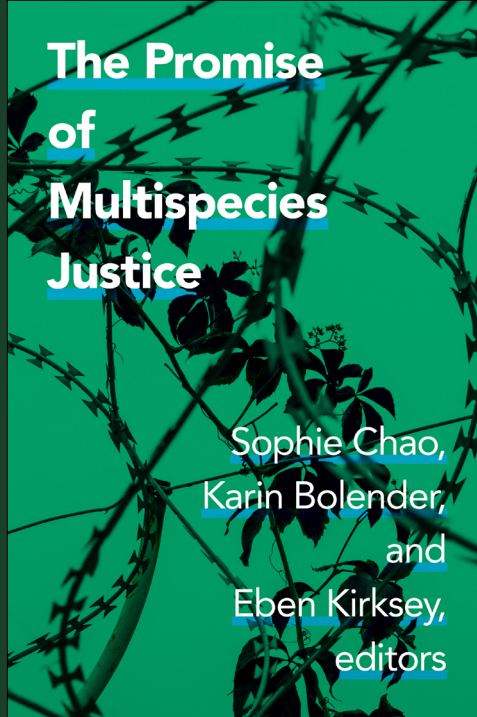


Who Benefits from Multispecies Justice?

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Review of:

Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey, eds. *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. xii + 284 pp. 23 illus. \$99.95 (hb), \$26.95 (pb)

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When I first thumbed through *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, I was most struck not by the edited collection's beautiful illustrations or thoughtful layout, but rather by its list of contributors. Half of the volume's fourteen authors are early-career scholars, ranging from doctoral candidates to postdoctoral researchers and assistant professors. Such a distribution reflects the commitments of editors Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey. It also, however, indicates where energies in the emerging field of multispecies justice studies lie and which voices are leading this work. The early-career scholars featured in the collection share an interest in how human groups relate to nonhuman beings and they conceive of justice as an activity that extends beyond, and often productively challenges, western modes of being human. As an early-career researcher myself who works on multispecies justice from inter- and transdisciplinary positions, I felt a spirit of collaboration while reading the book.

The Promise of Multispecies Justice emerged out of a series of online conversations and virtual talks held in 2020 and 2021 when a community of scholars came together to refuse the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing inspiration from Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, the edited volume examines the cultural articulations of multispecies justice and asks what kinds of worlds are possible in its "promise". It features nine single-authored scholarly essays; three genre-bending poems; and an introduction, afterword, and glossary written by the editors. Each of the contributors — with the exception of philosopher Michael Marder, poet and literary scholar Craig Santos Perez, and science fiction author M. L. Clark — use ethnography to study specific facets of multispecies (in)justice. Each brings additional scholarly approaches to bear on their analysis, including environmental justice studies, critical animal studies, Black geography, Indigenous studies, and legal studies. Moreover, each chapter takes up a different location, ranging from India to Colombia, Guam, Tanzania, Azerbaijan, the western United States, and the Philippines. The collection will be of interest to scholars working in these places

and fields, along with advanced undergraduate and graduate students studying the intersections of capitalist-colonialist violence and multispecies relations.

The Promise of Multispecies Justice joins a growing body of work that engages the area of study and collection of cultural practices increasingly known as “multispecies justice”. Recent special issues on the topic include the March 2023 edition of *Cultural Politics* (edited by Chao and Danielle Celermajer) and the Fall 2024 issue of *the minnesota review* (edited by myself and Celermajer) on “Multispecies Justice and Narrative”. Several recent books in legal studies and animal ethics have also taken up the topic, including Martha Nussbaum’s *Justice for Animals* (2023), Maneesha Deckha’s *Animals as Legal Beings* (2021), Irus Braverman’s *Settling Nature* (2023), and Lori Gruen and Alice Cary’s *Animal Crisis* (2022). Finally, the editors themselves have recently published books that address questions of multispecies ethics and justice—from *In the Shadow of the Palms* (2022) to *The Unnaming of Aliass* (2020) and *The Mutant Project* (2020).

