

The background of the entire page is a teal color. Overlaid on this background are several dark, thorny branches with small, dark leaves. The branches are crisscrossing, creating a complex, web-like pattern. The thorns are sharp and pointed. The overall aesthetic is natural and somewhat stark.

# The Promise of Multispecies Justice

Sophie Chao,  
Karin Bolender,  
and  
Eben Kirksey,  
editors

The Promise of  
Multispecies Justice

BUY

**The Promise  
of  
Multispecies  
Justice**

Edited by Sophie Chao,  
Karin Bolender,  
and Eben Kirksey

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Durham and London* 2022

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Avenir LT Std

by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chao, Sophie, editor. | Bolender, Karin, [date] editor. | Kirksey, Eben, [date] editor.

Title: The promise of multispecies justice / edited by Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022002040 (print)

LCCN 2022002041 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016250 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018896 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478023524 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Environmental justice. | Environmental ethics. | Environmental responsibility. | Restoration ecology. | Physical anthropology. | Ecology—Moral and ethical aspects. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Anthropology / Cultural & Social | SCIENCE / Environmental Science (see also Chemistry / Environmental)

Classification: LCC GE220.P766 2022 (print) |

LCC GE220 (ebook) | DDC 179/.1—dc23/eng20220627

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022002040>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022002041>

Cover art: Barbed wire and plant. Photograph

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This book is dedicated to Deborah Bird Rose,  
whose work continues to shimmer in the afterlife.

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## **Acknowledgments**

We acknowledge the peoples of the Kulin, Kalapuya, Eora, and Darug nations, for allowing us to work and live on their unceded lands while compiling this book collection. We acknowledge that genocidal and colonial processes in Australia, North America, Melanesia, and elsewhere shaped and constrained our knowledges. We are grateful to the newly recognized essential workers of 2020, who supplied us with food, medical supplies, and other life-sustaining support during the pandemic.

This volume came together in distinct ways both because and in spite of the tumultuous unfoldings of recent years. Beginning in the spring of 2020, a steadfast crew of scholars and artists came together regularly in a dedicated online space, across a dizzying array of time zones and living situations, to present and discuss the ideas and texts presented here. The camaraderie, provocations, and sense of common purpose cultivated in that space created a steadying force in times of unforeseen global upheaval and mind-bending inflection. We are grateful for all the gifts brought to bear on this volume by participants in that MSJ (Multispecies Justice) crew and visitors, who shared their time and insights in the forms of chapters in progress, artworks, and conversations. Thank you to Marisol de la Cadena, Kuang-Yi Ku, Tessa Laird, Michele Lobo, Celia Lowe, Jan-Maarten Luursema, Santiago Martínez Medina, Gina Moore, Natasha Myers, and Anna Tsing.

Participants in the Promise of Multispecies Justice series of online talks held in 2021 offered further depth and breadth to the ideas presented in



this book. We thank in particular our guest presenters, Danielle Celermajer, Ursula Heise, and Macarena Gómez-Barris, and our guest discussants, Alex Blanchette, Carla Freccero, Evan Mwangi, Nicholas Shapiro, and Christine Winter, and also our virtual auditors and interlocutors who tuned in from around the world.

We extend heartfelt gratitude to our editor at Duke University Press, Ken Wissoker, for his precious mentorship and wise guidance in helping bring this book to fruition, and to Ryan Kendall for supporting us throughout the production process. Immense gratitude also goes to the two anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their copious and constructive feedback.

The leadership of Emma Kowal and Fethi Mansouri of the Alfred Deakin Institute created a generative environment for us to nurture the initial seeds of ideas for this project and bring it to life. Financial support for this book was received from the Australian Research Council under a Discovery Project Grant (Ref: DP200102763). Luke Cuttance, Pauline Seet, and Giles Campbell-Wright gave us strategic support throughout. Eben Kirksey is particularly grateful for the intellectual community of Deakin University—especially Vanessa Lemm, Miguel Vatter, David Turnbull, Joe Graffam, Chris Mayes, and David Giles—for companionship and generative conversations amidst the contingencies of lockdown. Inspiration on justice came from Julieta Aranda, while Leon Aranda staged creative disruptions.

As a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Sydney's Department of History, Sophie Chao focused on bringing this book to fruition. Particular gratitude goes to the Janet Dora Hines Endowment and to Warwick Anderson, Keith Dobney, Annamarie Jagose, and members of the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry for this unique opportunity. At the University of Sydney, reading groups and symposiums held by the Sydney Environment Institute Multispecies Justice Collective have offered vital interdisciplinary insights into theories and practices of justice. Particular thanks go to Danielle Celermajer, Anna-Katharina Laboissiere, Astrida Neimanis, David Schlosberg, Blanche Verlie, Dinesh Wadiwel, Christine Winter, and Katie Woolaston.

Colleagues from a wide range of fields and disciplines provided critical feedback on the arguments and ideas presented in this book at various guest seminars and conferences. These include presentations that Sophie Chao delivered at the University of Manchester, New York University, Central University of Karnataka, Cornell University, University of California Berkeley, London School of Economics, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz–Max-Planck-Institut, University of

Waikato, Asia Research Institute, and Yale University–National University of Singapore College, and Sydney Environment Institute. Chao thanks the organizers and the participants of these events for their incisive questions and comments. Last but by no means last, Chao thanks her family, Dominique Chao, Jacques Chao, and Emmanuel Chao, and her partner, Jacob Perrott, for their unfailing support and ongoing care.

Karin Bolender is grateful for the new paths this project opens toward investigating sensory and other more-than-human dimensions of possible justices via interwoven creative and critical forays. This project gained important insights from Anne Riley, T’uy’t’angat-Cease Wyss, JuPong Lin, and Laiwan; Eli Nixon and the wondrous Bloodtide workshop celebrants; Heather Barnett’s international Slime Mould Collective, and slime mold Andi; angela rawlings and MOONLINE; Emily Eliza Scott; and Composting Feminisms. In the urgent quest to bring practical questions of how to do justice for all into contested (stay-at-)home places, Karin Bolender basks in a stream of inspiration from Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, dance for plants, Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology, and Kultivator. On-the-ground companionship in the course of this project came from a vibrant community of ecological artists and curatorial agents (thanks to Agnese Ceberé and Eugene Contemporary Art’s *Common Ground*, and the R. A. W. Pulp-ing Posse); furred, furless, feathered, and photosynthesizing friends and kin with keen noses for more-just assemblages; and the care, endurance, and ingenuity of Rolly and Sean Hart, holding it down on the home front and other swirling horizons.

