Encountering Anthropology: An Interview with Martha Macintyre

Martha Macintyre and Alex Golub

The following is an edited excerpt from a 2018 interview with Martha Macintyre, conducted by Alex Golub in Melbourne. Martha traces her entry into anthropology, important personal influences that have shaped the trajectory of her career (from her early historical anthropology of kula exchange systems to her applied work with mining companies and the police force in Papua New Guinea [PNG]) and her various forms of activism. The discussion concludes with some timeless advice for students. The full interview transcript has been deposited in the Melanesian Archives at the University of California, San Diego.

Beginnings

Alex: So how did you get interested in anthropology originally?

Martha: I came from a very left-wing family. My mother was secretary of the industrial nurses’ union in Victoria, and she worked as an industrial nurse from the time when I was about nine years old. My father worked in a factory as a laboratory assistant and later went to night school and qualified as an industrial chemist. My parents were both very active in the Labor Party and as well as in the trade unions.

I started university in 1964; during this time, I had been involved in two big political campaigns—anti-apartheid and opposition to the war in Vietnam. The Australian Trade Unions organised international solidarity
campaigns, so my parents inspired me to activism. My generation was the first group of people in Australia to be conscripted into fighting in Vietnam, so I was very involved in the anti–Vietnam War movement.

Then, of course, there was Women’s Liberation. All of those things involved me at university. We campaigned to have a women’s studies subject at the University of Melbourne, when I was a tutor in history. I was also involved in student theatre. I acted in several productions and at one stage thought I might be an actress.

At Cambridge, when I first arrived in 1972, it was the height of the women’s movement, and we had a big campaign for child care, which they there call nurseries. I got involved in that, thinking this is going to be useful to me (I was pregnant). And through that, I met a lot of people who were involved in feminist studies. We campaigned and won the battle for a subject in Sociology—The Women’s Paper. Two things came out from that. One was a book called *Women and society*, which was the name of the subject, and I have a jointly authored chapter in that. The other one was *Nature, culture and gender*. Elena Lievin, a psychologist, Ludi Jordanova, a historian, Carol McCormack, an anthropologist, and I organised a seminar called ‘Nature, culture and gender’ and we invited people over the course of the year to give papers in it.

I had not encountered anthropology before I went to England. It wasn’t offered in Melbourne. I went to Cambridge with the intention of doing a PhD in history. But that proved problematic because I didn’t have much money. I thought I would get a scholarship, and I didn’t. I was going to do my PhD in the area of history of ideas, history and philosophy of science.

My husband and I went together to Cambridge and then I discovered I was pregnant. I thought, ‘With no money, I cannot do a PhD and have a baby’. I decided I’d better quickly get a job before I looked pregnant. I had made friends because I was teaching on the women’s studies course. They wanted people who had some experience in women’s studies, and I had had experience in Melbourne. I was teaching the history of feminism, and I’d met Christine Hugh-Jones, who was completing her PhD, supervised by Edmund Leach. I said to her, ‘I’ve got to get a job quickly. Do you know anybody who can give me a research assistant job or anything?’ And she said, ‘I think Edmund Leach needs someone to fix up his library’.
She put in a word for me with Edmund, and I got the job working four or five mornings a week. His library was a beautiful conservatory in the Master’s Lodge because he was then the Master of King’s College. When I went into it, it was a midden! Offprints of his own and other authors, letters, notes, lectures, drafts of articles and copies of various journals. After several months I realised that under the pile was a table! There were papers that went six feet up the wall one end and he said to me, ‘Just start anywhere and catalogue and put them into files’.

It took me about two years to catalogue the whole library. I would take things home and read them, and sometimes he’d just say, ‘Have a look at this. What do you think?’ Or he’d give me things he was writing himself. Anyway, I got more and more absorbed in anthropology, so I thought, ‘I now know more about anthropology than I know about history’. Well, after three years of doing that, I thought, ‘I think I better do the certificate course’.

It’s now called an MPhil. It was one-year intensive. It was an incredible course. You sat four exam papers: one on judicial and legal anthropology, one on kinship, one on the economy and one on religion and ritual. But there were no lecture courses attached to any of them. You just went to any lecture that appeared to be relevant, and you had a supervisor who set you specific topics.

My husband Stuart was at St John’s College where he became very close friends with Jack Goody. Jack offered to supervise my studies. But Jack Goody and Edmund Leach were at loggerheads, so I felt conflicted about accepting his offer. In his office, Leach used to have a Sarawak machete—a long-bladed sword with human hair on the end. And when I was pregnant and couldn’t sleep, in the last stages of pregnancy, I used to lie there and invent detective stories whereby one of them would be found with the Sarawak blade lodged in his head.

