

Book Reviews

Gadrey, Jean et Aurore Lalucq. 2015. *Faut-il donner un prix à la nature?* Paris: Les petits matins et Institut Veblen, 121p. ISBN : 9782363831552; €10.

Revu par Antoine Verret-Hamelin Email: [antoine.verret-hamelin.1 "at" ulaval.ca](mailto:antoine.verret-hamelin.1@ulaval.ca)

Depuis la publication de l'article innovant de Robert Costanza *et al.* en 1997, les économistes écologiques se sont attelés à la tâche d'attribuer un prix à l'ensemble des « services écosystémiques » afin de leur donner une visibilité économique. Cependant, ces tentatives demeurent partielles et imparfaites. Dans leur excellent livre *Faut-il donner un prix à la nature?*, Jean Gadrey et Aurore Lalucq se sont attelés à la tâche d'évaluer ces nombreuses tentatives de monétarisation de la nature, mais de manière à rendre le débat accessible aux non-spécialistes. Au passage, les auteurs parviennent à tracer le pont entre l'économie écologique et l'écologie politique, cela en défendant – brièvement – une thèse proprement politique concernant les outils de protection du patrimoine naturel.

L'ouvrage de Gadrey et Lalucq est le second opus de la nouvelle collection « Politiques de la transition » aux éditions *Les petits matins*, en collaboration avec *l'Institut Veblen pour les réformes économiques*. Ce livre offre une entrée en matière lucide aux débats de l'économie écologique et en fait bien ressortir les enjeux normatifs sous-jacents, tels que l'opposition entre durabilité forte et faible, l'actualisation sociale, etc. Pour appuyer leur réflexion sur des cas réels, les auteurs ont inclus dans leur livre quatre chapitres consacrés à l'analyse de huit études de cas : la valorisation économique des chauve-souris comme pesticides et des Catskills comme zones humides (p.69-73); le rapport Stern et le PIB vert (p.75-80); l'approche par le *care* (référant à la fois à l'expression anglaise « prendre soin » et à l'acronyme français pour *comptabilité adaptée au renouvellement de l'environnement*) et le marché du soufre (p.81-85); la taxe sur les poids lourds et le marché du carbone en Suède (p.87-92).

L'analyse des auteurs a le mérite d'être équilibrée. Par exemple, après un premier chapitre qui présente l'enjeu de la monétarisation de la nature comme s'inscrivant dans une mouvance idéologique plutôt néolibérale – insistant sur les solutions marchandes au détriment des solutions politique, misant sur la privatisation, etc. – les auteurs enchaînent avec un second chapitre affirmant la pertinence d'attribuer, quand c'est possible, un prix à la nature pour en assurer la protection. Dans ce second chapitre, Gadrey et Lalucq insistent sur la distinction entre le prix, la valeur et le marché, trois notions conceptuellement distinctes: tandis que l'on peut attribuer un prix à un bien naturel sans qu'il soit fixé par le marché, ce prix est loin d'être exhaustif de la valeur du bien en question. Ces nuances permettent donc aux auteurs d'affirmer que « la monnaie est en quelque sorte devenue un langage commun » (p.35), qui peut aider dans certains contextes à redonner aux biens environnementaux une certaine visibilité. Mais ce langage commun ne doit jouir d'aucun piédestal et nos institutions sociales et politiques « doivent être en mesure d'accueillir différents types de valeur, différents types de langage » (p.62).

Le reste du livre continue sur ce ton nuancé: les auteurs laissent la porte ouverte à la possibilité de monétariser la nature dans certaines circonstances, mais trois avertissements sont toujours lancés en parallèle : *primo*, les tentatives passées de monétarisation de la nature se sont soldées par des échecs ou, au mieux, par des résultats mitigés; *secundo*, pour être efficaces, les mesures de monétarisation de la nature doivent être insérées dans un cadre d'action plus large, misant entre autres sur l'éducation aux enjeux environnementaux; *tertio*, la réglementation est souvent préférable à la monétarisation. La première déception du lecteur est de rester sur sa faim concernant ce troisième avertissement : les auteurs ne saisissent pas l'occasion de développer plus en détail leur thèse concernant les avantages – et les limites – de la réglementation comparés à ceux de la monétarisation. Cette thèse, latente dans l'ensemble de l'ouvrage, est finalement développée dans un chapitre entier...de trois pages (p.97-99).

