
SPILOVER CONVERSATION

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Interview: Anthropology and Activism within Occupied Worlds

As part of *PoLAR*'s virtual issue on Reflections from Occupied Worlds, this piece is an important and personal contribution. Here, two researchers reflect on how they have navigated one such world, West Papua, and endeavored to raise the visibility of its strife under Indonesian rule. Budi Hernawan [BH], a Franciscan friar and doctoral candidate, and Eben Kirksey [EK], author of *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power*, graciously agreed to give up an afternoon to participate in an interview conducted by *PoLAR*'s Online Content Editor, Kate Henne [KH]. The conversation delves into tensions laden within anthropological inquiry, activism, and anthropological inquiry into activism, as well as the politics and desires unpinning them. Below is how their discussion proceeded.¹

KH: Thank you both for being willing to sit down and chat. I want to first ask each of you about how you became involved in the West Papuan freedom movement and how you see your work within it.

EK: For me it was a series of surprises. Initially, I was a high school exchange student trying to get somewhere else, and I was surprised in an airport waiting lounge by Papuans who were dressed in grass skirts and singing songs that captured my imagination. A few years later, in another encounter on an airplane landing strip, a couple of people came and asked me point blank, "Are you here to help the Papuan people?" I had to sit with that question for a few moments and weigh the implications of my possible responses, but ultimately, I said yes.

At different moments, I was basically forced to choose and quickly realized that as I was choosing to align myself with the social movement. I began using what Vincent Crapanzano

and Maria Vesperi have called ‘just words’ to use principles of justice in representing the ideas, aspirations and struggles of this movement.² I realized I also had to choose sides within the movement. So, just like Malinowski, who put his tent next to a particular indigenous leader when he wrote *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, I had to take up residence with a particular arm of the movement. I stumbled into the realm of human rights advocacy. That afforded a situated perspective on a dynamic movement that had a lot of heterogeneous things bundled up in it. Inevitably this led to conflict.

In the book I am writing in alliance with human rights defenders, and sometimes that meant writing in opposition to other leaders. In particular, I am critical of leaders who had a vision of nationalism not too different from the projects that Partha Chatterjee has critiqued, the nationalistic elite who have mobilized the sentiment of the masses to get personal wealth and opportunities.³ So, I had to chart a very personal course through a field structured by countervailing asymmetrical powers. Papuans are stuck in a situation not of their own choosing. I was in a position of relative privilege—able to make an arbitrary, yet high-stakes decision with respect to the question: “with whom do I situate myself in writing this project?” I think all anthropologists necessarily make such ethical and epistemological cuts.

KH: Please hold some of those thoughts, as we should pick up some of those questions shortly. First, Budi, could you reflect a bit on how you became involved with the West Papuan freedom movement?

BH: When I was still doing my undergraduate degree in Jakarta, I was already active in the Labour Movement during the Suharto authoritarian regime in the 1993 to 1997—just a year before reformasi took place in Indonesia. I was also a Franciscan friar at the time on track to become a priest. In contrast to Eben’s story, my story with Papua was always more negotiated.

My superior asked me where I wanted to go after my formal religious training to have more on the ground experience. Since the Labour movement was completely different than what was going on in West Papua, I was sent there in 1997, a year before the West Papuan Spring events took place. My first encounter was with West Papuans in the highlands very close to one of the strongest West Papuan movements in that particular area. The perspective of a church pastor, looking after the congregation, allowed me to interact with a wider audience, and during my time there, I was exposed to very graphic and emotional stories of torture. While I did not witness the torturing, tortured people would come up to the presbytery or the parish house right after being tortured, still swollen and crying.

Because of my previous experience in Jakarta doing advocacy work, I tried to collect information to send to our bishop in order to try to prevent this from happening anymore. I found that exposure to the reality of the situation very useful in engaging a wider audience. In this way, you can localize and describe the confined and isolated military infrastructure that occupies the public space there. The narrative of West Papua within the Indonesian narrative is very distant and marginalized, so trying to turn these metanarratives upside down and into different narratives is quite challenging. I found it very difficult to try to insert West Papuan narratives into narratives audiences could understand.