I thought, ‘I can’t have Goody as a supervisor’—although he did supervise me for a little while on the kinship paper, so I said to Leach, ‘Well, who should I get?’ And he said, ‘You’re not going to be supervised by me?’ I said, ‘No’. By that stage, I’d worked for him for three years, and I think our relationship was quite different. He was my boss, but there was a very easy friendship too. We’d sometimes sit in the garden behind the library and have lunch together. I just didn’t want it complicated as I knew that I would disagree with him on some things. He said, ‘Well there’s this
woman who’s just returned from PNG. She can’t get a job because her husband’s already employed. Her name’s Marilyn Strathern. Go and see if she’ll supervise you.’

I went over to the Haddon Library and got out her thesis. As I read it, I thought, ‘Oh this is terrific. I’d love being supervised by her.’ But, then I flicked to the front, and it’s got a disclaimer that her work is all her own and not her husband’s. You know, that’s pretty weird! And, of course, his thesis was right next to hers, so I opened it up. He has no disclaimer!

**Kula**

Alex: Can you tell me about how you got interested in PNG?

Martha: Well, I did the certificate course, and I did very well in it. Stuart, by that stage, had a postdoctoral fellowship. I didn’t have a job, so I said to Edmund, ‘Can I still come back?’ He said, ‘I’ve got this plan to have a conference on the *kula*, and I want you to get everything that has ever been written on the *kula* and prepare a bibliography for all the conference people’. I had never heard of the *kula*.

Alex: You hadn’t read any Malinowski?

Martha: No, I’d never read Malinowski at that stage because much of my reading had been on Africa and South-East Asia. For my major essay, I had done a history of the ideas on the debate about African models in New Guinea Highlands. I was interested in Melanesia and, of course, Marilyn introduced me to quite a lot of Melanesian material. But I’d never read Malinowski. So, I went to the University Library and looked up ‘*kula*’—because he’d written it down for me—and there was one book! It was on a tribe in Sri Lanka called *The kula*. I took it out and I read it, and I thought, ‘How are we going to have a conference on this?’ It was written in 1906! So I went back to him said, ‘Look, I could honestly only find one book and nobody has written anything about this group ever since’. He said, ‘Really?’ And I said, ‘No’. He said, ‘Except that I’ve got that whole shelf there!’, pointing to all the works of Malinowski and a whole lot of stuff on Melanesia. He pulled out *Argonauts* and said, ‘Take this home and read it over the weekend and come back and start the bibliography’. I took it home, read it, and then I walked in the next day, and he asked me, ‘What did you make of it?’ I said, ‘People don’t believe this, do they?’
He took a dark double take, and I said, ‘Look, that place has been swarming with plantation owners, with pearlers, with missionaries and traders’. You know, I’m always a historian in some ways. I said to him, ‘These people have been involved in employment. There has been pacification in the region for many years. There are missionaries everywhere. They barely get a mention in this bloody book!’ And he was really taken aback. But, he was interested in my criticisms. He said, ‘Well go and read all about it and see if people respond anthropologically in the way that you do’. But, of course, they didn’t then.

I became more and more interested. When I produced the bibliography, it was really for him. Then he said to me, ‘Oh, I’m just going to send this off to Cambridge University Press, as it is’. I didn’t even have time to do anything to it, which is why it’s sort of in this funny note form.

None of the people I mixed with in anthropology were working in Melanesia. Chris Gregory was in economics, but we hit it off personally and we have maintained that friendship from the time of the kula conference. But, in the seminars and lectures, I found the few Melanesian ones that I attended much more interesting. The one that really inspired me was Gilbert Lewis. Gilbert was a fantastic lecturer. I’ll never forget the lecture about ‘What is a ritual?’ Which is part of the book Day of shining red. He just started ambling around, demonstrating the way that people walk about as a platform or ritual space is being prepared. He posed the question, ‘How do you know when the ritual starts, when everyone’s just of walking around, absorbed in practical tasks?’ He gave us a sense of what it was like to be in a village and trying to work out what was happening, knowing that this was a ritual, but when does it start? And then, who are the protagonists and, then, how do you analyse and interpret what’s essentially a chaotic social idea?

Fieldwork in Tubetube

Alex: How did you end up on Tubetube?

Martha: Having done all the research, I thought ‘Where is the area that’s least known?’ If you look at the map in the kula book, there’s a circle around the southern part because everyone knew that it was the centre of the kula in the south, but nobody had worked there, except for Cyril Belshaw, who got it completely wrong. Well, no, he didn’t get it completely
wrong. But, he just didn’t understand that what he called *kune* and *leau* was the *kula*. *Kune* is what it’s called in the Tubetube language, and he thinks they’re different systems. It’s just the same word in two different languages, you know. He has *kune* one and *kune* two … I can see why, because you get there and it doesn’t work like Malinowski said it did, so he thinks it’s a different system.