The rise of multispecies justice studies can be attributed to the widespread and growing critique of western juridical systems raised by multiple disciplines. As the top courts rule against human rights and crisis becomes experienced as a daily condition, it is increasingly apparent that modern juridical systems are not up for the task of repairing our damaged worlds and that they are partly responsible for creating injustice. At the same time, a growing body of work coming out of critical animal studies, Black feminist studies, post-colonial studies, and Indigenous studies, among other fields, has considered how power and inequality not only manifest, but also operate, across species lines. There is a growing consensus that what were once thought of as strictly “human” problems are multispecies problems—that addressing social injustice requires resolving injustices with more-than-human communities. Much of this work moves away from animal liberation models which overemphasize suffering as the prerequisite for action and separate the needs of animals (most often farmed and companion animals) from humans. It also departs from rights frameworks which have extended the

communities protected under the law without reorganizing the larger structures and operations of justice. Instead of “add-species-and-stir” approaches to justice where other beings are simply inserted into existing frameworks, scholarship on multispecies justice challenges ineffective juridical systems and considers what justice means and whom it supports. As *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* and other publications contend, multispecies justice is a situated, pluralistic practice that arises from, and in response to, the lived experiences of humans and nonhumans.

Curiously, given the proliferation of work in this area, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* does not make an explicit intervention into theories of multispecies justice. Instead, readers are left to determine the collection’s primary contributions. From my vantage point as an environmental humanist who frequently turns to ethnography, I see at least three contributions to existing literature, which I discuss in greater detail below. First, the collection proposes that multiple kinds of justice exist, particularly when it comes to nonhuman beings. Formulating a singular “multispecies justice”, the editors and contributors suggest, risks reproducing the universalism present in current theories of justice, along with the inequalities that such an approach creates. They propose thinking instead about “species of justice” (4). Second, they argue that feminist philosopher Susan Leigh Star’s question “Cui bono?”, or “Who benefits?”, is a guiding framework for multispecies justice. Struggles for justice are always built around particular individuals and groups, often at the exclusion of others. Asking “Who benefits?” not only reveals who is being included and excluded, but it also encourages critical reflection on how justice movements and juridical structures can be built in ways that benefit wider communities. Finally, the authors argue that theories of multispecies justice must move away from hermeneutics of peace to instead take on the more uncomfortable work of dwelling with violence and building better worlds amid the trouble of our times.

In calling for multiple modes of justice, the contributors emphasize how particular cultures view and theorize different kinds of justice

as multispecies projects. Cultural anthropologist Radhika Govindrajan, for example, considers how state policies in Uttarakhand, India, have disrupted livestock economies and placed new “burdens of care” on rural women (36). Govindrajan follows one woman as she pursues “spectral justice” (39) for a bull named Gattu who began haunting her dreams in the summer of 2019 after he was wrongfully killed. Much like Chao’s work with the Marind peoples in West Papua, Govindrajan uses ethnography to show how multispecies justice is envisioned and practiced by communities in response to global disruptions. The attention to granularity found in this volume and elsewhere reflects a growing insistence that challenging ineffective western modes of justice requires looking to models that emerge from living communities, or from what Marder calls the “just is” (134). Modes of multispecies justice, these authors show, arise from “the surfaces, materialities, and actualities of existence” (135) and must, therefore, be studied from their sites of expression. Moreover, as Govindrajan’s analysis of shifting social conditions in Uttarakhand indicates, this work requires attending to the ways that historical projects have unevenly shaped relations with more-than-human beings and produced differing—and sometimes competing—understandings of what justice is, how it can be pursued, and who gets to participate.

The Promise of Multispecies Justice derives its critical energies from that question of who gets to take part in projects of justice. As Celer-majer and I discuss elsewhere, the faculties of language and speech have long been viewed as prerequisites of legal subjecthood. This has positioned humans with disabilities and nonhuman beings marginal to juridical procedures and it has tied language and speech to political subjectivity. While *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* does not directly address the speech-endowed subject, it does dwell a good deal on the problem of language—namely on the limitations of language to convey multispecies worlds. At times, however, some of the contributors make assertions that risk collapsing linguistic differences and reinstalling binaries. M.L. Clark, for instance, asks: “If we struggle even to find a common language for transformational justices among fellow humans, what hope have we of finding the words

