her bag not only makes for compelling writing, it is what makes the book theoretically exciting. Filling her bag with Marind theory alongside carefully chosen non-Marind theorists allows Chao to collapse what she rightly identifies as the "hierarchical distinction between Western theory and non-Western cosmology" (p. 7). The result is less a Theory with a capital T than a sago bag filled with theories, theories that can also be dreams and songs, and are all the richer for it.

This is because in the process of so carefully filling the bag, Chao does more than share stories from an "out-of-the-way place" (Tsing 1993). Songs and stories of sago, skins, and survivance work together to do much more than might at first seem possible in the context of oil palm, a crop so physically and rhetorically dominant, divisive, and destructive. Woven together so beautifully, these stories both transcend the everyday, and perhaps demonstrate that the everyday itself has the power to be transcendent, without the need for what Le Guin might call the "Hero." In bringing the "texture of the ordinary" to light in this context of violence (Das 2020), Chao positions Marind as less *out-of-the-way*, than *in-the-way.* They become what Tsing might also call a "*displacement* within powerful discourses" (Tsing 1993: 7–8). This is central: as palm oil continues its global proliferation across lands, bodies, and material worlds, discussion of it—often rightly—takes place with a global framing. But this means that voices of Marind and others at the forefront of its expansion are little heard, or when they are heard, their

[1]. See also Scott 2004 on the trouble with "Romance" over "Tragic" narratives.

plight comes to feel inevitable, the result of a process defined in advance, a result of global forces over which they have little narrative control. In such a scenario, songs, stories, and dreams alongside Indigenous theory constitute a "texture of the ordinary" that is politically vital and a challenge to global discourses that seek to dispossess Marind of even their narrative autonomy.

This is not to deny that the realities of their situation undoubtedly consist of marginalization, vulnerability, and dispossession. Here, settler-colonial and capitalist regimes "resist conceptual abstraction and find a material grip" (p. 5). And yet Chao shows how Marind refusals, creativity, resistance, and attempts to build relations with violent oil palms all are *in-the-way* of the onslaught of devastation wrought by oil palm expansion, even if they do not (fully) halt expansion itself. Marind thus also get *in-the-way* of other kinds of simplistic narratives of the kind that Chao critiques, and that we might assume Le Guin would have bemoaned. This is where Chao's careful choices about what to include in her bag come to the fore. The reader is immersed in a dreamlike yet vividly real encounter with Marind as "ontologists of their own changing worlds" (p. 8). With Marind, readers may come to cast aside assumptions, and to ask not (only) how are people affected by oil palm, but what *is* an oil palm?

As we follow Marind weavers, activists, singers, mothers, and others as they themselves ask and seek to answer this question, Chao once again ensures that Marind get *in-the-way*. They are in the way of both dominant rhetorics that would seek to deny the relevance of the more-than-human, *and* in the way of those that would portray a romanticizing vision of multispecies relations as simplistically harmonious and beneficial (to humans). This is "a sobering counterpoint to the celebration of more-than-human encounters as inherently conducive to multispecies intimacy and thriving" (p. 11). Centrally, we come to learn about the violence of oil palms not only through stories of the dispossession in which it results, but through accounts of interspecies relations that existed prior to—and now despite—oil palm. For people who fear coercive interspecies relations and enact a "restrained care" towards forest plants like sago, and

both forest and village animals like cassowaries or domesticated dogs, the plantation's forcing of beings into relations of domination and control is shown anew in its full horror (p. 93). This is a form of violence both that is specific and that resonates beyond this locale, for example with the experiences of Batek people with whom I work in Peninsular Malaysia, who struggle strikingly similarly with the new relations of control and influence for other-than-human entities that "plantation life" produces (Li and Semedi 2021). For Batek and Marind alike, it appears that relationality and autonomy are two sides of the same coin (Rudge 2021). While plants and animals may be cared for, this is with an attitude of respect for the role of "respective disengagement" that promotes "autonomous thriving" (p. 101), and the "relational yet autonomous growth" of plant-persons (p. 132). Cultivation and agriculture are thus often opposed on moral grounds.

This "respective disengagement" goes alongside a central value that Marind place upon freedom, a freedom perhaps facilitated by opacity—the idea that one should know and can never know completely another's mind and that one has the right to know and to act upon one's own thoughts (p. 86).[2] Yet again, this is a form of *relational* autonomy, in which it appears that autonomy is the grounds from which relatedness can proceed. This is shown by how in some cases, autonomy can become too much, such as when Okto, before his tragic death became more-and-more cassowary-like, started to leave the village alone, and to take his meals alone (p. 88), demonstrating that something was seriously amiss. Oil palm, too, is thus pitied as it "prefers

[2]. It would be intriguing to learn more about this potential relation between opacity, legibility, and Indigenous activist theories of freedom and autonomyin contexts "marginal" to the state (Buitron and Steinmüller 2021; Das and Poole 2004).