Ce laconisme est tout à fait regrettable étant donné l'originalité de la thèse. Comme l'a remarqué Clive Spash (2012, 2013), l'économie écologique est en quête de fondement. Cette discipline encore jeune ne s'est toujours pas unifiée autour d'un paradigme nouveau, cohérent et, surtout, distinct de l'économie orthodoxe. En effet, l'on peut considérer les tentatives d'attribution de prix à chacune des parcelles de l'environnement

comme une tentative de correction d'une défaillance de marché. Cet idéal du marché parfait est justement celui de la théorie néoclassique. Dans ce contexte d'incertitude paradigmatique pour l'écologie écologique, l'angle proprement politique de Gadrey et Lalucq est instructif et gagne à être discuté. Tandis que les promoteurs des paiements pour services écosystémiques (et autres mesures monétaires) insistent sur la prétendue « flexibilité » des mesures monétaires et marchandes, Gadrey et Lalucq favorisent les normes contraignantes, progressives, et édictées de façon démocratique. L'intérêt de cette approche est notamment de mettre en lumière les « asymétrie[s] de pouvoir » entre les citoyens et les experts, l'aspect idéologique de la monétarisation de la nature, ainsi que le nécessaire recours à des langages autres que monétaires (p.62). Mais cette discussion sera approfondie, espérons-le, dans un autre ouvrage.

La seconde déception concerne les absents notables d'un livre qui se veut synthétique. Parmi les figures de proue de l'économie écologique, l'on peut mentionner Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly ou Tim Jackson, trois penseurs éclipsés par l'analyse de Gadrey et Lalucq. Ce ne sont pas seulement les piliers de la discipline qui sont passés sous silence, mais aussi les développements les plus récents et les plus prometteurs de la discipline, notamment l'évaluation délibérative (e.g. Dietz, Stern, and Dan 2009). Depuis quelques années, plusieurs chercheurs tentent de dépasser la simple évaluation contingente par une approche plutôt collégiale et discursive. Il est intéressant de noter que ces expérimentations coïncident avec le développement, en philosophie politique contemporaine, des théories délibératives de la démocratie (see Goodin 2008). Malheureusement, l'évaluation délibérative est évoquée un peu nonchalamment, sans jamais que les auteurs n'entrent dans le détail.

Troisième et dernière déception : la question de la substituabilité est traitée que de façon tangentielle tout au long de l'ouvrage. Et pourtant, il s'agit du nœud gordien au cœur du débat sur la monétarisation de la nature. Sitôt que vous mettez un prix sur un bien naturel, cela légitime le fait de le consommer si les bénéfices économiques anticipés surpassent la valeur monétaire du bien naturel. Si l'on estime la valeur d'une forêt à X, mais que la valeur d'un projet d'investissement immobilier qui exigerait une coupe à blanc est estimée à X+1, alors il semble parfaitement légitime d'opter pour le projet d'investissement. Et comme le notent sagement Gadrey et Lalucq, les prétendues « retombées économiques » des projets d'investissement sont souvent gonflées artificiellement par les discours idéologiques (p.62; 72; 103-104). Résultat: les biens naturels auxquels nous collons un prix ne peuvent faire le poids. Leur attacher un prix revient à concéder le droit de les consommer (p.56).

Au final, force est d'admettre que ces déceptions sont dues à une politique éditoriale tout à fait louable : rendre les débats académiques entourant la transition écologique accessibles et digestes pour les non-initiés. Pour ce travail de vulgarisation, nous ne pouvons que féliciter Jean Gadrey et Aurore Lalucq pour leur précieuse contribution.

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Antoine Verret-Hamelin is a PhD student at IDÉA (l'Institut d'éthique appliquée), Université de Laval, Quebec, Canada.

Karen Thornber. 2012. *Ecoambiguity: environmental crises and East Asian literatures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. ISBN 978-0-472-11806-9; US\$90.

Reviewed by Edwin A. Schmitt. Email: [schmitte "at" link.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:schmitte@link.cuhk.edu.hk)

Karen Thornber's *Ecoambiguity: environmental crises and East Asian literatures* is a massive undertaking by a first-rate scholar. While primarily focused on the creative literature of authors from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, there is no doubt this work will also be considered a classic within the emerging field of environmental humanities. Unlike many academic studies of the environment, this book is not topical but rather explicitly conceptual. The author focuses all of her rich empirical detail on the study of the ambiguous way human interactions with nonhuman beings are portrayed in creative works, which Thornber calls ecoambiguity. Chapter 1 begins by providing a brief environmental history and a history of environmental literature for China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. After this, the book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the ambiguity within the environmental attitudes, information and behaviors that are portrayed in literature, while the second part focuses on the ambiguity between attitudes, information and behavior.