I got to Moresby, I got my research permit from the National Research Institute. You had to apply to the province and get permission from the local-level government and the provincial government. I was told I had permission from the local-level government. In fact, they didn’t even inquire but, because I had the provincial one, I just set off, because they were the ones who were responsible for getting local-level government approval for your presence there. They didn’t want to go out to Tubetube. Who would want to? Trek out all that way. And in those days there were no fast boats, it was a day’s trip. Nobody on Tubetube was expecting me.

I went to The Australian National University to have Michael Young as a supervisor, who had worked in the region, who really knew it well and he prepared me very well for what I would need. I was used to living fairly frugally, so I wasn’t set back by any of the privations of living in a village. The thing that bothered me most was that I left behind two small children. I had no means of contacting them. Once you were out on the island, there was no radio. Sometimes, there were no boats. So, that was my main source of anxiety.

They were in Perth. I was on a grant. I had so little money. To get to Perth from Canberra was about $600, but I just couldn’t bear to go off, for me not to be there for my daughter’s birthday. I blew my money and went there and I said ‘No, you know, I can’t do this, I can’t’. Stuart convinced me, ‘You’ve done so much work on this, you’ve got to go’. I went, actually quite reluctantly. And a lot of people have since asked me, ‘Should I take my children along?’ I don’t think I could’ve taken my children there. It’s such a malarial area. I think it’s a terrible thing to do, to leave small children for months. Really, I’ve thought many times that if I could go back in time, I would not go to Tubetube. It’s very strange, as my life from that time has been dominated by work in PNG, but I now know how hard it was for the people I love most.
Alex: What was fieldwork like? What did your day consist of?

Martha: Well, when I couldn’t speak the language, the first thing I did was walk around and I’d have either Mary or Catherine or Fred—my three assistants, you know, they all have English names because it’s been missionised for so long. I’d been taught how to map. I mapped villages, gardens, paths. And I just constantly tried to learn the language, all the time we were walking. It takes about two and a half hours to walk around the island and I would just point to things and ask for words and, gradually, built it up. For the first four months, I concentrated on learning the language.

Because I had my tape recorder, I just used to tape everybody. Because I said, ‘This is how I’m going to learn the language. I’ll just listen to what you talk about. Can I turn it on? And anything you say will be on that thing.’ They used to laugh listening to it, hearing their conversations back again. If we sat down and other people were talking about something else I didn’t understand a word of, I’d have the tape running. When we’d get back, I’d say, ‘Fred, what’s that word? What’s that word?’ I did all the usual things, you know, getting family names and genealogies. I mapped the whole place, and I collected a lot of data on gardening. For the first six months, I concentrated on things that I could just watch and describe and later ask questions about. But, after I could speak the language, I started working on the historical material and the *kula*.
If you look at my thesis, it’s an historical ethnography. That’s what I set out to do and that’s what I did. I really wanted to understand how it had changed in the context of the colonial period; what the effect of pacification had been; what the effect was of things moving in and out. I knew from Malinowski that stone axe blades go out up in the north—they don’t go out in the south, as you see from Debbora Battaglia’s work. They’re still circulating down there. And, in the past, those things were circulating with mwali and bagi—items such as sapisapi belts, boars’ teeth, turtleshell ornaments and stone axes. All of those things were kula objects in the Malinowskian sense of the word. And what intrigued me was: ‘When did some things drop out?’ and ‘How come up north they’ve only got these two things while down south all of those things are called kune?’ Canoes are called kune. And you pay for them with your valuables. I was just trying to reconstitute not only what it was now, but what it was in the past.

Figure 2: Martha at Lagisuna, Tubetube, checking material collected a decade earlier (2010) with Fred Boita and Catherine Arthur.
Source: Photo by Simon Foale.
The Australian National University (ANU)

Martha: Michael Young and Roger Keesing were my supervisors. Michael kept in touch with me while I was in the field, as much as was possible in those days. Tubetube was very remote. There was no radio contact, I was very dependent on boats coming by with mail and dropping it off.

And I had the classic thing—all my field notes went missing. I had them in a box, and when I went to get on the plane, they made me put it in the hold. They wouldn't let me take it as carry-on luggage. When I got to Canberra, it wasn't there. I was so horrified that I didn't tell anyone, I just went home and cried. And I started writing.

Six months later, one of the academics, Gehan Wijewardena, arrived back from fieldwork in Sri Lanka, no, Thailand, opened his door—there's a box. And it was so funny because we were all sitting there having a cup of coffee with several other people and Gehan emerges with this box and says, ‘Martha, this has got your name on it. What's it doing in my room?’

Stuart moved to the University of Melbourne from Perth, which made things a lot easier. So, during that stage, when I was in the field, he moved over to Melbourne. When I was writing up … he applied for a visiting fellowship in Canberra and came up, and we all lived there. And that made life a lot easier for the last year of my research and for the first bit of my postdoc.

