

## THERE ARE DIFFERENT SPECIES OF REFUGE. AGATA KOWALEWSKA'S INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIE CHAO

**Sophie Chao** is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sydney. She is author of *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* (2022) and *Land of Famished Beings: West Papuan Theories of Hunger* (2025) and co-editor of *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (2022) and *Worlds Beyond Bios: The Life of Matter and the Matter of Life* (2026).

**Agata Kowalewska** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Performativity Studies, Jagiellonian University. A philosopher and artist by training, she studies spaces of human-nonhuman conflict and animal cultures from a transdisciplinary perspective<sup>1</sup>.

\*

**Agata Kowalewska:** Sophie, thank you so much for taking the time to share some of your thinking about the complex and often difficult realities of what can be a refuge in times of a polycrisis, how and with whom it can be created – if briefly – or made undone. Before we get to that, though, I would like to start with a broad question about safety. What is a safe community? Can safety be oppressive? How would you think about this concept through your work with the Marind people, their multispecies entanglements and spiritual connections? Is safety even a relevant category?

**Sophie Chao:** Firstly, thank you for being in conversation with me, Agata, and for raising these important ethical, epistemic, and ontological questions. In listening to your first question, it struck me that there is a direct connective tissue between the idea of a refuge or sanctuary, and the experience or condition of being, living, becoming, and dying in the safety and security of “community”, however defined. My first thought in qualifying community as safe is the broader geopolitical context of where I have been doing much of my research, which is the Indonesian-occupied region of

<sup>1</sup> Agata Kowalewska's research is funded by the Polish National Science Centre Sonatina grant 2024/52/C/HS2/00365.

West Papua. This is a region that has been settler-colonized for over half a century, and where idioms of safety and security are more often invoked by the government than by communities to justify the conversion of “wild and unsafe” forests into “tamed and disciplined” plantations. Similar invocations of safety and security are also deployed to enforce the transformation of putatively and equally “wild, savage, and primitive” Indigenous peoples into “cultured, socialized participants of the modern nation-state”. They are further routinely harnessed to refuse research permits to Indonesian and international scholars (including myself) who want to conduct fieldwork in Papua, but whose applications (where submitted) are rejected on the basis that it is unsafe *for researchers themselves* to conduct research in this part of Indonesia. There is thus a loaded politics around who gets to deploy the language of safety; what places and peoples, and communities are considered to be safe or unsafe, and how that can be also conveniently instrumentalized to further and justify settler-colonial logics and states’ and corporations’ understanding of what is safe and unsafe. So that is the kind of bigger geopolitical context that I am thinking about your question through.

For Marind, one cannot really distinguish or dissociate this idea of a safe community from a safe environment, because we are talking about a world in which nature *is* society. Elements of the environment are equipped with their own modes of sociality or agency and ability to relate to others in more or less life-sustaining ways. So, I ask myself in thinking about your question, would Marind characterize the forests, for instance, that they live in, with, and from as safe? Would they consider and characterize the forest as a just social environment?

I do not think this would be the primary way in which Marind would articulate their understanding of this space, in the sense that what seems to matter more to many of my interlocutors in the field is the importance of building and sustaining communities that are founded less on principles of human-centric safety than on an ethic of reciprocal exchange. By this I mean a relation of giving and taking, in which taking is not the prerogative of the human, nor giving the prerogative of the non-human. So, to be in the forest is more to lean into a kind of distributed vulnerability, a corporeal, emotive vulnerability to the multitudes of beings, of bodies, of forms of skin and wetness that animate the forest as sentient ecology (see Chao, forthcoming). This demands courage and a willingness to be open to cycles of exchange and relationships of giving and taking that are not always safe or known in advance. At the same time, knowing when these relationships between species lines are safe comes from drawing on vast and incredibly complex bodies of intergenerationally transmitted knowledge, lore, stories, philosophies, and protocols that are passed on from elders to younger generations, and that span understandings of which rivers are safe to cross at which time of the year, which mushrooms are safe to harvest and by whom, and what one gives back to the cassowary that one slays in exchange for the life taken in terms of food offerings or other minimal manipulations of the environment. That deeply embodied and intergenerational and ancestral knowledge is what can make an

environment safer for those who inhabit it and use it, and enable them to return to it in one form or another.

Alongside species, spiritual connections are very much at the forefront of people's ways of speaking about what it means to live in a community based on reciprocity and exchange in the sense that the forest is always more-than-natural and more-than-secular. It is animated by spirits and ancestors who take both material and immaterial forms. Again, comprehending and responding to the needs, presences, and demands of spirits and ancestors requires that one knows how to read the landscape, not just in terms of its physical textures, but also in terms of its energies, its atmospheres (or what people would talk about as the mood of the forest), all of which allow one to sense the presence of intangible yet consequential ancestral forces. These forces can make an environment safe so long as multispecies codes of conduct and protocols of respect are sustained, but they can also mete out punishment and retribution on humans who fail to protect and preserve the environment and the metabolic chains of giving and taking that sustain it.