Chapter 2 describes the way individuals within a story can have conflicting attitudes towards protecting the environment, which Thornber describes as ambivalence. A useful example is seen in Huang Chunming's short story 'Set free', where a family of environmentalists fights to prevent industrial factories from emitting pollutants but then become dismayed that the land where they trap egrets might become a protected area. Chapter 3 is concerned with the difficulty in interpreting environmental information, which is described as a kind of uncertainty. For instance, Wang Ping's 'Maverick' discusses the moments leading up to the final breaching of the Yangtze River at the Three Gorges Dam site that leaves many residents concerned about their unknown future once their homes will be flooded. In Chapter 4, the author examines the way conflicting behaviors, or contradictions, towards the environment are negotiated within East Asian literature. This is best highlighted through Masuda Mizuko's 'Horn' about the growing of flowers in a botanical garden. The short story talks about how human beings design parks to preserve the nonhuman within our cities, but in the end we are simply substituting one nonhuman for another, such as when we swap out different types of flowers in the flower beds of parks simply to accommodate our seasonal preferences.

Chapter 5 moves the book into Part II, where the author begins by describing characters within the literature who tend to give in, or acquiesce, to the enormity of environmental degradation. For instance, Cho Sehüi's story 'City of machines' provides a stark example of industrial workers who feel that "nothing can be done" about the massive amount of pollution they are exposed to everyday in the factories where they work. Thus, much as can be seen in Cho Sehüi's story, acquiescing is often the result of the feeling that the environmental damage is too great or the social system is too obstinate. Chapter 6 then analyzes how creative works narrate certain beliefs that lead individuals to ignore obvious environmental conditions, which Thornber describes as a kind of delusion. Probably the starkest example of this is the way Wang Lixiong's *Yellow Peril* (1991) describes China's post-apocalyptic future as being caused by the delusion that the polluted regions along the Yellow River would survive the next major flood, which turns out to trigger a global collapse in the story's narrative. Finally, in Chapter 7, the author reflects on what she calls the paradoxical nature of some environmentalist attitudes that actually results in further damage to the environment. For instance, in Jiang Rong's *Wolf totem* (2004) Chen Zhen, one of the main characters, is appalled at the rapid extinction of the wolf population in Inner Mongolia and adopts an abandoned pup to ensure that at least one of the species will survive. Unfortunately, it becomes impossible for Chen Zhen to keep the pup in captivity as it becomes an adult wolf that yearns for freedom, but he decides to take the young wolf's life rather than allow it to starve on its own in the wild.

The book would have benefited from a concluding chapter to discuss more clearly how these six aspects of ecological ambiguity are distinct from each other. It is often difficult for the reader to determine how the ambiguity described in one story is different from that of another. Overall, the organization of the book allowed the author to focus on concepts instead of topics, which was an important stylistic decision that probably helps the argument of the book more than hinders it. However, one other issue within the book is

the lack of engagement with political economy and social power. This prevents the author from placing ecological ambiguity within broader arguments related to how we understand sustainability and environmentalism. For instance, in Huang Chunming's 'Set free' Thornber provides some of the political context regarding how residents of Dakenggu attempt to cope with industrial pollution from nearby chemical factories. She explains that a Kuomintang official up for election promised to bring the factories to the village and then eight years later a new candidate (of what party we are not told) promised to get rid of them. However, Thornber's analysis makes it appear as if the interactions between the villagers, factory owners and politicians are uninfluenced by social power. Without going back to the original story, it is hard to know if this is the result of Huang Chunming's storytelling or if Thornber has just provided a very flat interpretation. Such interpretations are quite common throughout *Ecoambiguity*. The one exception is her analysis of Cho Sehüi's 'City of machines' that vividly describes the conflicts between factory workers, general residents, an activist and the industry leaders. Here Thornber makes clear the power that industry leaders use to manipulate the residents. Thus, because of the rich political economic context that she provides, the reader gains a profound understanding for what it means to acquiesce in the face of known environmental degradation. I think this highlights an important reason that a deep discussion needs to be developed between political ecology and the environmental humanities. Political ecology could gain a great deal from drawing on material found in creative literature to ensure that our political economy is robust enough to capture the sociological imagination of the non-human world that is well described by Thornber's idea of ecological ambiguity. Similarly, the environmental humanities needs political ecology to ensure that analysis of this literature is connected to the political realities faced by a society in the midst of ecological change; realities which may be stimulating the writing of such literature in the first place. While some of this work has been accomplished by Erin James' (2015) use of postcolonial theory to combine ecocriticism and narratology, there is still an opportunity for grounding our analysis of creative literature within the lived experience of the environment from which that literature emerges. The breadth of content that Thornber covers is astounding, but even in her meticulous notes she does not really engage with the depth of material available within other disciplines that could be used to better contextualize the politics of East Asia that ultimately structure the narratives about the non-human world that she analyzes.