Canberra was a really interesting place to be then. Roger Keesing—I have a lot of criticism of him on various fronts, but he was someone who brought people in, had interesting seminars going. He set up this project with sociolinguistics, which brought in a lot of young scholars, to discuss and develop research based on Dell Hymes’ work. I’d never really encountered sociolinguistics until then, but I attended some of the seminars, and I found them very absorbing. There were a lot of Pacific scholars there. Marie Reay, Michael and Roger in the Research School and in my cohort, Jimmy Weiner and Wayne Warry. Darryl Feil finished his PhD shortly after I arrived. Anthony Forge was head of department in the faculties. Don Gardner was there, Robert Attenborough, Patrick Guinness, Jadran Mimica, Shirley Campbell and Deane Fergie were in the other department—all doing research in Melanesia.
And visitors came, such as Deborah Gewertz and Fred Errington. So, you really felt a buzz of ideas around gender and issues of Pacific ethnography. Similarly, because at that stage, there were other people doing PhDs, I had people to talk to who I found interesting. Later, when I graduated, there was another crop who I was in touch with all the time as they were doing their PhDs. Chris Ballard, John Burton, Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas. Exchange was a really important topic, the networks of exchange and, increasingly, people in both history and anthropology were studying the effects of colonisation on Melanesian economies. Because I had taken a historical approach to the *kula* exchange system, I found that the archaeologists there were interested in my research. It was a fantastic Archaeology Department, with Jack Golson, Jim Allen; Chris Gosden was there for a while and other people who were interested in the exchange of material objects and migration in Melanesia. You always had people feeding new ideas into your own work.

**PhD Thesis**

**Alex:** Could you tell me a little bit about what your thesis was about? You said it was a historical approach to *kula*.

**Martha:** I was interested in the *kula* because of the ways it embodied values placed on specific material objects. I kept thinking, ‘How did these objects, which are shells, have so much other meaning once they are transformed?’

My hypothesis before I went was that whatever Malinowski saw in his fieldwork, in the early twentieth century, was not an enduring tradition. It had to have been utterly transformed by pacification, by missions, by the imposition of colonial government and by the changed economy. Because he has very little about the changed economy. You know, it’s just on the side. Oh, there are these pearlers there, and people give Hancock [G. F. B. Hancock] pearls for money, and goods, and *kula* shells and all this sort of stuff. And it doesn’t get drawn into his analysis at all. Then I realised I had a predecessor, J. P. Singh Uberoi, who made a very similar argument about the effects of pacification. I still think he is absolutely right in his reinterpretation of the *kula* in terms of the political changes that occurred in the context of pacification and the imposition of colonial rule. So, that was what I wanted to do, was to look at the effects of social and economic change on the *kula* system and, in so doing, perhaps, try
to do some reconstruction. Well, as you can imagine, this was somewhat iconoclastic. Malinowski was just appalled at any kind of conjectural history, as he called it.

But, I thought, I will at least be able to talk, at that stage, to old people who might recall stages in the economic changes and discuss what they saw. I concentrated on what was within living memory, although I also had some conjectures about the changes that had occurred prior to this. When I was doing the bibliography of the kula and at the first kula conference, we realised that although Seligman and Malinowski both designate Tubetube as the southern major axis, this tiny little island was very odd. Why would such a minute place be so important as the route, the southern route? That interested me, because I knew from the reading I’d done that Tubetube was one of the first places, after Dobu, that was missionised.

That intrigued me too. There was a long history of the missionaries being there. As I read all the government reports, I also realised that it had experienced interventionist government control, because Tubetube people were seen as warlike, which they were. I had that kind of historical dimension, that people should look at ethnography through a historical lens, take into account the effects of colonisation. This is not considered very strange now but, in 1979, it was viewed with some suspicion. I remember there was a debate of who could possibly examine my thesis because it wasn’t really anthropology. Donald Denoon was one of my examiners because of that.

**Alex:** Was Michael Young’s approach influential on you or maybe your approach was influential on him? How did he fit into this?

**Martha:** Michael Young was very encouraging of it, but he hadn’t published very much of that stuff at that stage. I think we influenced each other. He agreed with me that, yes, historical change is very important. And a lot of people would now agree, but, then, how you studied it and how you inserted, or enmeshed, sources of different types: literature, and memoirs, and government reports—what Tubetube people were up to. Just what kind of value did you place on it? And there was much more scepticism and antagonism. At the second kula conference in Charlottesville, Nancy Munn was scathing in her criticism of any anthropological ‘reconstruction’ and insisted that there would be no available data on Gawa anyhow.
John Barker’s work was thought about similarly. I remember when he contacted me about contributing to a piece he was doing on religion in Oceania. He said there were so few people who talked about the fact that there were churches in every village. They would just ignore them. Or schools in every village. And the view that people weren’t really Christian, whatever that might mean, was very strong. It came out in Mimi Kahn’s work—because they didn’t seem to be conventionally Christian, it must be a veneer. She called them Sunday Christians, Monday sorcerers.