Being in a safe community (or perhaps, being safe *in* community) is also about thinking about what kinds of ancestors one is accountable to, what sorts of protocols and practices must be sustained and maintained, and – by extension – what kind of ancestor one will oneself become in the future. By this I mean how one will be perceived and regarded by those to come in the future, both human and non-human, and also by those who came before. It is a notion of safety or relationality that is very much cross-temporal and intergenerational – one in which the non-secular or the spiritual is not necessarily starkly distinguished from the natural or the social.

When I use the language of the more-than-secular or the natural, that is me trying to gloss over distinctions that are alien in many ways to the way Marind would talk about an ecosystem of agency or animacy. I think, ultimately, safety comes from a willingness to become vulnerable to others – others whom one comes to know through culture, traditions, and stories, and not all of whom can ever be known in their ontological entirety. The humility of understanding the limits of that knowability is a big part of what it means to accept vulnerability. And safety is always a work in progress, as far as Marind are concerned. Just as becoming human, the way they would talk about it, is never a done job. We are always in that process of becoming human through the different relations we forge and through the encounters that shape our lifeworlds. It is a never-ending task, a never-ending dynamic that involves all kinds of different bodies, beings, and materialities. Embracing the processual and indefinite nature of becoming human, too, demands a kind of vulnerability or willingness to know that nothing is ever set in stone. Enacting, achieving, and sustaining safety, in other words, is always a work in progress whose dynamics and outcomes are shaped as much by human as by non-human agents.

**Agata:** I would like to go back to what you said at the beginning, about dying in safety. Would that mean, considering the broader practices of worldmaking and unmaking

that you talk about, that the ultimate danger is not death, but becoming cut off from these more-than-biological relationships?

**Sophie:** Absolutely. The ways in which settler-colonial socio-ecological orders, and in particular monocrop plantation proliferation, undermine people's ability to die in peace – and this is the way my Marind companions would put it – is a huge part of what community members mourn with the advent of these radical anthropogenic environmental transformations. There is an essay I published that describes a couple whose young child, Petrus, passed away from dysentery following food poisoning, which was in turn caused by chemical pesticides in the river waters that the community was drinking from and bathing in (Chao 2019). This child was refused a burial on the ancestral graveyard of their clan because the burial site was now located inside a privatized oil palm concession. The corporation refused the burial in the interests of preserving the health and wellbeing of the oil palm plants. The family then asked for the child to be buried in the conservation zone that the corporation had established to offset the adverse environmental impacts of oil palm plantations. That request, too, was denied in the interest of preserving the biodiversity of the particular area that had been designated as a protected zone. In the end, the child was buried by the side of a highway that cuts through two Marind villages – a highway that, much like oil palm plantations, was set up to promote regional economic connectivity and rural development in West Papua. The parents would tell me over and over again about how their dreams were haunted by images of Petrus being trampled over and over, and over again by passing palm oil fruit trucks, being unable to find peace in death because his body was not immersed in the soils and with the organisms that it had shared its life with.

So, this idea of a haunting quality to death, or more specifically, to what Deborah Bird Rose calls double death (Bird Rose n.d.) – that is, a death that cannot be channelled back into forms of living and vitality – constitutes a form of ontological violence that transcends the very distinction between living and dead. It is a haunting that creates what many Marind would call erring ghosts, or beings who do not really know where or who they now are and who become liminal in an uncanny and opaque way (see Chao 2023). The landscape is haunted by these beings that are caught between life and death, forest and plantation, and Marind culture and Indonesian geopolitics. Being able to die in safety, in sum, has now become a privilege of sorts. That is the case not only for human beings, but also for non-humans. Marind mourn the deaths of plants and animals that have perished in the wake of the plantation through singing, through weaving, through replanting (see Chao 2022b). These are rituals that they did not practice in the past, because in the past, so they told me, plant and animal deaths had a reason or purpose. There was a return for the death, whether in the form of gifts or offerings or rituals. The deaths haunting the Papuan plantation frontier today, in contrast, are gratuitous deaths, deaths that go completely unnoticed or unaccountable under techno-capitalist logics. These are deaths that happen over and

over again in places that no one really sees. But they are deaths that matter to Marind. Mourning deaths of this kind is now a way in which people are seeking, if not a kind of redemption, then at least a kind of reckoning with the enormity of any single or singular organismic death within broader chains of living and dying together.

**Agata:** You talk about the deep attunement to all the different kinds of beings in their various kinds of relationships. This takes me to an issue that has stayed with me those several years since we first met and I read your first book, *In the Shadow of the Palms* (Chao 2022), that is the attentiveness of Marind to the life of the oil palms, their refusal to be indifferent to the fact that this is also a being with a life. It might be a threat, it might be unintelligible, but one cannot be indifferent to it. So, with this radical openness in mind, my next question is: who is beyond the walls of the refuge and what are the ways we can learn to think about them? And I am aware that there are no walls in the understanding of the refuge that you describe, so perhaps I should ask who is outside the community, outside the refuge, and what are the different ways to think about them, to relate to them? When talking about creating refuges we are necessarily already always talking about some kind of exclusion. But this kind of relationality and relating that you write about seems to imply attentiveness to those who are outside the closest circle.