One major benefit is that the book is fairly jargon-free making it readily accessible to non-specialists. However, some aspects of how Thornber describes ambiguity may create confusion, particularly the way she uses the concept of uncertainty, an idea which is well established within other disciplines. Uncertainty is often thought of as that which is unknown about the environment but which we also endeavor to learn more. Different places in the world have a unique political structure for how to resolve those unknowns (Jasanoff 1999), which is why it is so important for us to take political economy seriously when discussing environmental issues. If we go back to the concerns of residents living behind the Three Gorges Dam in Wang Ping's 'Maverick', I am not entirely sure that "uncertainty" is the best word to describe this situation. Rather, the residents in 'Maverick' find their future to be obscure and indistinguishable, but due to state control over knowledge it is not necessarily possible for them to find more information regarding the unknowns related to the flooding of their homes. Moreover, what Thornber is describing is quite different than scientific uncertainty about the environment, although the ambiguity she discusses could very well be a part of the social reaction to scientific uncertainty. This social reaction is worthy of systematic study, but to avoid confusion it is important to distinguish between these concepts.

In general, it is important to take the other disciplines concerned with environmental issues seriously, because many of us hope that when the environmental humanities creates useful ideas these disciplines will reciprocate. Moreover, through reciprocation we can ensure a stronger bridge is built across the 'Two Cultures' divide. If we want environmental engineers, for instance, to recognize the widespread proliferation of ecologically ambiguous discourses in society and how that may influence the way we come to understand and react to evidence of environmental degradation, then those working in the environmental humanities also need to give the same amount of recognition to the scientific concepts that generate such evidence. Those within environmental humanities should feel comfortable challenging concepts within other disciplines but they at least need to demonstrate their understanding of how those concepts are typically used so as to avoid confusion and stimulate debate. In my mind, this is not an issue that necessarily undermines the power of Thornber's argument, but it does show that the environmental humanities still have room to grow. This is

precisely why the environmental humanities could benefit from a deeper engagement with political ecology, which has been working towards bridging the Two Cultures through the common goals of achieving social equality and environmental sustainability for many decades now.

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Dr. Edwin A. Schmitt is at the Center for Advanced Study, the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters and is a graduate of the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Robert Biel. 2016. *Sustainable food systems: the role of the city*. London: UCL Press. ISBN: 978-1-911307-09-9; free online, hard copy £10.00.

Reviewed by Rebecca Whittle. Email: [r.whittle "at" lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:r.whittle@lancaster.ac.uk)

Robert Biel's fascinating book on this topic is a breath of fresh air, taking, as it does, a strong and convincing political ecology argument into conversation with more scientific debates around food security in a way which manages to be both critical and constructive at the same time. The subtitle is perhaps slightly misleading given that urban agriculture specifically doesn't become a significant focus for the book until the penultimate chapter. Nonetheless, the book's main contribution – to argue for a closer connection between Marxist thought and the principles behind what we might term 'alternative' approaches to food growing (for example, the organics movement, permaculture, agroecology) – is both important and timely.

In the introduction, Biel emphasises that "I approach this topic as a food-growing practitioner and allotment holder: the allotment movement and its working-class traditions of self-organisation continue to inspire me." (p.1). A few paragraphs later, he also signals his intention to engage constructively with the FAO's new focus on 'sustainable intensification' "rather than merely critiquing its 'discourse'." Both these comments struck a chord with me. Like Biel, I am a social scientist teaching and researching in an interdisciplinary research environment where I want to have a 'constructive engagement' with the plant and soil scientists surrounding me. Like Biel, I am also a practitioner: I have an allotment and help to run a community garden and try to get involved in local food activism where I have chance. I have also been very inspired by the ecology and philosophy of permaculture and agroecology as, evidently, has Biel. And, like Biel, I have frequently wondered why many of the supposed 'alternative' and low-impact forms of growing currently being promoted for environmental reasons – with permaculture and the organics movement being two prime examples – have so little to say about the radical social and political change that is required if we are ever to achieve anything remotely resembling a sustainable food system.