Vital technical and logistical support for this project was offered by research assistants Marita Seaton and Rebecca Willow-Anne Hutton, proof-reader Marc Herbst, and web designer Alex Reeves of Moonpool. We also thank artist and scholar Feifei Zhou for creating many of the artworks featured in this book.

Finally, we thank the contributors to this volume for their tireless commitment and generosity of self and spirit throughout our collaborative journey: M. L. Clark, Radhika Govindrajan, Zsuzsanna Dominika Ihar, Noriko Ishiyama, Elizabeth Lara, Jia Hui Lee, Kristina Lyons, Michael Marder, Alyssa Paredes, Craig Santos Perez, and Kim TallBear.

With this book we hope to create an opening for future research and advocacy on multiple fronts that brings the promise of justice into contact with historical reality.

## Introduction

### Who Benefits from Multispecies Justice?

Eben Kirksey and Sophie Chao

**EARLY WORK IN MULTISPECIES STUDIES** described how symbiotic associations and the mingling of creative agents generated emergent ecological communities. Multispecies ethnographers mobilized approaches from cultural anthropology to study plants, animals, microbes, and fungi whose lives and deaths are intertwined with human social worlds. Justice and injustice were part of the conversation since the beginning of the field, even though these concerns were ancillary to early texts rather than the central focus. Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and many other multispecies scholars have followed Susan Leigh Star who suggested it is more analytically interesting and more politically just to begin with the question “Cui bono?” (Who benefits?) than to simply celebrate the fact of human/nonhuman mingling.<sup>1</sup>

Sympathetic criticism of multispecies ethnography has led many scholars to explicitly focus on justice as well as political and ethical concerns. A decade ago, when the field was still finding its feet, Kim TallBear emphasized the importance of including Indigenous and queer standpoints as we reckon with the violence generated by Western cosmologies that have divided human

and nonhuman realms.<sup>2</sup> Many writers have since abandoned the “nonhuman” altogether, since it implies the lack of something—like “nonwhite.” As we conceptualize multispecies futures, it is important to keep the intergenerational legacies of colonialism and racism in mind. Intersectional political movements and research practices are starting to simultaneously address issues related to social justice and interspecies care.<sup>3</sup>

The phrase *multispecies justice* was introduced by Donna Haraway in 2008 with her foundational book, *When Species Meet*. As we continue to build on classic insights about how human existence is bound together with the lives of other entities, it is possible to address emergent intersectional concerns. Building on an influential and quickly growing body of work,<sup>4</sup> *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* addresses an array of intersecting questions: Who are the subjects of justice in our shared worlds? What is at stake when they are captured by juridical-legal systems and social movements? Who has claimed a monopoly over justice in the past, and in the present, and how might we contest their sense of propriety in the future?

Injustice (the lack of something) is often more tangible than justice (the supposed fullness or perfection of something).<sup>5</sup> In assembling this collection of essays, we searched for authors who were focused on situated struggles against ugly injustices while also attuned to beautiful creatures and multispecies communities that are sources of delight.<sup>6</sup> In a book entitled *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry observes that there does not appear to be a finite amount of space, inside the brain, given to beautiful things or just causes. Since ideals about beauty can be hegemonic, Scarry is particularly concerned with errors in aesthetic judgement. She recalls the disorienting shock when suddenly she notices a palm tree—a kind of plant she had not previously recognized as noteworthy—“arc-ing, arching, waving, cresting and breaking in the soft air, throwing the yellow sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side.”<sup>7</sup>

Writers in the multispecies tradition have worked to cultivate what Anna Tsing calls “arts of noticing.”<sup>8</sup> This approach involves paying attention to charismatic forms of life—like plants, birds, and butterflies—as well as creatures that are often disregarded or actively targeted for destruction like mushrooms, bacteria, rodents, and beetles.<sup>9</sup> The idea is not just to celebrate the beautiful, like Scarry’s palm tree, but also to notice uncanny presences, such as stray dogs and thorny plants in post-industrial Azerbaijan (see Ihar) or the carcass of a dismembered bull by the side of the road in the Indian Himalayas (see Govindrajan). Writers who practice these multispecies arts of noticing have begun to turn away from landscapes conventionally regarded as beautiful—

like protected parklands and conservation zones—and toward sites of abandonment and extraction, like toxic waste dumps and plantations.<sup>10</sup> Feral forms of life have become sources of wonder in the midst of dread.<sup>11</sup> *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* embraces these alternative aesthetic sensibilities.

This book is the result of coalitional thinking with gardeners, anti-racist activists, and Indigenous peoples, as well as the urban and rural poor in Asia, the Caucasus, Africa, and the Americas. During the height of the 2020 pandemic summer, we assembled an international and interdisciplinary crew in a Zoom room to share stories with glimmers of hope for peoples and creatures who are united across geographical divides by shared experiences of violence, humiliation, or abandonment. We gathered writers with expertise—in cultural anthropology, geography, philosophy, science fiction, poetry, and fine art—to track the contours of justice as it travelled from courtrooms to protest movements in the streets, from the abstract realms of high theory to the fleeting domain of ghosts and spirits.

Together, we explored intersectional alliances emerging among diverse peoples and species on planet Earth, and even the possibilities of transformative justice in extraterrestrial realms (see Clark). We found that dominant hierarchies of life and worth—placing humans above other species—were being subverted and resisted in diverse cultural and ecological milieus. In Micronesia, we were drawn to Indigenous practices for exalting the beauty of an endangered bird—a kingfisher with green, orange, and white feathers—while colonial enterprises continue to produce extinction (see Perez). Plants growing in the prisons of California offered us glimpses of beauty within a deeply flawed justice system, and they illustrated possibilities for the prison abolition movement to gain ground and grow (see Lara). In the Colombian Amazon, open violence was intensifying even as dreams proliferated about justice for “Nature” itself (see Lyons). In these settings, and many others, we collectively asked: Can we depart from particular grounds of possible flourishing to bring justice to other sites and scales? How does expanding the scope of justice beyond the human and the law invite new possibilities for decolonizing multispecies relations, and the concept and practice of justice itself?