**Sophie:** It is such an interesting question because it makes me think, as you already invoked in your question, about the contours of the refuge, in physical, infrastructural, and geographical ways, but also in a more epistemic, affective, and ethical sense. I think you're absolutely right, the making or the building of a refuge and the dwelling that it enables also, by extension, relies upon certain forms or degrees of exclusion of those who do not belong. This raises the bigger question, of course, as to who gets to draw that line, and how a carceral geography for one might constitute a liberating refuge for another. Oil palm offers some fascinating insights into this question. The plant was introduced into West Papua as a cash crop, and it is proliferating in the guise of mass-scale industrial plantations. It is a being who inhabits what I describe in the book as a dispersed ontology, in the sense that it is both resented and feared by Marind as a hungry, greedy, predatory being who does not know how to share space or time with others (see also Chao 2018).

At the same time, oil palm is a being who is pitied by my companions in the field, because it is itself subject to all kinds of human, technological, and biological manipulations, its own vitality whipped up by the spirit of capitalism. Oil palm is also an object of wonder and curiosity for people who are curious to know where it comes from, and whether it necessarily lives in deeply violent ways with people, human and non-human, across the various places where it grows and flourishes. My Marind interlocutors were constantly tacking back and forth between these different understandings of the plant. The shape-shifting positionality of oil palm in this particular story raises some important questions. Oil palm is not a native plant, it does not have

a place within Marind onto-epistemologies of the forest environment. So, in a classificatory or taxonomic sense, it is matter out of place within the Marind lifeworld and Marind worldviews. In this respect, oil palm sits alongside an array of other actors and institutions who many Marind see as allies of the oil palm: the Indonesian state, international corporations, some environmental NGOs, other introduced or invasive species, and more.

What the place of the researcher and anthropologist is, whether within or beyond the bounds of the refuge, is something that I am now beginning to think about and that merits further reflection. But beings, human or otherwise, who are on the outside, of course, are also beings who come to occupy refuges. The forest is a refuge, a sago grove is a refuge. No refuge is free from the contamination, or presence, or infection of intrusive and coercive forces. One need only think about the water sources, the waterways that traverse, for instance, the sago grove, a place that is deeply valued and cherished by Marind as a spiritual and multispecies refuge. There is no river passing through the grove that is not already contaminated by plantation chemicals and toxins that do not then make their way into native sago palms. That do not then make their way into the bodies of those who harvest the palms. That do not then make their way into the bodies of those who consume sago's flesh. That do not then pass on to the bodies of the children and grandchildren of those who have consumed that sago flesh. So, I guess what I am trying to get at here is that there are all these beings who are beyond the wall of the refuge, and yet all of them are always already within the refuge, in more or less surreptitious ways, more or less obvious ways, more or less latent ways. There is no purity, if you wish.

And the challenge is less, perhaps, to maintain the boundaries of who belongs in and out, but to try to negotiate less violent ways of inhabiting the refuge together. When it comes to the oil palm, for instance, Marind describe it as not being family – it is not kin – but maybe a plant with whom Marind might eventually become friends. This, however, will rely on the oil palm learning to share space and time and landscape with Marind and their other-than-human kin. It will not just be about Marind getting to know this plant better. It is going to have to be, as I alluded to in my response to your earlier question, a more-than-human process of give and take. Whether the plant is able to do that under the particular structures and strictures of the monocrop plantation system remains an open question. And it is one that Marind still to this day keep open. What are the possibilities of making kin with an invasive plant that seems to destroy the refuge and yet with whom some sort of mutual coexistence is necessary for all to flourish? This is a question that is haunted by greyness. Greyness is the language that Marind themselves use, or *abu-abu* in Indonesian. It means both the literal color grey, but also uncertain, opaque, murky. And I think the same goes for what counts as refuge and for whom. Who gets to be in, who gets to be out? And what do you do with those beings who invade the refuge, but who under different conditions, might perhaps become allies rather than antagonistic entities within the refuge?

**Agata:** It really shows how important it is to stay with the tensions between in and out, kin and foe, hurt and hurting, without letting go of the complexities and flattening everything. In the Afterword to *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (Chao et al. 2022), together with Karin Bolender and Eben Kirksey, you talk about fugitive spaces and refuges for oddkin. I love the term oddkin. As you write, these refuges can also be epistemic, symbolic, or conceptual. Can you expand a little on what these symbolic refuges can mean in the multispecies, more-than-biological perspective?