It was therefore very welcome to read a book which addresses this issue head on. The book's key aim is to bring the more environmentalist/ecological arguments supporting permaculture and other 'alternative'/low impact cultivation systems closer to the social science, Marxist arguments more familiar to political ecologists. Biel takes as his starting point the Marxist argument that the logic of capital accumulation is destructive to both worker interests and the natural world. The consequences of this are clearly visible today in the economic and social hardships facing small and medium sized farmers all over the world as well as the large scale environmental destruction caused by many industrial farming practices. Biel also reminds us of what he describes as the 'paradox of innovation' which we see under contemporary agrarian capitalism, i.e., the ways in which many of the apparent 'novelties' being proposed as solutions to these problems (GMOs, biotech innovations and more sophisticated agrochemical formulations to name just a few) actually just result in a deepening of the farming system's dependency on capitalism, alienating us further from nature and exacerbating the social inequalities that result. However, also following Marxist arguments, he points to current struggles emerging around agriculture, including the global food sovereignty movement and a growing interest in various forms of 'alternative' agriculture, as necessary conflicts which signal that the process of generating a fairer and more ecologically sustainable farming system are underway.

These arguments may already be very familiar to political ecologists. However, what makes this book really special and different is the way in which Biel then links these social and political arguments to innovative thinking in science and ecology. Starting with an introduction to systems theory, he explores the way in which many of the 'alternative' farming methods currently gaining credence across the world, such as permaculture, agroecology and organics have an emphasis on the farmer working *with* complex natural systems and holistic processes, rather than trying to simplify and control them. For example, a 'no dig' cultivation system is based on building up the soil's natural ecosystem – including extensive networks of mycorrhizae, fungi, bacteria and other organisms – to better support the plants being grown. Biel explains that contemporary soil science and ecology is now starting to really appreciate the complex interactions taking place below the ground, and argues that this presents a complete challenge to the reductionist scientific paradigm which has held sway for many years, whereby 'understanding' something was thought to

be all about 'isolating' and 'controlling' the effect of one particular factor within a system. And here comes the crucial part: Biel argues that industrial farming systems which are based upon simplification and control of nature (the eradication of weeds, the reduction of plant nutrition to a few key chemical elements) are also easier systems to control socially and politically, precisely because they involve a reduction in diversity and mastery over a few key inputs. Contrast this to a low/no input, holistic system in which nature does the work and the farmer uses his/her knowledge to work with the complexity of the ecosystem, and we can start to see how this might be beneficial for farmers as well as the environment.

Again, however, it is crucial to think about the social and political dimensions of such a system. While the growing interest in more ecologically friendly farming methods has been welcomed broadly, social scientists have rightly pointed to the danger of such approaches being 'co-opted' by business-as-usual capitalist interests. Here, too, Biel has an important contribution to make. Reminding us that it isn't sufficient to think about agroecology solely as a new mode of production, he explains that:

...a knowledge-intensive, low-work system implies empowerment, a redistribution of power away from corporate intellectual property, and liberation from the dominance of global value chains. If these conditions are absent, the switch to small farms, which should in principle be progressive, could actually be just another form of exploitation. (p.86)

And again on p. 112:

...it is vital to establish a line of demarcation from co-optive strategies of neo-liberalism. Where the latter embraces themes of 'community', resilience, etc. in order to drag them away from radical class politics, we should assert that it is actually only *through* radical forces that we can arrive at a future where society and nature work on common principles. Concretely, we aim to situate organics within a *socially critical* approach to general systems theory.

To summarise, then, I found this to an extremely useful book. It is based on a strong grasp of social theory (in addition to Marx, we meet Foucault, Gramsci and Freire) but is also decidedly interdisciplinary in outlook, thanks to the aforementioned engagement with soil science, ecology and systems theory. It is a short book and this, combined with the breadth of material covered, limits the amount of detail that is possible on any of the topics covered. However, as an introduction to the research landscape it is really excellent and would make a great resource for Masters students interested in food and agriculture – whether from social or natural science backgrounds.

Importantly – and very much in keeping with the arguments made about sharing of farming knowledge within the book – it is also open access (as is this review) and forms part of a series of 14 such titles (currently) by UCL Press. It can be [downloaded for free](#) or a paperback copy can be purchased for just £10.

Dr. [Rebecca Whittle](#) is a lecturer at the Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, UK.

Davidson, Joanna. 2016. *Sacred rice: an ethnography of identity, environment, and development in rural West Africa*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 249p. ISBN 978-0-19-935868-7. US\$19.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Christopher Shepherd, Department of Anthropology, Australian National University.
Email: [chris.shepherd "at" anu.edu.au](mailto:chris.shepherd@anu.edu.au)

Joanna Davidson's study is set among the coast-dwelling Jola people of Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony. The Jola are an ethnic minority inhabiting the northwest of the country and number about 20,000 (while as many as half a million Jola live in neighbouring countries). Latin American cocaine traffickers know exactly where to locate Guinea-Bissau, but most do not: Guinea-Bissau is a small country on the west coast of Africa sandwiched between Senegal and the Republic of Guinea. It is not a popular research destination for foreign scholars. Davidson arrived in 2001, and following a two-year stint of fieldwork among a cluster of Jola villages, she returned periodically for the next ten years.