### Species of Justice

The idea of justice is often accompanied by qualifiers like social justice, restorative justice, and distributive justice. Naming forms of justice and injustice, Jessica Greenberg suggests, can produce a sense of action and agency. Creat-

ing a critical and activist semiotics, Greenberg argues, lets us experience the possibility of incremental hope and messy future action. “The opposite of justice is not injustice,” she proposes, “but despair.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than sink into a paralyzing politics of despair, this book identifies, defines, and indexes multiple species of justice (see Glossary). Our collection of essays reclaims modest forms of hope through accounts of transitional justice (see Lyons), multiworld justice (see Marder), small justices (see Ihar), generative justice (see Lee), and spectral justice (see Govindrajan). Taken together, these essays explore tactics for achieving multispecies justice in polymorphic situations where calculations are never perfect and are often open to reinterpretation.<sup>13</sup>

While the field of multispecies studies has largely moved past the environment as a framing concept for human agency and action, it is important to recognize the significant research about justice that is taking place in environmental studies broadly defined. The environmental justice movement emerged in the 1980s, as civil rights activists and scholars in the southern United States began protesting toxic waste dumping in marginalized communities.<sup>14</sup> The slow violence of environmental racism was damaging human bodies, even as overt violence and killings took place.<sup>15</sup> Early environmental justice struggles brought critical attention to the bias of government knowledge and industry practices.<sup>16</sup> Citizens impacted by environmental racism generated their own community-based participatory research initiatives.<sup>17</sup> Critical insights from these prior generations of activists and environmental scholars are more necessary than ever as we start to consider the promise of multispecies justice.

Our approach to multispecies justice is informed by Western continental philosophy and political theory related to rights and capabilities. Philosophers associated with the animal rights movement have drawn on the utilitarian tradition in ethical philosophy to deem actions right or wrong, depending on the extent to which they promote happiness or prevent pain. Justice can be accomplished, according to utilitarian thinkers, when people intuit the feelings of animals and become advocates for their welfare.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in speaking about possibilities of justice in multispecies worlds—in conversation with activists, biologists, nature lovers, environmental advocates, politicians, farmers, or philosophers—it is important to remain ever mindful of the creatures and communities being represented and who represents them.<sup>19</sup> Work in the field of multispecies studies always contains the risk of ventriloquism—the problem identified by Arjun Appadurai, as anthropologists attempt to speak “for” and speak “of” others.<sup>20</sup> Words often fail us when we attempt to do justice in multispecies realms (see Bolender, Chao, and Kirksey).

Capabilities-centered approaches to justice offer useful resources for getting beyond the problem of ventriloquism through the consideration of physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive well-being of animals, as well as their social relationships and ecological interdependencies. Practices of “sympathetic imagining” across gulfs of species’ differences, and creative engagements with scientific literature proposed by philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, offer fresh perspectives on the flourishing of animals as dignity-bearing subjects, agents, and world makers.<sup>21</sup>

Classically, theories of distributive justice were concerned with the equal distribution of resources and benefits as well as equal protection from scarcities and risk.<sup>22</sup> Struggles over distributing resources can tacitly reinforce hegemonic structures of power as claims are made on dominant institutions (see Lee).<sup>23</sup> Approaches to recognition justice instead acknowledge how different peoples or beings gain or lose standing as a result of structural, institutional, cultural, legal, and economic regimes as well as attendant hierarchies of worth.<sup>24</sup> Sociolegal scholars have expanded the conventional scope of this recognition by proposing “ecological vulnerability” as a theory of justice that positions the autonomous self within a larger relational framework of existence.<sup>25</sup> It is thus important to recognize how unequal vulnerabilities impact humans as well as species and ecosystems.

The contributors to this volume build on this expansive archive of Western continental philosophy and political theory, while remaining attentive to ways that justice has been twisted by colonialism, capitalism, and racism. On the margins of banana plantations of the Philippines, Alyssa Paredes explores justice at the limits of human empathy and sympathetic imagining beyond species lines. In a mountainous region of India, Radhika Govindrajan invites us to consider what recognition justice might entail when animals who suffer violent deaths continue to haunt the living with their ghostly presence. As the United States Department of Justice perpetuates the mass incarceration of Black and brown peoples, Elizabeth Lara’s essay about prison gardens insists that “the work of abolition is also the work of multispecies justice.”

The very principle of equality underlying distributive theories of justice (both in terms of personhood *before* the law and resources owed *to* subjects of the law) is breaking down in the context of racist police and judicial practices (see Lara), consequential species differences (see Paredes), and the ongoing theft of Indigenous sovereignty over lands, bodies, and animals (see Ishiyama and TallBear; Perez).<sup>26</sup> Procedural approaches to resolving injustice are, in many cases, failing to achieve substantive justice with concrete outcomes. As some aspire to produce transformative justice, what counts as the “greatest



good,” and for whom, often remains ambiguous (see Clark; Lyons).<sup>27</sup> Some essays in this collection explore situations of injustice where there is no clear consensus on what justice might mean in practice (see Govindrajani; Ihar).<sup>28</sup> Justice thus can be open-ended, elusive, or impossible.

The multiple species of justice that come together in this book offer what Claire Jean Kim calls a multioptic vision, or a way of seeing that takes different claims seriously without hastily granting undue importance to any particular approach.<sup>29</sup> Multioptic vision enables an onto-epistemological and methodological unflattening—a simultaneous engagement of multiple vantage points from which to engender new ways of seeing, imagining, and being in relation to other Others.<sup>30</sup> Imagining just futures through this intersectional framework demands that we reconsider what constitutes the threshold of (in)justice, who gets to determine it, and in whose interests.

Multispecies justice, at its core, is promissory as we share common dreams and tend to the creatures and communities that we love. “The promise,” in the words of Sara Ahmed, “suggests happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing.”<sup>31</sup> But pronouns can be slippery as “we” imagine shared futures.<sup>32</sup> When we harbor hopes about desirable and undesirable species interactions, about intended and unintended consequences, about moments of justice to come, we bring together different communities of “us.”<sup>33</sup> Multispecies justice emerges within fields of power where who is in the world, and whose world counts, is at stake.<sup>34</sup> Any project that aims to achieve justice in multispecies worlds should thus ask: justice for whom or what?

### Rights of “Nature”

Courtrooms are perhaps the most recognizable public arena where people are pursuing something akin to multispecies justice within existing legal paradigms. New Rights of Nature laws are focused on inherent rights of ecosystems and species. Some legal cases within this framework have also furthered concerns related to social and environmental justice. For example, a 2018 court ruling in Ecuador that shut down the Río Blanco mine represents an important victory at the intersection of human social worlds and the lifeworlds of multiple species. This particular case brought together the concerns of local communities, municipal leaders, Indigenous Quechua, and environmental activists who speak for watersheds, wetlands, and páramo ecosystems.