to be alone" (p. 147, citing Anna). Autonomy and aloneness thus sit in tension with one another.[3] Thoughts and actions should be one's own, this being the basis of how freedom itself is conceptualized. And yet when autonomy shifts to *being alone,* and thus fails to take into consideration the human and nonhuman relations that may make it possible, it transforms autonomous beings into objects of pity, sadness, and even uncanniness. When Okto states that "the thing about oil palm is that we do not know its skin" (p. 94), the profoundly uncanny nature of oil palms as relationless entities comes to the fore. Without their relations, they cannot be free, and at the same time, they deny the freedom of those who are forced into contact with them. With this, Chao draws on a long-standing tradition of questions of relational autonomy, while updating them to address the urgent contexts of plantation expansion that many face today.

Movement, too, is a central way that people have sought and achieved freedom and autonomy, both as a way to escape the military occupation and before (p. 42). Yet movement is both a practical solution to the need to avoid cooption by others, as well as a way that people come to know the forest through creative processes: singing, dreaming, and knowing the relations that constitute the meshwork that contains their lives (pp. 37, 49). Now, while roads facilitate the movement of others—settlers, guards, consumer goods, and indeed oil palms themselves—this is a tarmac meshwork which, unlike the pathways to sago groves and the sonic encounters with which they are constituted, can no longer form a container for Marind. Roads lead to plantations, and entry to plantations is forbidden for all nonpersonnel (p. 42). When freedom, movement, and autonomy are the very essence of vitality, then a denial of those things amounts to a denial of life itself. What Marind said of Chao's drone camera has, as Chao identifies, a striking resonance with their own experiences: it is not a bird, but a plastic bird. It

[3]. This is an interesting counterpoint to Batek theories of autonomy and what they describe as "aloneness" as mutually constitutive (Rudge 2023).

has no freedom, and hence “no life” (p. 65). In this uncanny existence, signs are hard to read. Forest trees are daubed with red paint that indicates their uncertain future (pp. 40–41). The boundaries drawn in straight lines on maps are used to deliberately mislead (p. 57). Roads lead to places that people cannot travel, rivers flow upstream, cassowaries come to live in the village. As Miranda so aptly puts it, “everything has become strange since oil palm arrived” (p. 45). Life becomes uncertain or, as Marind say, *abu-abu.* It continues without vitality.

And yet, as with aloneness, uncertainty can also be a value. It is a part of what it means to be opaque, to be autonomous, to be free, and this goes for how signs are interpreted and experienced. Again like Batek with whom they share a strong value of autonomy, Marind sometimes avoid categorizing the sounds that they hear because different sounds may mean different things to different people “based on their own life stories and relationships with the species encountered” (p. 63). As Keith Basso wrote of Western Apache language ideologies, the idea that one might “smother” his or her audience by saying “I *demand* that you see everything that has happened, how it happened, *exactly* as I do” is anathema. This “blocks thinking” and “holds down minds” (Basso 1996: 86). Batek, too, find aesthetic pleasure and beauty in forms of representation that leave space for individual interpretation, the coexistence of different memories and beings. Songs, words, stories, and dreams should be containers for many, rather than constitute the actions of a few. What, then, is the moment when uncertainty becomes frighteningly uncanny instead of beautiful?

Naʔ Srimjam, a Batek friend I have known for many years, once told me that one feels longing when *llyɔl krarap* (“noise turns to silence”). The word *llyɔl* implies the noise of many people, moving, noise coming from many sources here and there. *Krarap*, on the other hand, is not just silence, but the empty feeling, the absence of sound that occurs when a has recently been full and noisy. It is such moments that can cause the emotion of *haʔip*—a feeling of longing, yearning, and nostalgia that can at once be intensely beautiful, yet bittersweet, even leading to

pining away and death if it becomes too acute. Chao's attention to the uncanny silence of the plantation is thus key. It brings home the memory of what once was there in place of that silence: an uncertainty rooted not in the everyday uncertainty of what it is to relate to others whose intentions may be opaque, but what it is to experience an absence, a silence, of those relations, while your ears still ring with the sounds of the past (see Rudge 2023). Perhaps the most poignant aspect of Marind responses to this uncanny silence is their refusal of a future: "time has come to a stop" (pp. 178–79). Without time, the relational threads of life cannot hold together. This is a contrast to the time of myth: "the time of myth is a time of giving. It is everywhere. It is in the colors of the forest and the cry of the *khaw* [cassowary]. It is in the tast of sago, the ripples of the water, and the notches of bamboo trees. The time of myth is like a noken (fiber bag) woven out of sago. Its threads flow through each other. The story of *anim* and *amai* are woven together. Like the noken, the threads of the time of myth are all different, but they are strong. They support each other" (p. 171, quoting Felip). Plantation time does not support this relationally-autonomous, sensory interspecies flourishing. Marind responses to the oil palm thus cohere around the idea of getting *in-the-way* of time itself.