"Sacred rice", for Davidson, is not to emphasise the strictly religious meaning of rice as many classic studies have done. Rice is a "complex technical, social and ritual system through which Jola produce, consume, and revere rice" (p. 47). Beyond the local "rice complex", rice serves as Davidson's entry point to explore numerous historical, socio-political, religious, ontological and modernist themes directly or indirectly associated with a uniquely African mode of rice cultivation and, it turns out, one that is central—"sacred"—to Jola-land. It is also fairly typical of mixed mangrove and forest rice growing along the coast of Guinea-Bissau.

Drawing on the work of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, Davidson presents a systemic, holistic view of Jola rice as "a total phenomenon" and she resists making analytical separations between "legal, economic, religious, and other parts" (p. 5). If the reader begins to suspect a variety of "cultural essentialism" or a contrived "holism" in Davidson's portrayal of the Jola and their rice, that essentialism or holism soon appears as something relegated to the past. Davidson shares alarming news: climate change. Since 1945, annual rainfall has halved, rice yields have declined dramatically, and people are facing severe deprivations. Jola rice farmers can no longer see "living off the land" as a viable future. In the absence of substantial rural development projects, they consider alternatives (e.g. growing cashew nut), albeit reluctantly, since rice is so engrained at all levels—cosmologically, socially, culturally and so on. In effect, Davidson issues regular reminders that all things are bound up in this unravelling Maussian whole. She asks "what happens?" when the "total phenomenon" of rice unravels, "disentang[ling] itself from spheres of social, cosmological, moral, economic, political, and familial life?" (p. 8). Her question is reflected in local perceptions: the Jola themselves know all too well that their "feet are in the fire", are they are asking themselves "what next?"

Before we learn "what happens and what next", Davidson does the usual thing: she zooms out to the broader context. Chapter one in particular takes the reader from well-known Asian rice to little-appreciated African rice. Then she zooms back in to the Upper Guinean coastal rice of the "mangrove ecosystem." All the while she interconnects histories of rice domestication, local innovation, international breeding programs, developmentalist priorities and failed national policies. Coming back to the Jola, she reasserts rice's centrality: "rice is omnipresent in Jola economic, social, and symbolic life..."; it is "the medium of exchange during life-cycle redistributive processes"; it is the "ticket to ritual power"; "Jola lives are permeated by rice"; "growing, eating, displaying, wearing, discussing and revering rice" is "ubiquitous" (p. 34) and so it has been for a thousand years.

And yet, this is all changing. Engines of change (predating Davidson's arrival) are Portuguese colonialism, Catholic missionary influence, the eleven-year war of independence, bumpy postcolonial politics and some developments touching on education and health but neglecting agriculture. But more than anything, rice and yield are driving change. As much in the wet-rice paddies as in the dry-rice forests, Jola are working more for less return. However, the seemingly intractable cultural identification with rice-farming (even among those who have other salaried work) and a host of attendant social and cultural entanglements keeps the Jola labouring in the fields: more backbreaking work for less food.

Chapter Two begins to situate these shifts within the context of Davidson's field research. Her ethnography now comes alive as she recounts stories that revolve around the family with whom she lives—people she comes to see as "friends" more than "informants." Elevating story-telling to a method in its own right, she traces the family's stories through several generations. A "deeply biographic approach" describes kinship, experiences, conflicts, personalities, bodies, behaviours, anxieties, social roles, gender relations, ritual life, salaried employment and, of course, rain, rice work and change—always change away from the Maussian whole. In their stories and her stories of what was and what is, the reader gradually comes to appreciate that the coming and going of Davidson over twelve or so years has also enabled her to detect change within her own "ethnographic frame"—sometimes rapid change but most often subtle changes in activities, interactions, attitudes and tones. With her ethnography always bordering on the novelistic, Davidson presents herself as a highly sensitive ethnographer attuned to the nuances and meanings embedded in microscopic shifts.