Whereas, when I was there, well, I suppose I had expected them to be Christians, having been the second place in Milne Bay to have a resident missionary. In fact, when I got there, I found out that the missionaries had left very soon after the station was built because they all started dying of malaria. They had a very peculiar form of Christianity, which now, because I’ve written about it, I gather upsets the local—some of the more educated—Tubetube people. Some of them went across to Bunama, to Normanby Island, where the mission school was based, and learned to speak English and to become good Christians and pastors. For a while, there were Samoans on the island, Samoans and Rarotongans, missionaries. But, it was not quite the kind of total immersion that the Dobuans had had in Wesleyan Christianity. It was quite intriguing. I haven’t written a lot about that, partly because I realised now that it’s much more sensitive now even than when I was there. The only books they had in their own language, which they used to teach people to write in their own language, were the hymn book, a sort of abbreviated version of Bunyan’s *The pilgrim’s progress* and the *Gospel of Saint Luke*.

I suppose the religious thing turned out to be quite different from the way I had expected. I thought it would be much more institutionalised, much more recognisably Wesleyan. I’d read a lot about the Wesleyan Church in New Ireland and other places in PNG, and I expected it to be like that, and it wasn’t. It was local, very idiosyncratic. My argument about the transformation of the *kula* was messier than I had hoped. I still feel there are some problems there that I haven’t solved but, in effect, I would say, I would almost say now that the *kula* didn’t exist before colonisation. I wouldn’t have dared say that then. I remember sitting with Roger once and saying, ‘I think perhaps I should write my thesis referring to this system as it’s referred to, as *kune* and *leau*, in Tubetube, and never mention *kula*. And see if people twig to the fact that this was the *kula*.’
Because I found that *kula* valuables were used in so many other more contexts than I had known, and remain constantly in use, going in and out of the *kula* ring, my image of the *kula* is entirely different from Malinowski’s.

**ANU Postdoctorate**

**Martha:** Roger said I could get into the Gender Relations in Melanesia project if I finished my thesis six months early. Its aim was to be a kind of discussion that would produce new material on gender. It was based in the Research School of Pacific Studies, as it was then. It was a brainchild of Roger Keesing.

I wrote like a demon and finished it in time to be in on the beginning. Marilyn Strathern was the person chosen to be the leading light in that project. Margaret Jolly was also a postdoc, and me, and various other people, who came and went as visitors. Anyway, that was a real buzz, because I guess it was a time when the whole debate about women, anthropology, the influence of Western feminism on ways of viewing all academic disciplines, were in question. It was a really exciting project. Lots of seminars and discussions.

The book that came out from it was called *Dealing with inequality*, that Marilyn edited. That was the result of a very interesting series of discussions and seminars, where each of us gave something related to the theme: ‘What is inequality and what is gender inequality?’ All the time I was involved in that I was really inspired: ‘This is it!’ I think that was the time when I really got excited about anthropology being a very dynamic, changing discipline, in a way that I never felt about history. You know, history is different, history builds. You don’t get these dramatic turns. It also provided me with the opportunity to learn how to supervise, as my first three supervisions were when I was a young postdoc. And when you’ve got a lot of time like that and you’re intellectually engaged yourself, it is quite a good thing to be engaged with other people’s work. I was the co-supervisor for Jim Fingleton, who wrote on Tolai, Maureen McKenzie and Klaus Neumann.

I moved back to Melbourne and in 1985 was appointed to a lectureship at La Trobe University. From that time on, I started doing occasional consultancies. By that time, things were getting tight financially at
La Trobe, so funding for research was nil. I wanted to get back to PNG, and I thought, ‘Oh, this will get me back into the field’. So, I did the Misima work. I moved to Melbourne University in 1998.

**Activism**

**Martha:** My activism has been kind of sporadic. On women’s issues, I’ve always had some commitment and involvement. For example, I was very involved with the women’s movement here, before England. For many years, it was the movement for gun control. I was involved with it because I met a young bank teller who had been completely traumatised by being held up at gunpoint and having someone holding a gun to his head. And I asked myself: ‘What kind of country is it, that I can just get a gun and walk into a bank, for heaven’s sake?’

The longest political campaign that I was involved with was to do with the post-de-institutionalisation of mentally ill people, which, in Australia as in other countries, had many disastrous side effects. They are put out on the street. The park that we went walking in used to house the big mental hospital. And I think quite literally, they just said, ‘Well, you’re not in here anymore’ to people who had been there for many, many years. All around this area here, you would encounter people who really couldn’t function in the world. The mentally ill and people in prison are the two least glamorous sorts of activism to be involved in.

But, I just felt so badly about it, I contacted a minister in the church over in North Melbourne and said, ‘Something’s got to be done about getting these people some housing, some proper services to help them readjust to living in the community.’ For 10 years, I was involved in what was called the Macauley Association. We were a non-government organisation (NGO). We had to apply for funding and support everywhere, to employ people and set up housing and assistance for mentally ill people to adjust to living in the community.