Chao thus shows "the agentive and imaginative capacities of people in the face of structural inequalities that are relative to, but never totally determined by, macrolevel forces" by drawing "attention to the critical vantage points held by communities at the margins of the world capitalist economy and the complex idioms through which they articulate ongoing processes of accumulation through disposession" (p., 7). There is an ethical imperative to understand Marind and others facing the forefront of plantation expansion not as at the margins of the world economy *(out-of-the-way)* but as its very center *(in-the-way)*. The production of scales is highly political, and thus scale itself might thus be retheorized from a Marind point of view, not as a "zooming in" from the global scale of palm oil to the local realities of the Marind, but as a way

to retheorize what palm oil *is* in line with the questions that Marind ask of it from their perspective at the center, the forefront, of its story (see Hecht 2018; Tsing 1993).

Sylvia Wynter's unique insights resonate here.[4] Drawing a distinction between the "plot" as indigenous, autochtonous system in contrast to the profit-centered plantation, Wynter depicts a stark divide between the person-centred plot as a site of human resistance, and the plantation as a central and brutal site of capitalist reproduction (Wynter 1991). Yet Wynter is clear that you cannot have the plot without the plantation, the plot is a space of resistance that—just as the revolutionary novel sold within the market economy—will always be implicated in the existence of its despised Other. This may go the other way too: without the plot—whether the few spaces of sago that remain to Marind, or plots that continue to persist elsewhere—the plantation cannot sustain itself. Thus, though Kristiana states that "'in Indonesia and the world, everyone needs palm oil. But Papuans? No one needs Papuans" (p. 43) it may in fact be that palm oil and the capitalist order that underpins it and the world relies on Papuans: it could not exist without Papuans, just as the plantation needs the plot. As Chao states, and as Marind also state through their theories of how oil palms connect them to the rest of the world, Marind thus emerge as entangled with all who read this book, as at the center of the material worlds and ontological projects that shape the shampoo we use, the cakes we buy, and the chemicals we have no idea we are using. Marind theories of relational autonomy become grounded in a deep and personal awareness of planetary entanglement. They speak to plantations as a concrete manifestation of

[4]. Wynter writes here from the Caribbean, and while there are limitations to theorizing the "plot" in contexts outside of the Caribbean (not least as the histories, politics, and forms of ownership and control of and within these spaces may not neatly match up neatly to the spaces of the forests and sago groves left to Marind amid oil palm expansions), Jegathesan has shown how it can be productive to think beyond "regional closets" in the study of plantation forms (Jegathesan 2021).

ongoing and global processes of racism, colonialism, and capitalism. They speak to what it means to interpret and inhabit the world differently, while sharing in oil palm as a very material point of contact between Marind and all other "everyday consumers of palm oil" who are also "situated dwellers of a wounded planet" (p. 25). In short, "we are all subjects implicated in one another's lives, albeit unevenly, differently, and often elusively so" (p. 213).

The book thus offers a remarkable blueprint for engaged anthropological research. This leads us back to Le Guin's container. Not only is Chao candid about choosing sides during fieldwork, but about choosing what to put into the bag, and the conscious decisions about what should *not* be told (p. 25). This is a delicate balance, and one that is personal and situational. But what it leads to is a form of "telling the story well" (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 273) that evokes the stakes of the challenge of switching between "narratives of damage and defiance, of crisis and continuance, of suffering and survivance" but that are about "telling *better*, bitter stories" (p. 25). The form of the bag again becomes central. We come to see how this is one author's bag: it is not the only form of container that could be used to hold these stories. This not only fits with how Chao describes Marind aesthetics and semiotic theory itself as leaving room for interpretation and difference, but it is politically important: it leaves space for difference and diversity of opinion, but it also leaves space for Marind to fill their own bags too.

In foregrounding persistence and survivance alongside resistance,[5] Chao navigates that impossible boundary between showing these things at the same time as describing the "seemingly insurmountable abjection" that people forge within structures which, quite literally in the case of disappeared Papuan activists, make them invisible (p. 212). But by doing this through the manner not of the Hero or of Theory, but through a woven sago container, Chao forces her readers to see how persistence is far from passive. As Le Guin similarly put it, telling stories can involve fighting, resistance, and anger. But this is just "one of those damned things you have to

[5]. On survivance see Vizenor 2008.

do in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories," because "*it is the story that makes the difference*" (Le Guin [2006] 1989). Marind stories make a difference. Their persistence, their survivance, or what Wynter might call their "secret histories," are *in-the-way*. They matter.

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Alice RUDGE is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. Her research examines the senses, ethical life, Indigenous theories of Otherness, and the politics of voice between plantation and rainforest contexts in Malaysia. She addresses these topics in her book *Sensing Others: voicing Batek ethical lives at the edge of a Malaysian rainforest* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

Alice Rudge

ar80@soas.ac.uk