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Reviews

Chao, Sophie, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey (editors)

2022. *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*. Durham: Duke University Press. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1889-6

This collection of essays and poetry promising insights into multispecies worlds – edited by well-known Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender and Eben Kirksey – has been on my reading radar ever since it was published in October 2022. Now, finally, I have engaged in a slow reading, embracing its unsettling ethnographies. These ethnographies feel important for this time. They resonate with an uncertainty and strangeness I have been feeling and sharing with others: misgivings about how the Earth’s atmosphere, our breathing and living as human beings and that of our animal and plant kin will unfold and evolve over the next few decades. There is something strange, dysfunctional, in the air and, perhaps unsurprisingly, reflected in this book also. (But, we all read within our own worlds, our own minds and hearts and this is the place I am reading from: cis female, Gen X (grunge), tauwi, vegetarian, fermenter, lover of plant, bird and other life, on a small organic quarter acre section in semi-rural Te Wai Pounamu, Aotearoa.)

Donna Haraway first wrote for us about ‘multispecies justice.’ 14 years later, 14 multidisciplinary thinkers collectively trace the evolution of this concept and related ideas. They do this playfully, at times provocatively, and always in unexpected ways, intent on expanding the boundaries of ethnographic research. They open new windows into the complex intersectionalities of multispecies, environmental, and social justice worlds. As a collective they ask: ‘What are the possibilities for multispecies justice? How do social justice struggles intersect with the lives of animals, plants, and other creatures?’ In the words of the editors,

they ‘focus on situated struggle against ugly injustices while also attuning to beautiful creatures and multispecies communities that are sources of delight’ (page 2).

I like the editors’ approach to rethinking the term ‘multispecies justice.’ They chose not to flatten ontological worlds by abandoning the term ‘species’ altogether. Instead, they have collected and assembled contributions under the auspices of a new way of thinking about ‘species’: they invite the reader to think with ‘species of justice.’ This is an original way to present such a diverse array of ethnographic research. This writing – emerging from both the Global South and North, including from scholars of Indigenous and Settler-colonial backgrounds, based on field work in Azerbaijan, Colombia, India, Micronesia, North America, Philippines and Tanzania – describes multitudes of ways of demanding, seeking, implementing and refusing justices.

I encountered species of justice more than I ever imagined possible. Multi-species (of) justice indeed. Some of these species I already knew, others took me by surprise: spectral justice, small justice? Some will stay with me for a long time to come. Gatta, a dead bull in India, and Andi, a living slime mold in the Netherlands, who serve as bookends to the essays, will stay with me too. Without giving away too much, within these bookends we encounter both the beginnings and endings of worlds. We learn about a multitude of actors caught up in socio-political worlds of multiple power struggles: turkeys, toxic spray drift, bananas, prisoners, brown tree snakes, kingfishers, traps, nuclear waste, khazri the wind, heavy metals, rats, dogs, monkeys and ‘other’ weeds and pests. And Craig Santos Perez’s poetic incisions visualise the essays in evocative, deeply touching, and also unsettling ways.

Initially, I felt challenged in understanding how and why these essays should all find themselves in this same volume. But through a (very) slow reading I have come to see how souls, spirits, bodies, abiotic, elemental, and molecular entities all do fit into intersectional considerations of rights of nature and justice, relevant to this time. It is true, as the editors explain, that all of these ‘ask deeper ecological questions of what, how, and by whom laws and languages of any land are comprised’ (page 227). The rights of nature are a central theme, along with the rights of humans, leading us into thinking spaces of justice/injustice, balance/imbalance, inclusion/exclusion, perishing/flourishing. Of course, ‘rights of nature’ and ‘justice,’ like ‘species,’ are conflicted, uneasy terms. Readers will be interested in the differentiated use of these, following threads throughout the collection, and working out how these fit into their own learning and critical thinking journeys.

While this volume can by no means cover all multispecies worlds relevant for this time, it is precisely this aspect where I see it as a valuable gift for future research. Because it touches on diverse worlds, but also points to gaps, it invites us to continue thinking with other species and working on new ways of articulating these into the future. These ethnographies are ‘old songs of love and loss, daring escapes and even little justices: recalled, remembered, lived in and longed for’ (page 227). I think they are songs both old and new.

As an apprentice-practitioner of the arts of noticing, interested in ethnographies about multispecies thinking, I have uncovered treasures and new ways to think with, and I am happy to recommend this book to those with similar leanings. In the words of the editors: ‘This approach demands that we decide which dreams are worth dreaming ... which justices are intolerable. It is an invitation to renew our commitment to love, live, and to fight for the possibility of flourishing in worlds present and yet to come’ (page 17). This invitation I can live with, go on with. It offers hope in a determined, considered way – a hope for a more just and multispecies-connected life on Earth.

Some of the editors and contributors have experienced traumatic, deeply affecting experiences on their ethnographic research journeys. This volume made me think about the lives, sorrows and despair of ethnographers and the intense challenges they face in their work more generally. And, since reading this volume, I have felt strangely touched to be an apprentice-practitioner of the same method used by these brave, innovative and resolute researchers. I would like to thank the editors and contributors for caring enough about multispecies worlds to embrace discomfort, endure hardships, risk their lives and wellbeing – mostly staying with the trouble – whilst honouring and expanding the practise of ethnography.

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