KH: Given the compelling dynamics you have described, what were some of the decisions you made in framing West Papuan voices within your research and work? Could you reflect on the choices you made around negotiating your voice and their voice, especially in writing

a narrative for readers who may not be familiar with some of the situations or even the occupation of West Papua more generally?

EK: Any time you are trying to do the work of translation there is this negotiation between making something intelligible and keeping it strange. Some of the narrative choices I made in this book are to make things very intelligible, and to do so in a way that is also an epistemological translation—working across different theories of knowledge and traditions of knowing. So, for example, I took narratives from the realm of rumor and translated them into what Donna Haraway would call the “view from nowhere.”⁴ I regard this work in “strategic translations” as being similar to the “strategic essentialisms” described by other scholars.⁵ I think we can make strategic epistemological simplifications that take the situated insights we have as anthropologists, insights about the micro-processes that lead to the construction of knowledge, to present facts in a way that would travel here in Canberra or in Washington.

I have also found that stories that simply stick-to-the-facts don’t ultimately have that much power in many cases. After a meeting that didn’t go so well in Capitol Hill, I had someone tell me that politics is about storytelling, and it depends on who’s telling the story and how powerful they are and how good a story they can tell.

It was also a serious empirical project to get at certain facts. For instance, I managed to find masterminds behind murders and things like that, but I also made an effort to tell narratives that are strange and force us to rethink how imaginative landscapes might be configured. If strictly factual stories are failing, there are other narrative resources we need to draw upon.

Going back to the idea of writing, using just words and doing justice to the beliefs and aspirations of folks with whom you are engaged: I think the challenge is also to write with empathy and even to start believing in some of the things folks are hoping for, to engage with stories that push the bounds of realism and realistic possibility. For me, it’s been the centerpiece in this project of translating a bundle of desires. I have written some very intelligible narratives, stories that would fly in a newspaper or a magazine, but then have also recorded stories about the magic of modernity, stories that on their face seem utterly strange. I have taken time to figure out how hope and imagination are working, and using the power of dreams to push the bounds of readers’ imaginations, too.

KH: Budi, knowing that your research takes a different angle and approach to issues in West Papua, could you explain those distinctions, and then reflect on the challenges you faced in narrating a story of others, a story that was also in part your own?

BH: Sure, from the perspective of a human rights advocate and a missionary attempting to engage broader audiences, such as the UN Human Rights Commission, I found that sometimes you have to sell sad stories, which then compete with other stories, and the process becomes politicized along these lines. In a way, this is very tragic, because you are removed from the grassroots and become a player in a political situation to make sure that your audience understands the gravity of your story—all the while competing in this big market of human suffering at the UN.

I agree with Eben that trying to translate local narratives into an intelligible story for broader audiences becomes quite challenging in various ways. Firstly, it becomes technically difficult, especially from an isolated place, to derive a fleshy story that can find traction in a very politicized and slow-moving bureaucracy like the UN. During that back and forth, you

also find some expectations for authors of the narratives: They put so much expectation and emphasis on the UN doing something, because you have brought these stories for them.

When I came back [to Papua], I brought nothing more than assurances that their story had been placed in this massive machinery that may or may not work. To make it worse, people [at the international level] generally don't actually want to hear these stories, so human rights narratives are useful to hook up your narrative to a broader audience, making it understandable. But, at the same time, the unintended consequence is that people may generate new ideas and hopes that may be misleading, so the role of advocacy may be just to be faithful to both sides and that both sides are informed as much as possible. You can't avoid the competition that takes place, and at the time, West Papuans were competing with the Iraq situation, with Cuba, and with African genocides like Uganda and Rwanda. The complexity of many actors trying to engage with human rights narratives to make their stories stronger also creates its own expectations.