Multispecies justice, for human and ecological communities, is often a provisional achievement. The ruling that closed the Río Blanco mine is just



a temporary legal victory that might still be overturned with future appeals by the mining company. Even though the Ecuadorian government has exercised considerable “control over the meanings and the uses of ‘rights’ for nature,” in the words of Erin Fitz-Henry, this particular case illustrates that the interests of the authorities can sometimes align with broad political coalitions that are pushing for justice on behalf of multiple species.<sup>35</sup> The Río Blanco ruling demonstrates that justice for people can also be attuned to multispecies relations.<sup>36</sup>

As Rights of Nature laws proliferate in jurisdictions around the world, ethnographers are just starting to study exclusions and conflicts that are reverberating beyond the walls of courtrooms. Kristina Lyons describes a particularly acute site of ongoing trouble in Colombia’s Amazon as leaders of social and environmental movements reckon with a ruling from the distant center of power in Bogotá. Following a 2016 peace accord, transitional justice initiatives in Colombia have resulted in some important criminal prosecutions, but at the same time the targeted killing of environmental advocates has intensified.

As conservation efforts in Colombia become increasingly militarized, Lyons suggests that people involved in ongoing disagreements should aspire to have “better conflicts” as they try to resolve competing social and environmental problems. While many call for peace, Lyons builds on the work of Isabelle Stengers to propose “new modalities of warfare” in fighting for forests and other loved communities of life.<sup>37</sup> As other ethnographers approach these new modes of warfare in theory and praxis, it is critical to consider how antagonism might help us understand the democratic possibilities in multispecies milieus where conflict is *sustained*, rather than erased.<sup>38</sup> Antagonism can produce consequential shifts in the order of things—not a final peace, but ruptures in the established order that produce opportunities for new collaborations, alliances, and worlds.

While fighting for justice in legal and symbolic realms, while advocating for forms of life that we find beautiful and necessary, it is critical to remain mindful of exclusionary languages and logics.<sup>39</sup> Feminist theorists of science and society have already drawn attention to “implicated actants”—the animals, plants, species, and ecosystems—who are “silenced or only discursively present, constructed by others for their own purposes” in legal rulings and some environmental campaigns.<sup>40</sup> While government officials, lawyers, and some activists rally to defend Nature, it is important to return to a question that Donna Haraway posed more than twenty years ago: “What counts as nature, for whom, and at what cost?”<sup>41</sup>

## Beyond the Limits of the Human

As legal scholars and philosophers seek to expand the category of rights-bearing subjects—to identify animals, plants, rivers, and ecosystems as legal persons—it is important to remember that not all people are treated as fully human before the law. Alexander Weheliye, among others, has described how unequal power structures determine “which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot.”<sup>42</sup> Colonial constructs of race and nature haunt the cultural politics of identity as terrains of power operate within and across species lines.<sup>43</sup> As a result, some species and kinds of people continue to be vulnerable to premature death, or even targeted for extermination.<sup>44</sup> As open violence is directed at people on account of their blackness, brownness, and queerness, slower forms of violence are incrementally and often imperceptibly disabling and debilitating vulnerable peoples and species.<sup>45</sup>

In approaching the promise of justice, we—that is, Eben Kirksey and Sophie Chao—bring profound feelings of despair from long-term ethnographic research among Indigenous peoples who are living through conditions of genocide. Both of us work in the Indonesian-occupied region of West Papua, where a Black liberation movement is trying to achieve recognition on the international stage. Human rights laws are failing in West Papua. Dreams from the mid-twentieth century, about universal justice for humankind, are foundering here and many other parts of the world. The Indonesian army has systematically killed and tortured Indigenous Papuans in a pattern that has continued, largely uninterrupted, since their initial invasion in 1961.<sup>46</sup> One particular incident, where upward of 139 Indigenous Papuans were massacred, was witnessed by Kirksey in 1998. The rules of law were never applied to this particular case, nor to countless other state killings.

The conflict in West Papua over who counts as human intensified in 2018 after Indonesian social media influencers posted a picture of a Papuan leader alongside a gorilla. Anti-racist protests erupted a year later when a group of Papuan students were physically attacked and verbally abused—called monkeys, dogs, and pigs by members of an Indonesian militia. Some Papuan activists and Indonesian allies donned full-body primate costumes, masks, and headdresses as they challenged the imagery that renders some people subhuman, killable, and disregarded before the law.<sup>47</sup> Banners, placards, and slogans deployed during protests across Indonesia read: “We are not monkeys!” “The monkeys take to the streets!” and importantly “Monkeys

stand united against the colonizers!” Meanwhile, a flurry of monkey-themed hashtags shared by Papuans and Indonesian supporters went viral on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They included #PapuaBukanMonyet (“Papuans are not monkeys”) and #KamiJugaManusia (“We are also humans”) but also #SayaMonyet (“I am monkey”).

Proximity to animals can be deadly—even if this closeness is just the result of a visual juxtaposition or a racial slur. The case of West Papua speaks to the experience of many different kinds of people—including disabled, queer, brown, Black, Indigenous, or minority religious communities—who continue to bear the burden of imposed comparisons to the nonhuman.<sup>48</sup> The symbolic violence of these comparisons can quickly give way to actual violence. People become vulnerable to incarceration and torture—or even become killable—when they are singled out, as Claire Kim notes, for “how animal they are—and, how human they are not.”<sup>49</sup> Even still, proximity to animals can also be affirmative. The surprising identifications made by Papuans and their allies—“I am monkey” and “Monkeys stand united against the colonizers!”—speak to the radical forms of interspecies alliances that are emerging here and in other parts of the world.