Chapter Three concerns the norms surrounding agricultural labour. She contrasts a Jola ethos of "hard work" to traditional notions of the "lazy African" and describes the disciplinary measures through which hard work is enforced. Given the sixty-year presence of Catholic institutions in particular, however, "the protective and punitive power of spirit shrines to enforce the social relations of labour is weakening" (p. 93). Yet, says Davidson, "the ways in which work was evoked, performed, or prohibited illustrated how Jola work was a complex of values that cuts across economic, religious, and social domains" (p. 97). Indeed, Davidson herself was subjected to some disciplinary norms since she too worked in the fields, planting, transplanting, and harvesting rice. In this chapter, the theme of disintegration emerges forcefully when the ethnographer-cum-cultivator points to a kind of inertia in the rice complex that has given rise to a contradiction: Jola work has become delinked from actual productivity in terms of rice output. The "paradox of custom" has meant that the Jola appear to work almost for almost nothing. "Jola villagers...were maintaining the very social forms that exacerbated... their central problem"; they worked ever-harder in the fields, but were ever-less able to secure enough food (p. 98-100). Davidson avoids conjecture as to how low yields must get before the Jola give up the ghost of rice cultivation once and for all.

The following chapter then moves from the cultivation of rice to the cultivation of knowledge. Davidson is particularly concerned with the many layers of secrecy, both the formal secrecy concerning, for example, esoteric religious knowledge, and the informal, everyday secrecy that encompasses, for instance, the extent or nature of Jola possessions. Here, Davidson returns to questions of method. She distinguishes her approach from the "penetrative ethnography" that goes in search of secrets. Comically, Davidson describes how some of the "big secrets" she non-penetratively unearthed turned out to be "banal." This gave her reason to believe that "the content of the secret was irrelevant" compared to the significance of "the performance surrounding its concealment and revelation" (p. 110). Ironically, the less Davidson wanted to know peoples' "secrets", the more they were willing to enlighten her (but always out of earshot of others). She then jettisons the simple idea of "secrecy" in favour of a more sophisticated analysis of the dynamics of concealing and revealing information inhering in the uniquely Jola ways of "producing, controlling and transferring knowledge" (p. 111). All this is better understood in terms of communicative and practical strategies for concealing actions, possessions and so on, and keeping the special knowledge of different social locations separate, including between the genders and within them (e.g. the female knowledge of reproduction); the "leaking" of knowledge is a continual Jola preoccupation. In teasing out the links between knowledge, power and the processes of gaining rights to knowledge, Davidson's Jola, we read, inhabit a world "rich in ideas and information." The chapter concludes with a caution for the development industry, particularly the "learning-from-farmers" approach that assumes that "local knowledge" can just be plucked from its context and incorporated into development intervention. Acquiring information from the Jola is evidently tricky, even for an anthropologist. Apart from all their secrets, they tend not to explain things. Here, there is no place for impatience or "rapid rural appraisals."

The complex relationship between the Catholic religion and animism (although Davidson avoids the term, and perhaps sensibly given the likeness between the Christian God and the Jola "supreme deity") is broached in Chapter Five. In many ways, Davidson tells a familiar story of missionaries undermining what she calls "customary beliefs and practices." The result has been a growing Jola ambivalence towards them. Yet Davidson noticed one anomaly: a growing attachment to a certain once-every-thirty years initiation

process, by which males aged from three to 33 undergo a long period of seclusion in the forest. On the one hand, Catholic pressures opened up a rift between those who participated in the ritual seclusion (last held in 1998) and those who didn't in what was once a "tight-knit community." On the other hand, Davidson notes the marked persistence of the ritual, her explanation for which centres on a combination of influences including environmental degradation, declining rice yields and a number of contingent rituals and practices. Essentially, this greater "rice complex" that defined masculinity was no longer doing its job. So, in its absence, the importance of this initiation process was raised as "one of the last purely male and man-making venues" (p. 153). With a more speculative tone, Davidson suggests that Jola men's participation in initiation might ritually "encode" their desire to reverse the environmental degradation that has limited the viability of rice, such that they can "regain the opportunity to become men in the rice paddies once again" (p. 154). Since ethnographers rarely free themselves from their attachment to their doctoral field-sites, I suspect that we can look forward to Davidson's update following the 2028 male initiation ritual.

A return to story-telling marks Chapter Six. Davidson's adoptive family, among others, continued to emphasise the importance of hard work in the fields, especially as an alternative to thievery. But hard work in itself had its limitations, and so modifications to traditional work regimes were afoot. Women's work associations had formed to alleviate the burden of work and distribute economic vulnerability. Beyond the farms, parents were increasingly pinning their hopes on their children's education and urban upward mobility. Typically, the kids were sent off to the city for higher schooling where they would hopefully proceed to salaried employment. Most of the time this didn't work out, and many returned to the village. Daughters in particular came home pregnant and out-of-wedlock. More generally, social mobility, urban migration and globalisation were ushering in all sorts of challenges: traditional Jola sexual mores were in jeopardy and HIV infections were on the rise. Davidson picks up the theme of eroding Jola socialisation practices and "moral decline" in the final chapter. She does this in light of the various simplifying discourses for understanding social problems (taking J. Scott's notion of "legibility"). Davidson issues a warning about "the implementation of facile and ineffective solutions" (p. 180) by "external-change agents." She demonstrates the true complexity of problems biographically and experientially by telling the stories of the daughters of her host-family. Defying stereotypes and standard development and missionary narratives, "each young woman [is] a unique social drama unto herself", says Davidson, generalising. Interestingly, Davidson reveals how she gets caught up in the drama as a provider of funds to help women in their predicaments, as a source of information (e.g. on birth control) or a cross-border (to Senegal) escort; even the total rent she paid to her host-family gets spent on resolving a certain pregnancy-related problem.