For the last few years, I have been a member of the Grandmothers against Detention of Refugee Children. We held demonstrations and lobbied politicians. It took a long time but, in the end, almost all the children were moved from offshore detention. Alas, many are now detained in Australia.
I should say the other thing about where my academic interests and my feminist politics overlap. For a long time, I was involved with the International Women’s Development Agency, which began as a kind of ginger group to attempt to get the Australian aid agency to look at things to do with women in the Pacific region where it gave aid. Women were never given any kind of place in aid; it was all agricultural projects for men in cash cropping and things like that. What started as a little political movement is now an independent NGO. I was on the board of that for a while too. That was a real crossover because, by that time, issues of violence against women in PNG and the Solomons and other places had become an issue for NGOs.

Misima Consulting

Alex: Let’s shift to talking about your consulting work and how and why you got into consulting.

Martha: In 1985, I was approached by EFIC, the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation, which is a commercial arm of the government in Australia. Although I didn’t realise at the time, they were the insurers for Placer Pacific for the Misima project. They asked me if I could help prepare what was part of a much larger feasibility study to weigh up and decide whether or not they would finance it and what kinds of constraints they’d put on the company. In retrospect, they didn’t explain their role very well to me. I thought this would be a good way of getting back to PNG. I did negotiate that any report I wrote—and this was the same for Lihir—had to be of value to the government of PNG and to the local people, so that decisions made in respect of my report would be clear and open.

But, I think, perhaps I was somewhat naive, because it was a fairly narrow consultancy, that one. I thought, ‘Oh, this will be very helpful, because they always stuff up land tenure arrangements and have peculiar ideas about communal ownership and things like that’. It was clear when they were talking to me that they really had no idea, neither the company nor these EFIC people, of how people held their land and what kinds of relationships they had. There was also the idea that there was land there that belonged to no one. I thought, ‘Well at least I can be helpful in that
and identify the ways in which people own or transmit or in other ways have claims over their land’. Although it was called a social impact study, the terms of reference were not very clear.

I read a lot about social impact analysis, which was very geared to Western countries, where you had lots and lots of data. You could do a social impact study at a desk in Australia. I thought, ‘Oh God, I’ll have to put in some of these other things’.

I was working with Rolf Gerritsen, who’d done social impact studies because he was going to do the economic/business side of it. Rolf was in Development Studies at ANU then. He had worked in PNG. But, he’d done a lot of research on economic development—in Ghana, PNG and in Australia. He was trained in economics and interested in the ways in which small-holder agriculture worked in developing countries, the transformation from subsistence to cash cropping, that kind of thing. He was much more experienced working with those guys than I was.

I couldn’t work out how EFIC had heard of me but, apparently, they’d asked who had worked in that region, not realising that every island has a different language. Because at least they did realise that someone would have to be able to communicate, which in fact was not really true, although a lot of Misimans can speak Tubetube, it’s not easy to work in a different language in the field. But, a lot of Misimans also speak English because of the mission school they had for decades. It was one of the early places that had missions, and they taught in English. Very highly educated group, the Misimans.

They’d also had previous mining. This was the 16th mining operation. They were not little innocent people who had no experience in mining. They have had very large mining projects there for over a century. And I felt—and this really changed over the period of my time working in PNG—the Department of Minerals and Energy, as it was then, was protective of the interests of local landowners. They really tried to protect the interests of local people. I recall my meetings with the various public servants before I went to Misima and I did believe that they supported landowner interests and conservation.

But, it was clear that, higher up the food chain, the PNG government wanted Misima to go ahead and were not really interested in the social or the environmental impact. They thought it was small enough in scale, people were very enthusiastic about it, and they were used to mining.
Obviously, fussing away about drawing up new sorts of arrangements, as happened in Porgera, at the development forums and things like that, would mean they were not going to get it up and running quickly. Those people who I initially dealt with had very little influence over what eventually happened. That kind of disturbed me, to be honest. I felt bad about that because ideas about ways of implementing processes for improved housing, standards of roads and a whole lot of things were just swept aside. Things that the mining company could do and that everybody wanted. The people wanted a big flashy high school. Rolf argued against it on the grounds that it would not be sustained by the government when the mine closed.

**Alex:** How long did it take you to do the study?

**Martha:** I was there for about three months. Some things were just checking how similar they were to Tubetube. All across that region, ideas of kinship and land, relations to land and transfer of land and property are very similar. I was confident that I was on firm ground. But, as happens in lots of places, the company wants to constantly restrict the number of people whom they acknowledge as having a stake in this process. They designate landowners, and they’re the people who they restrict their benefits to as much as possible. Which was crazy on Misima. It’s a small island; everybody is affected. And I think, in retrospect, I didn’t speak strongly enough about that. I was bullied by them into, you know, ‘But these people are losing their land and those people aren’t’.