KH: So how do you see your research and its academic outcomes fitting into those projects and those tensions?

BH: I still think my contribution would be to try to make small isolated stories into something understandable by broader audiences. Also, to make local expectations realistic by conveying how their stories are valuable, while also translating back how those stories fit within a larger set of narratives and complexities. In this sense, I see the role of academia as one of influencing policymakers and to make sure that policies are informed. I do try to bridge the roles of academia and policymaking, while trying to ensure that those three different epistemologies communicate and talk to each other to maybe generate a better situation on the ground.

EK: I'd like to touch on Budi's mention of unrealistic expectations and how they surfaced in my research. Thaddeus Yogi, a guerrilla fighter who Budi has also met, placed entirely unrealistic expectations in me when I was a first-year graduate student. Yogi said that he would start burning down churches if I didn't finish my book in a year, if I didn't quickly finish it and present him with a copy! It took me more than a decade to finish the book, and Yogi has since passed away. If he were still alive, I wonder how he would receive this book. I wrote about his collaboration with the Indonesian military, some strange performative dynamics where the distinctions between enemy and ally broke down. I chronicle how Yogi, a Papuan "freedom fighter", received material support from undercover military agents. Ultimately, through these tactical collaborations, he was able to score a symbolic victory for his people—he made the Vice President of Indonesia look like a fool in front of a lot of people when she visited West Papua's highlands.

I've also seen unrealistic expectations in the work of others and realms of advocacy. For example, Eni Faleomavaega from American Samoa, who is the non-voting delegate to the US Congress, had a very powerful position when the Democrats were in control of the House of Representatives. He was the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment. Faleomavaega has long taken a public position in support of independence for West Papua and when he became Chairman the Papuan people had all sorts of unrealistic hopes that he would usher an era of independence for West Papua—this idea of a powerful outsider who was going to save the day.

Faleomavaega held a Congressional hearing where he invited experts and indigenous leaders to talk about the issue of crimes against humanity in West Papua. All of a sudden, news about this hearing spread like wildfire on the Internet, and everyone was conflating it with a meeting of the UN General Assembly that was going to take place the same day. In that moment, I saw these very expensive dreams—visions of the UN suddenly recognizing the independence of West Papua—go on a crash course with reality. A delegation of twelve Papuan leaders came to the United States with high hopes that were dashed. But, I truly think that unrealistic expectations prompted us to do surprising things. Faleomavaega has taken a strong stance in Congress about these issues—even in the face of disinterest by his colleagues. So, I found the power of collective dreaming working within him, and I could also see it working in me.

BH: I completely agree with that. And, also part of the ongoing struggle of an oppressed society is that rumors are the leading narrative, because reality is too hard to digest and the dream is still too far. The closest we can get to it is sometimes by rumors. Rumor-based narratives are very strong in clandestine movements. Even though you give the facts and original translations from official sources, what they believe is not the text or subtext or the centers of power in DC or Geneva or New York or Canberra that symbolize their dreams, because the real world that they live in is entangled with plural powers. Doing advocacy and human rights work in those entangled worlds may also get you caught up in different power relations that challenge you to understand how the universal human rights framework can work in very particular situations and vice versa: how particular situations can speak to the universalism of rights.

KH: Eben mentioned dreams and suggested that they are very much embodied and tangible “things.” Could you talk about how you seem them operating in your work? Perhaps another way of asking that question is to enquire about how are you held accountable to your interlocutors.

BH: I think that when you put things into a long-term perspective, people can miss that you have made tangible achievements. For example, after working in the coalition of national and international Papuan NGOs for over a decade, we had the special rapporteurs on torture and human rights visit Papua in 2007. On that occasion, people could see that the expensive, high-level, and long-distance work we were doing could result into something measurable. At the same time, those UN envoys, while being on the ground and talking to people under heavy surveillance, generate further unrealizable expectations. There are no real sanctions within the state principles of international law, which leaves only the UN Security Council as a potential source of measurable change. People don’t want to hear those complexities so our very achievements often only served to perpetuate this cycle of unrealizable expectations.