**Sophie:** Thank you so much for engaging with that volume. Oddkin was a term that we borrowed from Donna Haraway (2017) to expand the concept of kinship to include unexpected and non-human relationships, such as people, animals, plants, and elemental forces. I also want to credit Karin Bolender for really bringing most of the critical and creative and capacious insights to that Afterword. Karin is an incredible environmental humanities scholar and also artist practitioner, who injected our project with a unique kind of radical thinking and an experimental and ethically charged set of questions and positions that, I think, are really vital to the work our project was attempting to undertake – namely, to take seriously the possibility of treating a non-human entity as a subject of justice.

As you noted, a big part of that Afterword is to think about – going to the question of symbols and symbolism – the problem of language. Specifically, we sought in that Afterword to consider the challenges of communicating and conveying the textures and terrains of multispecies relations of all kinds, violent and life-sustaining, vulnerable and resilient, cultural and otherwise. Karin is a visual artist and what she brought to the project was a call to take flight from language and the long arm of black letter law, and to find other spaces of symbiosis where other kinds of relationships or understandings of the more-than-human world might be unearthed. One example of that in the Afterword is a conversation we had with Andy, the slime mould, to whom we asked the question of what multispecies justice looks like, feels like, smells like, and tastes like, to which the mould, as readers will know, offered very interesting if enigmatic answers – answers, that, of course, were ultimately refracted through our human modes of understanding and perception. Taking flight from the assumed fixity and determinacy and omniscience of language, I think, is one part of the answer to your question about symbolic refuges, and to experimentation with other modalities of storying multispecies justice or injustice. In this collective reimagining of the relationship between language and justice, we were also drawing on long traditions of thinking around fugitivity in critical race studies, in queer studies, in Latin American studies, and so forth. What happens, for instance, where fighting, protest, and activism are not the most important or valuable tools to combat structures of power and injustice, but rather the flight to sanctuaries and refuges, where one can find companionship and solace with others in different kinds of ways?

These fugitive spaces we were thinking about were both, as you said, material and conceptual or symbolic. One of the authors in the volume, Elizabeth Lara, looks

at prisons in the United States as refuges through the lens of prison gardens that (primarily African American) prisoners cultivate, nourish, cherish, even as they inhabit and are quite literally, in this case, condemned by colonial and racializing carceral topographies (Lara 2022). The carceral garden, as Lara uncovers, nonetheless allows certain forms of multispecies relationality and hope to gain ground and grow in one of the most, admittedly, unlikely places for multispecies fugitivity. Another chapter in the book looks at post-industrial wastelands in Azerbaijan as a space of multispecies fugitivity where feral dogs and unruly weeds conspire with marginalized humans in making other kinds of shared futures, on the sidelines or in the shadow places of capitalist modernities (Ihar 2022). I think what these sites and subjects, and imaginaries of refuge offer is a way of thinking about justice and relationships through the everyday and the mundane. A way of moving from justice with a capital J, often tethered to the law, to everyday, or little, or small justices. The kind of stuff that goes often unremarked and unnoticed, but that matters deeply as a form of care, as a form of coalition-building, as a form of embracing and recognizing vulnerability.

The question, of course, that all of us in this volume had on our minds when it came to fugitivity and fugitive spaces is: when do the refuges run out? Where then do we unearth them? Who sustains or nourishes a refuge? Who is the sovereign of a refuge? Can there be a refuge that has no sovereign, that is grounded in sovereignty but without the kind of structures of power and hierarchy that so often then result in precisely these kinds of injustices and asymmetries and that are at the heart of multispecies injustice and anthropocentrism and other similar dangerous fictions? The question of sovereignty and fugitivity is one that I have no good answer for, but it is one that I think we need to ask ourselves in considering who gets to flee, where, with whom, and who we find and foster refuge with, both in human and other-than-human terms.

**Agata:** As you point to these questions of refuges running out, it makes me think of the language we are using in the – broadly speaking – environmental humanities space where a lot of the work has this strong commitment to, or at least intention towards, multispecies justice. With that intention, we continually come up with more and better words, as previous words run out because they turn out to be poisoned refuges. Linking that to the idea of epistemic refuges, do you think that means a refuge has to be temporary, to run out?

**Sophie:** That is a really great question. Incidentally, I recently did an interview about language and multispecies justice with Alejandro Ponce de León, a brilliant Colombian editor, artist, and PhD student in cultural studies at UC Davis, looking at multispecies justice across the Melanesian, and in his case, Latin American context (Chao and Ponce de León 2024). It is a super incisive conversation between the two of us about the limits of language in achieving justice.