There was some opposition from women, which I found interesting. This was because of the disruption that they remembered previously and the marginalisation of women in the mining industry, so that women didn’t have access to money. I called a meeting of women at the mission station and I was amazed how many came. The old ladies got up and spoke about the effects of previous mine projects, of prostitution in the community, of illegitimate children to miners, that kind of talk. But, everybody thought that that could be controlled, including the women. They wanted the mine, you know. They just wanted people to acknowledge that this might happen, so you control it. They were enthusiastic about bringing in laws restricting how women can dress or, you know.
The mine took on board some quite good things, such as schooling and the employment of women. Only a few in ‘non-traditional’ jobs, but at least they tried. One later became the head of IT at the Lihir gold mine. But, Placer did things on the cheap there. The roads were not well-made and fell apart in the rainy season.

I was interested in what was happening in PNG. And I also think that the best teaching is informed by research. I think that people who just do their research when they are doing their doctorate and teach on that for the rest of their life become very boring teachers. You teach what you’re studying. I have very rarely taught exclusively on PNG. But, it engages you with theoretical developments that you think, ‘How do I deal with this material?’ When you’re writing reports, I think people quite incorrectly see them as atheoretical. The theory is implicit, and it’s heavily descriptive, but you do have to keep abreast of how people are thinking about economic change, how people are conceptualising the demise of a whole lot of institutions that occur in the context of mining. I like doing research, even though, as we’ve discussed, it’s often very uncomfortable.

**Lihir**

**Alex:** You ended up doing the Misima consulting and then Lihir was right afterwards?

**Martha:** Not really, it was almost 10 years later. I did work in Australia because having children restricted travel. I tried to get back to Tubetube a few times, but it was always very short periods of time because the kids were at school and I was teaching. I did a study of El Salvadoran refugees, and I did a couple of pieces of research combining with people at Melbourne University in the medical faculty, on refugees’ experience of the health system in Australia. In that period of time, up until 1995, I wasn’t working on mining, but that was when Bougainville was happening. I was reading about it and thinking, ‘My God!’ Ok Tedi was becoming more and more crazy in terms of environmental damage, so when I was approached to do the Lihir social impact study, at first I did it with Rolf again, but because he worked exclusively on what would be the associated business development and how to work in Lihir. He dropped out, and they asked me to stay on and do annual monitoring, so I did that.
Social monitoring requires you to collect a lot of information on health and I became very interested in health in PNG. The Human Development Indicators that are accepted by the United Nations and the World Health Organization include maternal health and mortality, infant health and mortality, injuries and deaths from injury, infectious diseases and endemic diseases as well as health service provision. I’d immersed myself in the international literature when I was working out what would be monitored.

My work with refugees introduced me to another area of research. Refugees arrive with massive health problems, often psychological or psychiatric problems, but they have children, and they have to negotiate a new health system. They often have babies shortly after their arrival. I did a comparative study of refugees from Russia, Ukraine, China, Latin America, Iraq and Turkey.

With all things, you can always find someone who’s prepared to sit down and say you should read this and you should read that. I talked a lot with others who had worked on mining—Richard Jackson, with Colin Filer who was an old friend from Cambridge anyhow. John Burton taught me so much about demography, just from his own extraordinary knowledge.
of the subject and ways of dealing with it. Robin Hide is the most amazing bibliographer and generous with his time and knowledge. People can give you reading to do and advice; you kind of muddle along.

By the time I started working on Lihir, I felt doing that kind of work was more tricky, both ethically and in terms of the way in which you were understood by the community you were working with.

The other thing is that I really felt very strongly that, although people say, ‘Well you shouldn’t work with big business or whatever’. For someone like me, who in one stage of my life was a member of the Communist Party, politically I really felt very uncomfortable about working with Rio Tinto. But, on the other hand, by that time, I was much more confident than when I was working on Misima. I felt that I had knowledge and expertise that could be useful in representing the community in ways that were important. However, you have to make compromises; you can never keep yourself nice.

Alex: Well, I think you can. You just end up being an activist pushing the process from the outside.

Martha: But then you’re outside, and you don’t have access to what is going on. Your knowledge is partial and skewed. That was the thing that I found very interesting working there—I really followed what decisions were being made within the company and what information or pressure influenced change because mining companies, every day, do these extraordinary searches about what activists are doing and saying and how it is being disseminated, so they really know who writes about them, what they’re saying. This is as well as reports of injuries, accidents, oil spills from all over the world. At that stage, there was quite a lot of activism around Porgera. I would see the things coming off the fax machine on Porgera and occasionally discuss them with managers, to see what they thought of the tensions elsewhere. I would get into work early at the Community Relations office and read through the faxes.