EK: I can contribute two particular examples of spectacular failure, examples where I failed to live up to people’s expectations. The first was when I was fresh off the boat in the same era when Budi started his work—an era that has been dubbed the Papuan Spring. I showed up as an undergraduate exchange student and very quickly found myself in the middle of a series of massacres and in the wrong place at the wrong time. One of these massacres took place after people led by Filep Karma raised a flag in Biak in 1998. The crowd took brave and unprecedented action by flying the Morning Star flag for the first time in forty years. But after the flag was aloft they waited for some sort of external recognition. I later learned that there were rumors circulating among the crowd about the immanent arrival of the UN or Amnesty International, even Jesus or CNN journalists.

Different versions of the story had varying degrees of realism attached to them. For example, the UN did have a delegation in Jakarta at that very moment, but it was headed to East Timor where there were other protests happening. The hopes of this crowd, waiting under a flag, got fixated on an ocean vessel that was about to arrive. I happened to be on that ship. I was one of two white people on that ship—the other one being my travel partner, a Belgian entomologist. When the ship docked, there was this palpable sense of possibility and excitement. People were waving banners and running throughout the ship as it was docking, searching inside for journalists or Amnesty International activists. Instead, they found me at age 21, and I watched as their expensive dreams turned into palpable disappointment. When I chatted with some of the protestors while making my way to the harbour I heard that they were terrified of what might come next. I was basically waylaid on the island of Biak for three days. The next morning at dawn the Indonesian military, navy and police surrounded these protestors, they started shooting into the crowd. Upwards of one hundred and fifty people were killed. I could see the boats that took survivors out to sea and dumped them overboard to drown.

In that moment, there was a failure. I couldn't live up to the expectations of the crowd in the moment. But encountering their amazing dreams, the ways they were probing the field of historical possibility, looking for an opening, and hearing about the spectacular violence that followed, was what prompted me to write this book. It took me almost fifteen years from that event, but I've finally been able to write about what happened.

The other spectacular failure was a more personal one during a going away party a friend had thrown for me after I completed my PhD research. I thought I was done and was feeling really good about myself after doing three hundred and eighty-five interviews. This guy whom I had never met before showed up at my party, saying he was with the government's human rights commission. It turned out that this unexpected guest had done his undergraduate thesis on shamans in Wasior, a place I had just visited on a research trip. While in Wasior I had wanted to interview shamans, or, as they are referred to in Papuan Creole, "the old people." But I didn't have time to interview the shamans. At that point there was an intense police operation going on in Wasior. Villages were being raided, and bodies had been dismembered. At my going away party I thought, "Perfect, I'll interview this guy about the shamans, and that will complete this piece of my research." At that point, I was reading a lot of Michael Taussig, studying the miasma of terror in Wasior, a phantasmagoria of shadows where it didn't really matter whether stories were true or not. I was focused on the cultural dynamics of terror, how it worked, and how it was reproduced.

When I asked him for an interview, I framed it like all of the other interviews I had done. I said that I would keep his name anonymous, using standard conventions for protecting sources. In response he said, "Hell no! If you are going to interview me, I want you to name me, and I want you to produce strong knowledge that is not this 'miasma of terror.' I want you to produce the sort of knowledge that will travel to Congress." He also said, "Don't use your data as a pillow. Don't use these interviews as an opportunity just for professional advancement. I want you to make knowledge in a way that helps my human rights struggle." He is the one that prompted me to publish a story in *The Sunday Times* of London about the violence in Wasior. But ultimately this story also failed to change anything. It was a momentary blip on the world's radar. Business continued as usual.