I think that there is a transience to many of these terms and concepts, or a way in which these terms get deployed in different ways to mean different things and can sometimes be co-opted. Similar conversations happen around “multispecies”, “more-than-human”, “other-than-human”, “non-human” and so forth, and also “Anthropocene”, “Plantationocene”, “Capitalocene”, and others (for a review of these distinctions, see the conversation piece Price and Chao 2023 and the op-ed Chao 2024). These terminological debates are interesting – but to a point. As an anthropologist, my approach to determining what terms or concepts matter starts first and foremost by taking refuge in the languages and epistemologies of those who make all of my research possible, and meaningful. I am referring here to the Marind People of West Papua, whom I have had the great privilege to learn from and think with over the last decade. I seek refuge in Marind’s language. I seek refuge in their embodied practices. I seek refuge in their theories, articulations, and critiques of theory with a capital T, or scholarly theory, if you wish. Indeed, I very rarely find the need to coin a (new) term to describe what Marind already have a word for – or if not a single word, then a set of doings and relatings that merit full textual fleshing out.

This is both an ethical and a political stance – that of starting to think through categories by way of the concepts generated and debated by people on the ground, in dialogue with the other-than-human beings they are rooted in and shaped by. For early career scholars and researchers, I think this kind of stance also offers a place of refuge when one begins to get a little bit lost or untethered from the empirical as a result of higher-level, abstract conceptual deliberation and dialogue. I think that space is critical and I find great joy in delving in it too. But ultimately, I have always found it centres me and it grounds me to return to the refuge of realities, as they are lived, described, theorised, critiqued, and debated by those, who, in some ways, are most deeply and directly mired by the predicament of multispecies injustice and violence.

**Agata:** Staying with uneasy categories, also in your first book is a story that has never left me, the story of Ruben, the “plastic cassowary”. Ruben was not domesticated and was not wild, but he lived alongside humans and was cared for in various ways and given food, which was scarce. In a way, we go back to the refusal to be indifferent to a life, even if somewhat suspicious or difficult to understand. To me, it is a story about the fuzzy edges of the community, the outsider-insiders who are not, like the oil palm, a threat to the liveability, and yet do not quite belong. This porosity of borders seems to strengthen a refuge, yet, at the same time porosity and permeability can be difficult in practice.

**Sophie:** This was one of the hardest chapters of the book to write. It tells the story of a young cassowary whose forest and home had been burnt down to make way for oil palms, and who approaches one of the Marind settlements where I was working in search of shelter and subsistence, and who is, as you said, taken in and cared for by Marind communities, but with great reluctance. This is because of the fact that this

being should be wild, should be living with its own kin, and in some ways is turning humans into oppressors by putting them in a position where they have to take care of a being who is matter out of place and subject to domestication in the village. There is something deeply troubling about this kind of problematic pet, as I write in the book. It is also an ancestor, and the idea of taming your ancestors raises all kinds of other complex ethical questions around relationships of caring and being cared for in intergenerational terms.

The story of Ruben the cassowary relates to the question of refuge in ways that I had not thought about until you framed it in that way, not just in terms of the porosity of the boundaries of the refuge, but also in the sense that the positionality of the beings within and outside refuge are never static. What, I wonder, constitutes refuge for Ruben? Is it really the village? Is it the dying forest? Is it the inhospitable yet proliferating plantation?

Your question reminds me of another diagnostic event that occurred during my fieldwork, and that also involved a cassowary without refuge. My friends and I are driving on a dirt road in the middle of rural Papua, and suddenly we grind to a halt. An adult cassowary jumps into the middle of the dusty highway. A beautiful, towering, majestic bird, but a bird that also looked absolutely terrified. Understandably so: to the left of this highway is a forest that is literally in flames, a practice undertaken by local companies to clear land more cheaply, if illegally, to make way for oil palm. And on the right is a barricade, an ocean of thorny oil palm trees, where this cassowary will find nothing to eat and will not survive. And it is caught there on the road, much like us in this vehicle. My friends point out: see, look, its fate is just like ours. It is caught between the forest and the plantation, and it knows not what to do. In the end, the bird jumps into the forest of flames, seemingly choosing flame over famine. That is how my Marind friends put it. What kinds of choices exist for beings caught at the fuzzy, burning edges of the refuge? What is the lesser of the two evils? A dying home in the forest, or an inhospitable environment in the plantation? What *real* choices exist here?

Ruben's story also brings us to think about questions of power in the refuge. One of the reasons why this being was so problematic is that he in many ways uncannily mirrored the fate of his own human keepers. An orphan who has lost his home, who is now eating instant noodles and taking baths and recognizing the sound of mobile phones. None of these are traditional cassowary-like dispositions or desires, and many of them are ones that Marind are also now adopting, such as using mobile phones, speaking Indonesian rather than Marind, or wearing modern clothes rather than traditional garments. And I think that relationship of indexicality and resonance, together with the uncanny echoes that surface across species lines, are what a being like Ruben offers to us within the refuge. That every being within the refuge is refracting and diffracting each other's experiences and lives in very different ways, but in ways that nonetheless can allow us to unearth a kind of kernel of sameness. A kernel of

solidarity in the face of shared vulnerabilities to forces like settler-colonial capitalist logics, that are fundamentally oppressing, disempowering, and orphaning.