Activists in West Papua and elsewhere are pushing back against ways of speaking and thinking that prioritize some lives over others—they are disrupting value-laden categories that separate the human from the non-human. By embracing the figure of the monkey, these Indigenous intellectuals are rejecting the paired logics of racialization and animalization, even as they oppose ongoing processes of colonialism by lighter-skinned Indonesian settlers. They are refusing to denigrate the animal, while agitating against destructive forces that threaten their own lives. This refusal resonates with writings by Bénédicte Boisseron, who has lately begun to explore the forms of solidarity and sociality that have emerged for peoples and animals who have experienced “entangled forms of oppression.”<sup>50</sup>

### Interspecies Intersectionality

Multispecies justice involves seizing opportunities for intersectional political praxis across species lines. Intersectionality has classically been used as an analytical framework to understand how social and political identities combine to create different lived experiences of discrimination and privilege.<sup>51</sup> Ideas about intersectional inequalities involving humans and other species have recently been explored in the context of a patchy Anthropocene, where

concerns are simultaneously people-focused and also engaged with multi-species relations.<sup>52</sup> In an allied spirit, we are interested in patches of justice amidst uneven conditions of livability.

Political ecologists and economists have already identified intersectional connections between social justice principles and transnational environmental concerns.<sup>53</sup> Juan Martinez-Alier's account in *The Environmentalism of the Poor* describes how small-scale farmers and Indigenous peoples began to frame their political struggles in environmental terms in the 1980s. While environmental justice was a concern of minority groups in the United States, Martinez-Alier contends that these issues are important to "the *majority* of humankind, those who occupy relatively little environmental space, who have managed sustainable agroforestral and agricultural systems."<sup>54</sup> The Environmental Justice Atlas, a participatory mapping project started by Martinez-Alier in 2016, currently encompasses over 3,400 local social movements that are opposing the frontier logic of global capitalism in diverse corners of the world.<sup>55</sup>

Mapping does not necessarily or automatically translate into coalitional action. As thousands of environmental advocates each fight beautiful and necessary struggles on their own local patches of ground—in places like West Papua, the Amazon, and the contaminated lands of Azerbaijan—there is the potential of competition for attention on the international stage. Creating and sustaining effective alliances has been one of the central challenges of intersectional struggles, ever since Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the idea of intersectionality—questioning why white women had not created enduring coalitions with Black women.<sup>56</sup> Competitive struggles for justice can nonetheless transform into coalitional movements, as contingent and nonnecessary links are built and maintained.<sup>57</sup> Collective work—across different patches of justice—has enabled us to do some of this work through conversations with anthropologists, artists, poets, and authors of fiction. Together we have also approached the challenging work of pushing beyond "the environment" to understand the possibilities and perils of sustaining intersectional alliances across species lines.

In ecological communities filled with predators and prey, hosts and parasites—worlds where hostility and hostages are embedded at the very heart of *hospitality*—alliances can be fleeting as interests align, only to unravel again.<sup>58</sup> Even still, "symbiotic agreements" can emerge among interdependent subjects as former enemies become allies.<sup>59</sup> According to Isabelle Stengers, peace does not exist within ecological communities. Instead of longing for peace, she argues for the necessity of ongoing battles in sustaining conditions for life on

earth. This “cosmopolitical proposal” demands compromise with destructive species and hostile peoples who challenge our fundamental ethics, values, and understanding of the cosmos, or even threaten to destroy our world.<sup>60</sup>

Since many political theorists suggest that subjects are never entirely self-aware, or rational, the idea of intersectionality should travel well into cosmopolitical and multispecies worlds to account for how different kinds of entities move each other as their interests align.<sup>61</sup> While the idea of agency implies fully present, individuated, and autonomous subjects, the framework of intersectionality points to possibilities of identification among differently embodied, situated, and entangled beings.<sup>62</sup> Intersectionality points to the hopeful edge of interspecies political projects—where new articulations might produce new grounds for possible flourishing.

Failures in identification nonetheless abound. In the Philippines, a political movement has emerged on the margins of banana plantations, where people assert a strong rhetorical divide between humans and nonhumans, even as their livelihoods depend on animals and plants that share their conditions of precarity. Alyssa Paredes describes how Filipino activists have united around a rallying cry—“We Are Not Pests”—while demanding justice after being sprayed with toxic fungicides. In aspiring toward an alternative vision of multispecies justice, Paredes proposes a new slogan for confronting the violence of contemporary plantations: “We, Too, Are Pests!” This alternative rallying cry contains echoes of the counterintuitive slogans from West Papua that point to possibilities for interspecies alliances even amidst conditions of genocide. These ideas also resonate with the deep archive of writing in the tradition of Black ecology that shows how people and animals, linked by the inhuman logics and violence of slavery, share, in the words of Joshua Bennett, “the desire for a world without cages or chains.”<sup>63</sup>

## Unflattening

Amid ongoing struggles over water and gas pipelines in North America, the militarization of Indigenous lands in South America, as well as megamines and plantations in all parts of the world, Macarena Gómez-Barris observes that “indigenous and multispecies autonomy are increasingly in peril.” She calls for more innovative thinking and writing “against the binary of the human and non-human.”<sup>64</sup> However, some creative multispecies writing has attracted criticism for evacuating the diversity and complexity of human lifeworlds.<sup>65</sup> Theoretical and rhetorical gestures that result in a “flattened multispecies ontology—where difference among and between forms of life

is obscured”—have also been critiqued by Janae Davis and her colleagues. These scholars suggest that sustained engagements with racial justice struggles might inform new conceptual and empirical research about “multispecies assemblages that lead out of socioecological crises toward better futures.”<sup>66</sup>

An argument for flattening ontologies is articulated in Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, the book about “thing power.” Reveling in the liveliness and agency of all matter, Bennett blurs distinctions between persons and things such as a dead rat, oak pollen, a plastic glove, and a bottle cap. Collapsing the ontological divide between people and things, she admits, “will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression.” Instead, she hopes to solve other problems by promoting ethical behavior in the realm of vital materialism. “In a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself,” Bennett suggests. “Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest is good for humans.”<sup>67</sup>

Many multispecies ethnographers and allied anthropologists have consistently pushed back against this flat conception of ontology to scrutinize the interplay of distinct agents and entities amidst flows of power. While Bennett attempts to flatten the distinction between life and nonlife, Elizabeth Povinelli asks: “Are we simultaneously extending the qualities and dynamics of one form that we believe existence takes (Life) onto the qualities and dynamics of all forms of existence?”<sup>68</sup> Rather than focus on the self-interest of humans, multispecies ethnographers have considered how creatures once limited to the realm of zoe—bare life, which is killable—have begun to appear alongside humans in the realm of bios, with biographical and political lives.<sup>69</sup>