Incidentally, the human rights official who I wanted to interview had worked for two years compiling a dossier on human rights abuses in Wasior. Eventually he took this dossier to Indonesia's Attorney General. This dossier was returned to him. Officials said that the data was not strong enough. That offered an opportunity to put my own failure into a wider context and to reflect on the power of different sorts of stories. I realized that even if you do get all your facts straight and even if you do take your story all the way up the chain of command in the Indonesian or US government and present policy makers with the facts, your stories are not necessarily the ones that are going to win the day—even if they are compelling, and horrible things have happened. So, this realization ultimately compelled me to experiment with the hybrid narrative forms that you can see in the book. I try to tell stories that might catch people's attention by surprising them and getting inside their imagination.

KH: That offers a really interesting twist to how one might approach public anthropology, which I think you are both already doing, at least to a certain extent. The point you raise about not using your data as a pillow is an interesting one. Could you tell us more about how you navigate the roles of activist and engaged researcher in this particular project?

EK: In addition to asking me to help them influence institutions of power—like the US Congress, the Obama administration, and British Petroleum—Papuan were also asking me to investigate how power worked. Advocacy, work as a participant observer trying to influence agendas, became an opportunity to ask how contingent alliances are constructed. These institutions were not monolithic conspiracies, but, in fact, very heterogeneous places full of all sorts of actors with all sorts of different interests. It became a chance to see how the politics of articulation, to use Stuart Hall's language, works. We built contingent alliances involving Dennis Kucinich and right-wing Republicans who, while telling people they can't have abortions, were also very good on issues of human rights. Thinking about politics as the work of translation and articulation is something I came to do while serving as an expert in action. We made piecemeal and molecular changes within institutions of global hegemony. Ultimately, however, we failed at affecting larger changes.

While doing advocacy work, a pastor gave me a net bag, and asked me to give it to Kofi Annan. He said: "Have Kofi put *merdeka* (independence) in this bag, and then give it back." I haven't been able to do that! What I have managed to do is make very minor amendments to US policy towards West Papua and Indonesia. I think that interplay of collaboration, a tactics of engagement, and imagination is what produced this book. I think when those two elements meet up that's when things get really exciting, and historical possibility multiplies beyond control. Collaboration and imagination mostly operate separately, so we can harbor these dreams about something completely unrealistic like an independence referendum for West Papua taking place in the near future, but we can also focus on more concrete things in the present. I was engaged in that process and starting to harbor some modest personal dreams. If West Papua got independence, I could move there and teach. We are scripting ourselves into these dreams, I think.

BH: The idea of reflection is, I think, very interesting from what Eben talks about. Because I am still writing my dissertation (let alone publishing books!), I think my reflection on the Indonesian narrative on West Papua is in some ways very simplistic, because it is generated by a certain type of hegemonic military narrative that follows this idea of Indonesian nationalism, including Papuans. The construction of the Indonesian nation-state, particularly the idea of the Indonesian post-colonial state, as the ultimate construction of reality is always inclusive of West Papua. In that sense, the different sides and diversity of voices are not

really tolerated, because the whole narrative is already fixed. I found that construction not only in Papua, but also in East Timor, Aceh and other past atrocities that have never been documented or acknowledged officially. They are still struggling to find a place of recognition.

Gruesome Papuan stories are, then, not the only ones available to the Indonesian audience, because they already have layers of narratives of suffering. My challenge is how to engage with this multilayered narrative of suffering, which is already embedded in the national psyche. In the broader context, Asia and wider international geographies are not devoid of similar stories either, so the challenge persists at other levels, too. Sometimes selling stories from a rights perspective might work at some stage, but I have come to a stage where the people have to speak for themselves and rely on their own voice, not on outsiders like the UN or the US Congress to intervene.

This is the biggest challenge for any oppressed society: to appreciate that they still have agency while they are constantly reminded of their insignificance. Maybe the role of academia can be to bridge unknown and known stories to make them useful in acknowledging local agency, to engage broader audiences, and to produce the kind of knowledge that allows engaging with powers that play out in local situations that of Papua. This role is really dynamic and includes doing something on the ground as an activist and transferring to broader audiences through the use of academic knowledge.