**Agata:** In a world of such impossible decisions, does then the refuge itself become a moment, a decision, rather than a state, or a place, or something that can be secured, or promised, or stay unchanged in any way?

**Sophie:** The form of refuge that I have done most of my thinking around in the context of plantation studies is the plot – a formation that Sylvia Wynter initially theorized (Wynter 1971) and that has been taken up in a lot of more recent environmental humanities work on the plantation system (see, for instance, Davis et al. 2019). The plot was the provision grounds that enslaved African workers would nurture and cultivate on the margins of the plantations where their bodies were being exploited and extracted to feed the imperial capitalist system. The plot was where the enslaved would care for plants and seeds that they had carried with them from the Old World to the New World, many often braided directly into women’s hair as they undertook the tortuous journey across the Middle Passage. The plot was where they would share and revive stories, songs, and rituals once practiced on their native lands and now transplanted, alongside humans, to new and unknown lands. The plot was where they would feed and provide food for themselves and future generations. The plot, as Sylvia Wynter and many other critical race theorists have written, was also a space not just of refuge, but one of resistance and refusal, the grounds of revolution and abolitionisms to come.

And it all started from seeds and soils. It started from a hand braiding a seed into hair that then lands into waterways, and that travels. It is a whole multispecies ecosystem, this plot. And I feel that there is something really powerful there, because the plot is a refuge not just in terms of a geographical space (the provision grounds) but also in terms of a socio-political stance in that it was the one place where the enslaved could seek respite, and solace, and community, and talk and laugh outside of the constraints and gaze of the colonial master. Beyond a space and a stance, then plot was also a practice. It was harvesting, it was weeding, it was growing things, and growing each other. It was the doing, it was the place, it was the moment, it was the energies, it was the reconnections that all crystallized or coalesced in the plot as a counter-plantation materiality and imaginary. So, in an age where, to pardon the pun, we really do seem to have lost the plot when it comes to cultivating care across species lines, what kinds of possibilities do gardens, for instance, or food provisioning grounds, or other sorts of counter-hegemonic spaces, offer to us?

Putting this thinking into practice as a doing need not start far away from wherever and whoever one calls home. Attunement, a term you mentioned earlier, attention, slowing down and noticing the existence and continuance of more-than-human relationships and life-making projects in the backyard, on the campus pathway, in the gaps between the train tracks, could be a start. It is also in these seemingly mundane

and little places that we can unearth ways in which life is always already going on, whether we like it or not, whether we are part of it or not. These are not the kinds of places or witnessing that are necessarily going to lead to a sweeping revolution, even though that is perhaps what we also need. But I think they also matter in terms of thinking about refuges as sometimes mushrooming in unexpected places, always already transient, always already more-than-human, and always already bringing together the spatial-temporal-affective dimensions of what it is to be in and of the world.

This all makes refuge and refuge-making sound very positive and life-embracing, in ways that push against my earlier interrogation of the perils and promise of conceptualizing refuge as necessarily benign and generative. I think there are different species of refuge, each of which comes with, and is animated by, its own particular, situated, partial, and contingent mosaic of companions, kin, and foes, and each of which, much like the plantation and other shadowy places of extraction, is also a site of negotiation, compromise, and awkward co-flourishing.

**Agata:** Your latest book, *Land of Famished Beings* (Chao 2025), was just released. It is also based on your long-term work with the Marind peoples of West Papua. In it, true to your commitment to telling bitter stories well, you stay with the pain and share stories of hunger, loss, and death that is robbed of its usual meanings, and you reconstruct the multiple Marind theories of hunger. It speaks of a world where many beings will not find sustenance and where multispecies communities are literally being devoured by beings that came from far away. Importantly, therefore, you problematize the role of the academic, of the person in the field, who is wit(h)nessing (Boscacci 2018; Ettinger 2004) and sharing stories. Can you say a little more about the new book, and how do you, as a relational being engaged in this difficult work, make your refuges?

**Sophie:** *Land of Famished Beings* considers how Indigenous theories of hunger and nourishment relate to the bigger question of what it means to eat well and become good food for others in multispecies worlds. For me, nourishment is a big part of what makes a place a refuge, or a community. In some ways, this conversation right now, with you, right here, is offering me refuge. I am in intellectual companionship with you. I am in intercorporeal and intellectual vulnerability with you. I am in a relation of give and take with you. In this day and age, these sorts of nourishing conversations are for me a vital refuge, a momentary reprieve from the paralyzing politics of despair that can so often arise when it seems that nothing can be done about overwhelming and seemingly insurmountable planetary challenges. Following Gabrielle Hecht (2018), I think refuges are interscalar, in that they span ecological formations, activist movements, the weeds growing in the gaps between the tracks of the trainline, and more. All of these are refuges we can hold on to and be in relation with. So too, I think dialogue, and the forms of repair that dialogue can enable, can

be nourishing and can count as refuges. This is basically a long way of saying thank you so much for this conversation, Agata!