As some scholars call for abandoning the species concept, we contend that this idea remains useful to the work of ontological unflattening in more-than-human worlds.<sup>70</sup> Humans are not alone in the world in recognizing a plurality of species, beings, and kinds. Other creatures—like frogs, plants, and even bacteria—also engage in their own practices of classification, recognition, and differentiation as they live together in shared multispecies milieus.<sup>71</sup> In the words of the philosopher of science John Dupré, species can be recognized with a “promiscuous realism” that stabilizes important aspects of reality amidst radical ontological pluralism and general metaphysical disorder.<sup>72</sup>

Anthropologists have lately started to push the species concept beyond the realm of biology, while holding on to consequential phenomenological differences between domains of the living and the nonliving.<sup>73</sup> Within the nonliving realm, chemists use the idea of species to denote identical molecular entities that undergo dynamic changes through processes like combustion,

decay, and sublimation. Multispecies ethnographers and scholars in allied fields have started to use conceptual and technical tools for grappling with this material reality to ask: “How are molecular frictions, catalytic dynamics, forms of not-Life, and other-than-life reconfiguring our conditions of knowing, being, and sociality?”<sup>74</sup>

*The Promise of Multispecies Justice* showcases the work of scholars, activists, and poets who use precise and promiscuous languages as they name creatures and communities suffering ongoing harm as life becomes nonlife on a planetary scale. Several essays in this collection focus renewed attention on the interplay of chemical and biological species, in situations where people are working to actualize various kinds of justice. In the windswept desert landscape of Baku, Azerbaijan, displaced peoples, plants, and dogs have found distributed possibilities for justice in abandoned oil-contaminated lands (see Ihar). As toxic chemical plumes drift from banana plantations—harming people, plants, and animals in the Philippines—community activists are trying to achieve justice in courtrooms where they are required to identify and isolate “Bad Actor Chemicals” (see Paredes). In these situations, ethnographers are developing strong forms of knowledge—with the potential to disrupt hegemonic relations of power—while deriving theoretical insights about dynamic molecular and multispecies intra-actions.<sup>75</sup>

Struggles for multispecies justice—especially in arenas adjacent to biology and chemistry—risk being captured by technoscientific modes of knowledge production. Efforts to build universalized knowledge and justice together can produce both epistemological and ontological forms of exclusion.<sup>76</sup> Beyond tangible realms, Ruha Benjamin warns that “with increasing attention to the possibility of forging multispecies justice . . . there has been far less attention to immaterial actants such as those inhabiting the ancestral landscapes.”<sup>77</sup> This is why this book reckons with the haunting presence of souls and spirits alongside abiotic, elemental, and molecular entities (see Govindrajan; see Paredes).

Native American scholars are blending approaches from the social and natural sciences to understand human entanglements with animals, plants, and other entities like stones and water.<sup>78</sup> While making a soft refusal of the terms *spiritual* and *species*, our contributors Noriko Ishiyama and Kim TallBear invite us to think about how biological and social relations might contribute to an “idea of co-becoming that refuses the nature/culture divide.” Other authors in this collection remain committed to the species concept as a valuable tool for making sense of the ebb and flow of agency in multispecies worlds. Memorizing and reciting a scientific name—like *Halcyon*



*cinnamomina cinnamomina* for the Micronesian Kingfisher—can produce curiosity and wonder about life at the edge of extinction. Craig Santos Perez’s poem about this endangered bird species also shows how Indigenous names—like *sihek*—might animate lively futures.

By bringing together authors who represent different ontological standpoints and political visions, we have built on the work of Nick Sousanis, whose genre-bending comic book, *Unflattening*, illustrates pathways from a one-dimensional flatland toward multidimensional possibilities.<sup>79</sup> We recognize that differential relations to power mean that not all peoples or species can equally access the possibilities contained in the future itself. Within future-oriented imaginaries shaped by science, technology, and justice, Ben Hurlbut observes, “Particular conceptions of progress, of the human person, and of the good are engaged, displacing others.”<sup>80</sup>

### Reclaiming the Promise of Justice

Promises may give purpose, meaning, and order to life, but they can also perpetually postpone the realization of hopes and desires. With *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed suggests that desire is both what promises us something, what gives us energy, “and also what is lacking, even in the very moment of its apparent realization.”<sup>81</sup> Ahmed demonstrates how the imposition of certain imagined futures—at the cost of others—can become an instrument of oppression. In other words, the imagination itself is a battlefield where unevenly distributed power shapes the fragmentation of shared dreamworlds.<sup>82</sup>

Some Indigenous theorists and activists are critical of the future-oriented temporality of justice in Western paradigms.<sup>83</sup> Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, for instance, notes a refusal on the part of Native American peoples to imagine “new” futures when climate injustice and its social impacts intensify existing imperial-capitalist regimes.<sup>84</sup> Symbolic and structural violence is embedded in some strands of international climate justice discourse, as influential institutions fail to address the uneven distribution of responsibility *for*, and vulnerability *to*, global warming and its deleterious effects.<sup>85</sup> The concept of justice itself has been critiqued by Anangax scholar Eve Tuck as an inherently “colonial temporality, always desired and deferred, and delimited by the timeframes of modern colonizing states as well as the self-historicizing, self-perpetuating futurities of their nations.”<sup>86</sup> In West Papua, some Indigenous communities have given up on the future



itself as an act of resistance—refusing the promissory hype of futures conjured by powerful forces.<sup>87</sup>

Within the realm of Western philosophy, Jacques Derrida is notable for celebrating justice as a universal and transhistorical force that will bring dramatic transformations to future horizons. Derrida describes elusive and lively specters of justice that contain “the attraction, invincible élan or affirmation of an unpredictable future-to-come (or even of a past-to-come-again).” In an attempt to protect this idea from the tools of deconstruction that he helped create, Derrida describes justice as something that is literally and figuratively empty—disconnected from “the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body.” Rejecting law (*droit*)—the application of existing rules—he suggests that justice requires us “to calculate with the incalculable.”<sup>88</sup>

In reclaiming the promise of justice, and the idea of the future itself, it is important to refuse some of Derrida’s more dramatic and seductive gestures. We find it necessary to ground dreams and struggles for justice in the *topos* of particular territories, soils, cities, landscapes, bodies, and technologies. We suggest: justice, like situated knowledge, is always *partial* in the sense of being for some worlds more than for others.<sup>89</sup> Rather than hold justice apart from situated political struggles, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* identifies opportunities to deconstruct and reconstruct political positions, technical systems, ecological assemblages, and figures of hope.