to speak of restoration and rehabilitation as it relates to multispecies trespass, too?” (182). The editors return to this assertion in the afterword, noting that “words can do justice, for humans, in some ways” (229), but that “we rattle against the limit of our languages” (230) when “seeking to describe how to do justice for frayed forests, overburdened oceans and waterways” (229). Why is it that words are seen as capable of representing human lives and securing justice for some groups of humans but as failing to adequately convey the experiences of nonhuman beings? Noriko Ishiyama and Kim TallBear argue that the English language is responsible for the problems of representation and knowing that Clark and the editors identify. They observe that English has functioned as an apparatus of “settler-colonial thought” (189), especially in the context of settler law and Indigenous genocide, one that has strategically disrupted kin relations. Taking a similar approach, Perez asks not how language represents another, but instead how language is shaped by other beings. His poem “Th Sxth M ss Ext nct n” suggests that species loss is felt at the level of language and that it leaves its mark on speech. Addressing extinction, Perez successfully argues, requires transforming language and its capacities to account for loss.

Rather than celebrate multispecies existence (through language or other means) as a mechanism for achieving justice, the collection’s contributors centre the conflict inherent in struggles over juridical standing. Kristina Lyons, for example, calls for “bettering conflict”, or “creating opportunities to confront and live out disagreements” (72) in the Colombian Amazon. She proposes a “dialogic approach to justice” (69) based not on consensus and non-confrontation, but rather on robust political debate where different groups work out better futures amid disagreement. This focus marks a broader shift occurring in multispecies thought where there is a growing acknowledgement that living with others requires embracing trouble. Multispecies justice does not seek to create harmony amid or out of chaos. Rather, it seeks to negotiate the always-conflicted world “we” co-produce and co-habit. Alyssa Paredes makes this point in her chapter on resistance to aerial spraying. Communities in the Philippines and other postcolonial nations, she observes, often practice

an “ethics of exclusion” (80) that involves prioritizing certain modes of being human. In such plantationscapes, juridical arguments for human wellbeing and “molecular sovereignty” (89) require insisting on a sharp demarcation between human and nonhuman, and on the community’s humanity over the nonhuman beings upon whom they depend. As Parades demonstrates, the lens of multispecies existence is drastically insufficient in this context. This is not to say that the elimination of interspecies violence should not be a central goal of multispecies justice, but rather that the exclusive focus on praising interconnection ultimately misses the material conditions that multispecies justice approaches seek to address.

As I suggested above, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* could have gone further in directly positioning its ideas in relation to existing scholarship. The introduction, for instance, uses the term “interspecies intersectionality” without crediting Harlan Weaver or acknowledging the concept’s roots in queer and trans theory. Similar moves occur in the glossary with terms like “ecological justice” and “procedural justice” which have well-established critical lineages that go unremarked upon. Greater engagement with existing work could have brought the collection into dialogue with the wide array of scholarship happening in multispecies justice studies and made its contributions to this area more targeted. It could also have served as a counterweight to the collection’s tendency to flatten the more-than-human ecologies that are central to multispecies justice studies. While the contributors carefully attend to the histories and dynamics of specific human communities, chapters by Elizabeth Lara, Lyons, Marder, Clark, and Ishiyama and Tall-Bear discuss animal and plant communities only in broad strokes. In each of these chapters I was left wondering about the particular lifeways and experiences of the beings they mentioned. Which species and groups are at stake in projects of multispecies justice? How are their lives constrained by historical and contemporary events? And how do these beings relate to groups of humans? The inclination to generalize and omit details about more-than-human communities while emphasizing the need to study human groups in all their complexity may reflect a larger problem in multispecies justice

studies. As the field develops, there will be a growing need to tell more lively stories about and with the human and nonhuman beings who are supposed to be at the centre of analysis.

All told, the edited collection provides a compelling example of how to do multispecies research that attends to particular cultures and ideas of justice, and how to analyse the conflicts that so often structure multispecies relations. *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* offers a striking example of how multispecies justice studies can envision alternatives to ineffective political paradigms during this moment of profound loss and opportunity.