KH: Perhaps we should close on a question about “horizons,” as you frame it at the end of your book, Eben, and “reimagining,” as you phrase it in your dissertation, Budi. Could you elaborate on developments that have happened since the events we have discussed? If possible, could you also provide some resources for readers who would like to learn more?

BH: The politics of hope is the latest development spearheaded by the government of Indonesia. By virtue of being willing to talk to key Papuan representatives, new hope for both sides to redraw boundaries and maybe even to reconstruct the whole narrative arose. At least there is a window of opportunity for the parties involved to engage in dialogue. Recognizing that both sides have agency is crucial for me as an activist and for them as afflicted parties. In the case of Papua, more leverage from observers has influenced power relations in the region, especially through development aid and health policy. This has created more space for Papuans to represent themselves in these settings.

EK: In the book, I describe this transition from how the movement was moving like a rhizome at certain moments to embody the form of a banyan tree, an arboreal rhizome with definitive points and structures. At the moment the movement is rhizomorphic again. It is totipotent and can move in many different directions at any time. Any sort of thing could emerge, surprising me and other observers right now! With the absence of a definitive leader, we have a lot of concrete hopes emerging on future horizons. There are a lot of things going on and things are happening in a decentralized sort of way. There are really interesting developments on UN Subcommittees, and within the US government. There is a broader awareness that there is something here that exists. But, I really think that here in Canberra there is a center of power, which might move in a molecular way that may give people on the ground broader horizons of possibility.

Washington seems to be the center of a failing empire, and I think Washington will follow Canberra on this issue. It is also here at the ANU there is a well curated set of resources. The

papuaweb.org website is a definitive inventory of thesis, dissertations, books and historical material. There is also lots of research to be done in this area, so for readers who are in a position to advise graduate students, the field is wide open. Though it is technically illegal to work there, I myself and others have figured out ways around unjust laws that aim to restrict the freedom of movement of academics and Papuans. I would love to see a new generation of students come along to tackle these issues.

Notes

¹ This interview took place at the Australian National University on May 28, 2012. Many thanks to Eduardo Ramirez for attending the interview and doing most of the transcription.

² Maria Vesperi and Vincent Crapanzano organized a panel called “Just Words” at the 2007 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. In the session abstract, Vesperi and Crapanzano write: “Nonfiction writers approach injustice from many directions; some document and contextualize known concerns, some trace suspected leads some stumble on compelling evidence in the course of other research. In the end, however, those who follow the most difficult, structurally marginalized stories find their perspectives altered in ways that confound the retelling to their intended audiences.”

³ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

⁴ Donna Haraway explicitly uses this phrase to critique androcentric notions of objectivity. Thomas Nagel coined it before her.

⁵ See, for example, Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

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Resources

West Papua Web, an information network for those working on issues relevant to Papua, Indonesia (formerly Irian Jaya) hosted by the University of Papua, Cenderawasih University and the Australian National University - <http://www.papuaweb.org/>

Peacebuilding Compared, a project for a peacebuilding point of view on Papua and Indonesian issues - <http://regnet.anu.edu.au/peacebuilding-compared/home>

Filep Karma page at Amnesty International, page dedicated to the advocate for the rights of Indonesia's Papuan population, Filep Karma, who was arrested for raising of the Morning Star flag, a Papuan symbol - <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/cases/indonesia-filep-karma>

Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization that voices concerns with and on behalf of the most vulnerable about justice, poverty and the planet - <http://www.franciscansinternational.org/>

Asia Human Rights Commission recently compiled country reports to the UN about Indonesia (Out of 25 countries that made reports about Indonesia to the UN, 12 of them specifically mention stories of Papua) - <http://indonesia.ahrchk.net/>