As some resign the future to fate—by waiting for a definitive act of justice on future horizons—Indigenous leaders in North America are working toward improved relations in future lifetimes and generations (see Ishiyama and TallBear). Modest forms of justice are emerging through a process of co-becoming with biological and social relatives, even though not all of our relations are good relations. Indigenous thinkers in other parts of the world, like Benny Giay of West Papua, reclaim hope through “freedom dreams” that push against hegemonic forms of power as well as the limits of realism and realistic possibility.<sup>90</sup>

Counterhegemonic political imaginaries have long been guided by the articulation theory of Stuart Hall, who was originally interested in how different ideologies and institutions become joined together in contingent associations.<sup>91</sup> Articulation, in a general sense, means making speech sounds or linking things together. As a theory, Hall used the idea of articulation to understand how “people try to displace, rupture, or contest” dominant power structures. Counterhegemonic articulations involve getting inside ideological, institutional, and discursive formations to interrupt, transform, or change them from within.<sup>92</sup> Careful articulation work within the domain

of justice has the potential to reinvigorate situated political struggles in the here-and-now, and also reorient promissory discourses toward worthy figures of hope in shared imaginative horizons.<sup>93</sup>

Some contributors in this collection are pushing the ideas of Stuart Hall beyond the realm of human discourse into the realm of ontology—to pursue justice through “the contingent, the non-necessary, connections between different practices” in multispecies worlds.<sup>94</sup> Jia Hui Lee brings us to urban Tanzania where an inventor is generating modest possibilities for justice by designing mechanical traps for pesky rodents. In the Philippines people are working toward forms of “molecular sovereignty”—or freedom from toxic chemical exposures—by setting up plants and animals as sentinel species. While reckoning with complex material entanglements, our contributors recognize that certain kinds of situated justice require an ethics of exclusion.<sup>95</sup>

Looking around, taking inventory of contemporary conditions, it is easy to slip into paralyzing feelings of despair. We live in an era of self-devouring growth, as Julie Livingston reminds us, with the expansion of capital markets undermining the conditions of life on Earth.<sup>96</sup> Atmospheric conditions are shifting, making it increasingly difficult for us all to breathe. As the privileged create cosmopolitan refuges in growing deserts, and safe bubbles in a viral pandemic, other peoples and creatures are living through endless wars. Industrial processes are uncoupling life from death, diminishing death’s capacity to channel vitality back to the living.<sup>97</sup>

It is time to import the ecological principle of “intermediate disturbance” into dominant political institutions while creating the conditions for political assembly in alternative spaces.<sup>98</sup> Imagine a field of justice where multiple species circulate cradle to cradle—where the *oikos* of the household is in a dynamic equilibrium with interlocking ecological systems and economic circuits. Within this field, justice is slippery and spectral (see Govindrajan). Justice shifts and morphs across time, space, and species, resisting institutional capture or human mastery. It exerts an unpredictable force in the world as actuality or potentiality, through momentous events, everyday moments, and provisional judgments (see Marder; see Ihar).

A nomadic aesthetics of poaching has informed our curatorial and editorial practice. Taken together, the essays and poems in this collection tell a story that nimbly jumps scales and domains—moving from abstract speculation to situated political action and material intervention, and then back again. The authors show that it is possible to care for particular forms of life and biocultural communities, while at the same time holding onto promises of sweeping change on future horizons. Together we have developed an

approach to multispecies justice that is anchored in the ongoing practice of being open and alive to the generative possibilities of each encounter.<sup>99</sup> This approach demands that we decide which dreams are worth dreaming—and by extension, which injustices are intolerable. It is also an invitation to renew our commitment to love, to live, and to fight for the possibility of flourishing in worlds present and yet to come.

## Notes

- 1 Kirksey and Helmreich, “Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” 546; Star, “Power, Technology, and the Phenomenology of Conventions,” 43.
- 2 TallBear, “Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints.” See also Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene.”
- 3 Davis et al., “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, . . . Plantationocene?”
- 4 Ursula Heise’s 2015 keynote address on multispecies justice at the Green Citizenship symposium focused on “the political tensions between biodiversity conservation and environmental justice over the last thirty years, which have centered on the privileging of nonhuman species over the welfare of disenfranchised human communities.” Ideas about multispecies justice were further developed by Subhankar Banerjee in 2018, “not as theory or analysis” but as “praxis.” More recently, Danielle Celermajer and colleagues have examined how the entrance of other than humans onto the scene of justice challenges normative modes of liberal political discourse and practice. Meanwhile, T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee’s recently edited volume deploys a decolonial and interdisciplinary approach to widen considerations of justice as it intersects with contemporary art, visual culture, activism, and climate change. See Heise, “Multispecies Justice”; Banerjee, “Resisting the War”; Celermajer et al., “Justice Through a Multispecies Lens”; Celermajer et al., “Multispecies Justice”; Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice”; Demos, Scott, and Banerjee, *Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*.
- 5 Dave, “What It Feels Like to Be Free.”
- 6 Gay, *Book of Delights*.
- 7 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 16.
- 8 Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion”; also see van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, “Multispecies Studies.”
- 9 Rose and van Dooren, introduction to “Unloved Others”; also see Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma.”
- 10 See, e.g., Kirksey, “Chemosociality in Multispecies Worlds”; Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*; Chao, “Can There Be Justice Here?”
- 11 Tsing et al., *Feral Atlas*. Wonder, writes Mary-Jane Rubenstein, is a disposition that encompasses an array of affective responses including awe, amazement, and marvel, but also dread, astonishment, and shock. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, 9.