Writing *Land of Famished Beings* was challenging because it is not just a book about how local Indigenous food systems are being radically reconfigured by environmental change, but also about how none of us reading (and writing) this and other books are innocent when it comes to unevenly distributed yet planetary-wide processes of extraction, destruction, and extinction. We are all imbricated, more or less willingly, more or less consciously, into global food systems that are very much predicated, as bell hooks would put it, on “eating the other” (hooks 2014). Other lands, other peoples, other species, other ecosystems, other lifeworlds. bell hooks’ words resonate strongly with Julie Livingston’s characterization of the current epoch as one of “self-devouring growth” (Livingston 2019). These idioms of unsustainable consumption, extraction, and predation all speak to the ontology of capitalist logics itself and the fiction of endless growth. With that in mind, what then does it mean to eat well in an age when no food is not contaminated or impure as a result of industrial processes and practices and violences that make that food for us possible in the first place? I do not know what forms of reckoning, recognition, and repair are possible in the face of extractivist industrial food production systems like the plantation.

Growing your own food is probably the most revolutionary act one can do. And yet, the waters and soils from which one grows that food are probably still already contaminated. My answer to your question is anything but satisfying, and the frustration I feel in not being able to give a hopeful answer is also one I feel when people who read my book, particularly from the general public, ask me: what can *I* do about this reality? And honestly, the answer is that very little can be changed as an individual consumer. There is very little we can do in the face of structural forces that breed nutritional structural violence. We need to learn to live with contamination or impurity, as Alexis Shotwell puts it (Shotwell 2016). We need to acknowledge that, strangely, contamination also breeds emergences and new kinds of worlds and relationships. I am not saying that these are better or worse, simply that they are emergent and different. Some beings are thriving in the companionship of microplastics, while others are not.

I think the bigger challenge for me is how do we tell these stories well? How do we find refuge in everyday life? But also how do we story and celebrate and protect a refuge? How do we know which refuges are worth fighting for in the first place? Who do we undertake these labors of storying, celebrating, and protecting for, and with? What are we willing to give or sacrifice to protect these spaces or practices? What will it take to achieve a critical mass and meaningful momentum for fulfilling multispecies justice? How do we make these stories and practices of refuge-making heard and heeded by the actors who are bent on destroying them? And how do we come to acknowledge that what the refuge is might be a very different thing to different people, just as what counts as violence (or justice, for that matter) might mean very different things to different actors. The ivory tower of academia is refuge to

some. The disciplined, regimented, orderly plantation is a refuge of sorts to others. For me, refuge demands that we stay within the tension of telling better, bitter stories of dying and emerging worlds, while also putting our outrage to work in the form of more actionable, engaged, and practical actions and collaborations.

**Agata:** Perhaps your role here is exactly that, to tell the stories well. And in your book you write explicitly this was the role Marind wanted you to play.

**Sophie:** Yes, that is true. The work was never about solutions but rather about the ethical and political stakes of storytelling. I know there is pushback against solution-driven work in some realms of academia, and I completely see where those critiques are stemming from. At the same time, I came to academic research from a background as a human rights activist, where the urgency was to act in the world, and not just try to understand that world. As I said, I completely understand the reticence to be solutions-driven, and yet in the face of growing and polymorphic crises and urgencies, I cannot help but think that we *need* to act. There needs to be a doing here, not just a thinking. No individual can do all of this work alone, and in engaging with broader publics, it can also be really challenging to translate knowledge to different audiences, including policy makers. I wonder, for instance, what would be the closest term to “refuge” that an Indonesian land ministry official or palm oil CEO might understand, in a way that opens space for thinking about the forest as a more-than-human sentient ecology, rather than a zone of industrial extraction or a privatized conservation zone? What labour of translation goes into making a concept like “refuge” intelligible and actionable by those who have the greatest power and influence to make a difference to more-than-human worlds?

Thinking about my own practice, there is a degree to which writing and holding on to these kinds of accountabilities and stakes of representing multispecies worlds constitutes a refuge of sorts. On the one hand, it is incredibly difficult because one grapples with the seemingly unsurmountable task of doing justice to the lives, words, and worlds of the people who make all of my research possible and meaningful and difficult, and for all the right reasons. And yet at the same time, in the practice of writing, I also find refuge. Words have their limits, as does language, but words can also channel affect, and experience, and possibility in a way that I have found can be quite empowering. There is a very particular kind of craft and commitment that goes into telling a good story, a better bitter story. And as much as writing is often an individual (or individuated) act, writing is also community. One never writes alone in that one is always in intellectual and affective companionship within a broader ecology of thinkers and practitioners, both in the field and across disciplines. Personally, I have never found writing to be a lonely act, because I am always in some ways in intellectual dialogue with many other voices and presences, to whom I am accountable in different ways, including when I am pushing against their perspectives or practices. I am talking here about academic writing, but there are of course many different

ways of representing more-than-human worlds that transcend the textual medium. For me, writing can be a refuge when it is done in a thinking-with-others mindset, in a collaborative ethos.