Davidson's critique of manufacturing simple solutions for complex problems is resumed in the conclusion. This applies to agricultural development as well. Development agents, Davidson advises, must take account of the specific ways in which the Jola understand work, not simply in productive terms but also in its links to personhood, morality and social structure; they must also take into account the special Jola approach to knowledge and communication. Davidson, again, emphasises the centrality of rice to all facets of social life while simultaneously acknowledging that this rice-centricity is disintegrating. The younger generation of Jola barely identify with rice at all. I often sensed contradictory messages in Davidson's arguments that derived from a certain idealism surrounding the essential place of rice. I was left wondering to what extent rice was really central to Jola lives, in both the past and the present, and to what extent these depictions that fluctuated between "the total rice complex" and "disintegrating rice complex" were rather essential to Davidson's narrative. Davidson may betray a slight discomfort about her deployment of a longstanding anthropological technique—to take an object or practice and wrap a "total" cultural narrative around it—when in the conclusion she admits that the book has been *ostensibly* about rice. While she has certainly been quite creative in her efforts to bring disparate social phenomena to bear on rice—including the impact of global warming and collapsing productivity—one is tempted to think that the purported centrality of rice has more to do with Davidson's narrative skill in rendering a Maussian "total phenomenon" partial. The problem might be that the evolving "rice partialness" remains attached to its parent "whole" as an idealised, "close-knit" culture (although she mostly avoids the term "culture").

Davidson, finally, pronounces on globalisation and "the effort to make sense of dramatic changes wrought by forces beyond local control, and to respond based on local imaginings of what the good life is" (p. 195). She navigates a position midway between "doom-and-gloom" stories and celebratory ones of

"cultural creativity". This position runs parallels to her general conclusion that the Jola are both culturally constrained yet, within those constraints, are able to find ways to better their situation. I was left with the feeling, however, that the doom-and-gloom picture was rather more accurate given the environmental and social impact of climate change over the last fifty years. I would have liked to see Davidson extrapolate into the not-too-distant future heralding a two-, three- or four-degree rise in average global temperatures. What would remain of the Jola covenant with their supreme deity—"if we work hard *Emitai* will bring rain"—when the rainy season has contracted further or when annual rainfall has halved yet again? At what point would rice yields reach zero? Would there remain a forest in which to seclude young males? Would the mangrove paddies lie under seawater instead of in freshwater? Would the Jola exist at all by the end of this century?

In relation to one chapter, Davidson asserts that it "might be a frustrating [one] to read for those looking for a clearer theoretical package or exegesis" (p. 155). As a reviewer, I thought that this applies to much of the book as the author meandered loosely around a range of positions. Yet one could also be more forgiving in this respect, commending Davidson for not "reducing" Jola life to one or two explanatory regimes (thus imposing her own standards of legibility). Either way, it is not clear the book makes much of a contribution to theory; and while it critiques development from a number of perspectives, some readers (but not me) may wish to see those critiques meaningfully applied to the actual implementation of development projects (although it appears that not much in the way of development projects was going on anyway).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned—or because of it—*Sacred Rice* remains an excellent ethnographic monograph. It is well written (poetic in parts), engaging, reflexive and thoroughly researched. The book does remarkably well at illuminating the complex and dire social, environmental, religious and economic predicament of the Jola people in a way that has much in common with the situation faced across the illegible "Third" World. I find exactly the same themes emerging in my "fields"—Peru and East Timor. *Sacred Rice*, in my view, stands at the cutting edge of ethnographic writing where ethnography is often at risk of becoming excruciatingly detailed, positivistic, depersonalised and dull. Few ethnographies are as engaging as this one. If one of Joanna Davidson's objectives of *Sacred Rice* has been to provide the reader with a feel for the everyday material as well as emotional reality of Jola life in all its hardship, suffering and hopes, she has succeeded in doing so.

Dr. Chris Shepherd is a postdoctoral fellow, School of Culture, History and Language, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Australia.