- 12 Greenberg, "When Is Justice Done?"
- 13 For more on these tactics, see Garcia and Lovink, "The ABC of Tactical Media."
- 14 See, for example, Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*; Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*.
- 15 Taylor, *Toxic Communities*; Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
- 16 Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy*.
- 17 Shepard, "Advancing Environmental Justice."
- 18 Singer, *Animal Liberation*.
- 19 Kirksey, Schuetze, and Helmreich, "Tactics of Multispecies Ethnography," 3; Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes Without Its World," 208–9.
- 20 Appadurai, "Introduction," 17. See also Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes Without Its World," 208–9.
- 21 Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities"; Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*.
- 22 Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice*.
- 23 Eglash, "Introduction to Generative Justice."
- 24 Young, *Politics of Difference*.
- 25 Woolaston, "Ecological Vulnerability." On vulnerability as a framework for justice, see also Fineman, *Autonomy Myth*; Fineman, "Equality, Autonomy, and the Vulnerable Subject."
- 26 On egalitarian justice, see Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*; Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?"; Scheffler, *Equality and Tradition*.
- 27 On utilitarian justice, see Mill, *Utilitarianism*; Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*.
- 28 On contractarian justice, see Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*; Rawls, *Theory of Justice*; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*.
- 29 Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*, 19–20.
- 30 Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 32. See also Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 11–12.
- 31 Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 29.
- 32 Rutherford, *Laughing at the Leviathan*, 207.
- 33 Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 199. See also de la Cadena, "Making the 'Complex We.'"
- 34 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 244.
- 35 Fitz-Henry, "Distribution without Representation," 10.
- 36 De la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.
- 37 Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, 80.
- 38 Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 66; also see Laclau and Mouffe, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy."
- 39 As the founders of the Science and Justice Research Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, remind us, hegemonic and colonial efforts to build universalized knowledge and justice together can produce both epistemic and ontological forms of exclusion. Reardon, "On the Emergence of Science and Justice," 189–90. See also Reardon et al., "Science & Justice"; Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*; Benjamin, "Black Afterlives Matter."
- 40 Clarke and Star, "Theory-Methods Package," 119.
- 41 Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium*, 75.
- 42 See, e.g., Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 3. See also Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*;

- Jackson, *Becoming Human*; Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being”; Benjamin, “Black Afterlives Matter.”
- 43 Moore, Kosek, and Pandian, “The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature,” 1–3.
- 44 See Roberts, *Fatal Invention*; Braverman, “Captive”; Copeland, *Cockroach*; Mavhunga, “Vermin Beings.”
- 45 Nixon, *Slow Violence*; also see Muñoz, “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms”; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Martinez-Alier, “Environmentalism of the Poor.”
- 46 Hernawan, “Torture in Papua.”
- 47 Chao, “We Are (Not) Monkeys.” See also Karma, *Seakan Kitorang Setengah Binatang*.
- 48 See, for example, Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; Muñoz, “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms”; Raffles, *Illustrated Insectopedia*.
- 49 Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*, 18. See also Anderson, “The Politics of Pests”; Glick, *Infrahumanisms*; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian, “The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature.”
- 50 Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, xiii–xx. See also Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*.
- 51 Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”
- 52 Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt, “Patchy Anthropocene,” S188.
- 53 See Peet and Watts, *Liberation Ecologies*.
- 54 Martinez-Alier, “Environmentalism of the Poor,” 11–12.
- 55 Temper, Bene, and Martinez-Alier, “Mapping the Frontiers.”
- 56 Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”
- 57 Grossberg, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 53.
- 58 Derrida, “Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality”; Serres, *Parasite*.
- 59 Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, 35.
- 60 Stengers, “Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 999.
- 61 Laclau and Mouffe elaborated a theory of political subjectivity by building on Lacan, who suggested that subjectivity is not self-transparent and rational but irredeemably decentered and incomplete. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 125.
- 62 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 66.
- 63 Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*, 3.
- 64 Gómez-Barris, “Decolonial Futures.” See also Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*.
- 65 Galvin, “Interspecies Relations and Agrarian Worlds,” 244.
- 66 Davis et al., “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, . . . Plantationocene?,” 5, 8.
- 67 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13 (italics added).
- 68 Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 55.
- 69 Kirksey and Helmreich, “Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” 545.
- 70 Ingold, “Anthropology beyond Humanity.”
- 71 Kirksey, “Species.”
- 72 Dupré, *Disorder of Things*, 18.
- 73 Here we also build on Gregory Bateson’s distinction between *pleroma* (the nonliving world that is undifferentiated by subjectivity) and *creatura* (the living world, subject to perceptual difference, distinction, and communication). Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 489.

- 74 Shapiro and Kirksey, “Chemo-Ethnography,” 482.
- 75 Sandra Harding has written about the possibilities of “strong objectivity” in the context of feminist standpoint epistemology. Kim Fortun’s careful study of the Bhopal disaster at a Union Carbide pesticide plant in India stands as an exemplary account of molecular intra-actions and a social justice struggle that emerged from shared chemical exposures. Harding, ““Strong Objectivity””; Fortun, *Advocacy after Bhopal*.
- 76 Reardon et al., “Science and Justice,” 29. See also Reardon, “On the Emergence of Science and Justice”; Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*; Benjamin, “Black Afterlives Matter.”
- 77 Benjamin, “Black Afterlives Matter,” 51.
- 78 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now.”
- 79 Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 39.
- 80 Hurlbut, “Technologies of Imagination.”
- 81 Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 31.
- 82 Benjamin and Glaude, “Reimagining Science and Technology.”
- 83 See, e.g., TallBear, “Failed Settler Kinship”; Winter, “Decolonising Dignity”; Hau’ofa, *We Are the Ocean*; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Stewart-Harawira, “Returning the Sacred.”
- 84 Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene.” See also Indigenous Action, “Rethinking the Apocalypse.”
- 85 Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice”; Schlosberg and Collins, “From Environmental Justice to Climate Justice.”
- 86 Tuck and Yang, “What Justice Wants,” 6. See also Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence,” 21, 31.
- 87 Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms*, 231–55; also see Indigenous Action, “Rethinking the Apocalypse”; Lear, *Radical Hope*.
- 88 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 16; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28; Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” 253; Derrida, “For a Justice to Come.”
- 89 Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium*, 37.
- 90 Benny Giay, a theologian and anthropologist from West Papua, has a long history of writing on hope and desire in Oceania. While earlier colonial tropes framed these hopes as “cargo cult” discourse, Giay has engaged with thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin to insist that Indigenous peoples no longer “wait for outsiders to bring peace, happiness and justice.” Quoted in Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 13. See also Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.
- 91 Hall and Grossberg, “On Postmodernism and Articulation”; also see Clifford, “Indigenous Articulations.”
- 92 Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology,” 112.
- 93 Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*; Kirksey, Shapiro, and Brodine, “Hope in Blasted Landscapes.”
- 94 Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 53; Richland, “Jurisdiction.”
- 95 Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*, 2.
- 96 Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth*.

- 97 On breathing, see Choy and Zee, “Condition—Suspension”; Hatch, “Two Meditations in Coronatime”; on cosmopolitan refuges, see Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert*; on vitality and death, see Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*.
- 98 See Dial and Roughgarden, “Theory of Marine Communities”; also see Garcia and Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media.”
- 99 Cf. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, x.