And then, there are other forms of refuge. When things get too much, Marind go to the forest. They go to the sago grove when life in the village is exceedingly difficult and the pressures of the state are mounting. They go to the forest, and they sit under a tree, or a stump, or whatever is left of the grove, and they watch and listen and practice what they call *damai*, which is inner peace. They slow down. They stop all kinds of activities, and they observe what is around them – what *just is*. Those moments of pause or hiatus in everyday life are also things that I have tried to put into practice myself. Walking into the bush, going to the water. Sitting and stopping and slowing down. Nothing about the world we live in encourages or supports or allows us to find refuge through the slowing down of things. In closing, and as someone who has just had a child, I want to add that there is also a refuge to be found in the wonder of rediscovering the world through the eyes of a being who is seeing it all for the first time, smelling it all for the first time, tasting it all for the first time, being held and also hurt by it all for the first time. There is a kind of freshness that comes from that kind of refuge-finding, that rediscovering the world one thing at a time, all over again. It is a liberating kind of rediscovery, at the same time as it is terribly challenging. It inculcates a stance of wonder, curiosity, enchantment, and possibility – one that might offer a shimmer of hope as we learn to relearn and rebuild refuge in the midst of planetary unmakings.

## References

- Bird Rose D. (n.d.), “Double Death,” *The Multispecies Salon*, <https://www.multispecies-salon.org/double-death/> (accessed: 23.01.2026).
- Boscacci L. (2018), “Wit(h)Nessing,” *Environmental Humanities*, No. 10(1), pp. 343–347.
- Chao S. (2018), “In the Shadow of the Palm: Dispersed Ontologies among Marind, West Papua,” *Cultural Anthropology*, No. 33(4), pp. 621–649.
- Chao S. (2019), “The Truth about ‘Sustainable Palm Oil’,” *SAPIENS*, 13 June 2019. <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/palm-oil-sustainable/> (accessed: 23.01.2026).
- Chao S. (2022a), *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chao S. (2022b), “Multispecies Mourning: Grieving as Resistance on the West Papuan Plantation Frontier,” *Cultural Studies*, No. 37(4), pp. 553–579.
- Chao S. (2023), “Spaces and Subjects of Rupture on the Papuan Oil Palm Frontier,” *Antipode Online*, [https://antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/1\\_Chao.pdf](https://antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/1_Chao.pdf) (accessed: 23.01.2026).
- Chao S. (2024), “Beyond the Anthropocene: We Must Rethink Our Epoch,” *IAI News*, The Institute of Art and Ideas, 8 April 2024, [https://iai.tv/articles/beyond-the-anthropocene-we-must-rethink-our-epoch-auid-2803?\\_auid=2020](https://iai.tv/articles/beyond-the-anthropocene-we-must-rethink-our-epoch-auid-2803?_auid=2020) (accessed: 23.01.2026).

- Chao S. (2025), *Land of Famished Beings: West Papuan Theories of Hunger*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chao S., Bolender K., Kirksey E. (eds.) (2022), *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, with M.L. Clark, R. Govindrajana, Z. Ihar et al., Duke University Press.
- Chao S., Ponce de León A. (2024), “¿Alcanza el Lenguaje para Hacer Justicias?,” *Revista Anfibia*, 11 June 2024, <https://www.revistaanfibia.com/alcanza-el-lenguaje-ambiental-para-hacer-justicias/> (accessed: 23.01.2026).
- Chao S. (forthcoming), “Skinship, Scarship: Multispecies Vulnerabilities and the Violence of Plantation Capitalism” [in:] D. Kulick, M. Naepels (eds.), *Analytics of Vulnerability*, Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press.
- Davis J., Moulton A.A., Van Sant L., Williams B. (2019), “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises,” *Geography Compass*, No. 13, e12438.
- Ettinger B.L. (2004), “Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, No. 21(1), pp. 69–94.
- Haraway D. (2017), “Making Oddkin: Story Telling for Earthly Survival,” Yale University, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-iEnSztKu8> (accessed: 23.01.2026).
- Hecht G. (2018), “Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence,” *Cultural Anthropology*, No. 33, pp. 109–141.
- hooks b. (2014), *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, New York: Routledge.
- Ihar Z. (2022), “Multispecies Mediations in a Post-Extractive Zone” [in:] S. Chao, K. Bolender, E. Kirksey (eds.), *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lara E. (2022), “Prison Gardens and Growing Abolition” [in:] S. Chao, K. Bolender, E. Kirksey (eds.), *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Price C., Chao S. (2023), “Multispecies, More-than-Human, Non-Human, Other-than-Human: Reimagining Idioms of Animacy in an Age of Planetary Unmaking,” *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, No. 10(2), pp. 177–193.
- Livingston J. (2019), *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shotwell A. (2016), *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wynter S. (1971), “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou*, No. 5, pp. 95–102.