The people who affect the mining company policy, the one great opposition strategy I felt, was PARTiZANS (People Against Rio Tinto Zinc and Subsidiaries). Have you read about them? PARTiZANS were people who bought shares in order to get up at meetings and protest about something or try to change policies by the company. They really scared the hell out of them, whereas MiningWatch and organisations like that, who get their facts wrong so often, they just get shrugged off. The big
changes and adjustments are made in London or Toronto by members of the board who make judgements almost entirely in terms of money—shareholder interest. Civil unrest, threatened lawsuits, that might change company policies for the better, but much as I deplore what mining does to the environment and to communities, I am sceptical about fly-in/fly out activists who campaign ‘on behalf of Papua New Guineans’. I saw my role as an ‘honest broker’. I am deeply suspicious of people who see themselves as ‘anthropological heroes’ for ‘their people’. Writing an anthropological monograph is not being an activist. It’s an entirely different business.

**Alex:** You really brought students through. You must’ve brought a half dozen students through Lihir.

**Martha:** I got one who did a thing on women’s health. She was an Honours student, Emma Kowal. She shifted from being a medic. She did graduate as a doctor, but she got the bug when she did that work in Lihir and is now a professor of anthropology at Deakin University. She did a really good study with Lihirian women and their attitude to birth control and Western medicalisation of women’s health. Kate Morton did a terrific study, an Honours thesis, on modern land use. The company gave us access to aerial photography, which was very detailed and so she was able to do that. Simon, of course, Nick Bainton, Susan Hemer. Susan worked on the outer islands, looking at the indirect impacts. Alana Burley, who undertook the tree study, the study of forestry, was able to demonstrate that, in fact, there was no pristine rainforest, that it had been planted. Lots and lots of things had been planted over a long period of time. A lot of people came through.

All of the PhD students got university grants. Some of the others came on money from my research fund—so, yes, indirectly, on mine money. I could pay some of them during holiday breaks as research assistants to go and do little studies. Michael Fabinyi did research on fishing with Simon. It just expanded what we could really study.

**Alex:** Did you put people up in the mine? Did they use mine accommodation?

**Martha:** I had built a little house down in Samo [on the opposite side of the island to the mine]. When I first went there, I initially thought that I couldn’t stay in the mining town site all the time, because I didn’t want to be identified with the mine. But, in fact, it wasn’t easy, because you have to have a computer and you have to be buzzing around to the court,
to the police station, to the schools, to offices. You’re not just strolling around the island chewing the fat with people—you have to be getting numbers. I used to spend some time down in Samo in my matchbox; they thought it was the funniest little house because I’d said, ‘I just want a little, tiny house’. The mining company would put them up sometimes, if there was space in the dongas [prefabricated accommodation huts], which there often was.

**Alex: And that didn’t compromise you irredeemably with the Lihirians?**

**Martha:** No, with my own students who were doing PhDs there, I’d encourage them to have cross-links with the mining company. Nick Bainton had a little bush-material house in Kinami village, where he was based. Towards the end of the time I was working there, they would usually put me up in a place that was shared with other consultants, and I would base myself there. There’s no way that you can’t be linked to the mining company if you’re doing that kind of work because you’re asking questions. And I’d have to drive around in one of their cars [because there were no other vehicles on the island].

**Alex: Do you honestly think that the work you did in Lihir changed what happened on the island?**

**Martha:** On some things, yes. The policies for health treatment and particularly health treatment for women. There were objections by the mine manager, but I got the other managers onside. There was such a high rate of gynaecological problems associated with having too many children. Cervical cancer is a big problem in PNG, and very young women in their forties would die. They lost a few secretaries, women who worked closely with them, whom they respected. Those managers got upset about it. I said, ‘Okay, we need to have someone come in on the medical team, who is a trained obstetrician and gynaecologist, to deal with these health problems that woman have’.

First of all, it was confined to the women workers, who would then have an automatic check-up. I don’t know if it was compulsory, but they were all very keen to have it. But then, of course, the doctors say, ‘We can’t just pick and choose which women we deal with’, as the women were coming into the maternal and child health clinic. Something like that is the direct policy that you influence.
ENCOUNTERING ANTHROPOLOGY

Some of the other things were indirect because you can get something started, or you can become part of another process of change that is coming from the local people, which it occasionally was, for things like water supplies and housing. You’re endorsing a process of local people and that gives weight to it. Mining companies mistake community relations for public relations, for PR, right? So, for a lot of the suggestions, I’d say, ‘This will be good PR’. That works.

Here’s one thing I’m really proud of that we did, which was stopped, but I got a ball rolling. I brought in Simon Foale after I’d been there for a year or two when I realised that deep-sea tailings disposal in Lihir was going to be a big environmental issue. I thought, ‘I need a marine biologist because I can’t tell whether the reefs are being wrecked or the fish are gone’. He worked with their other consultants, doing surveys with them too. That was another check, his own observations, and with CSIRO [Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation], the Commonwealth scientific body that the company hires to do the environmental impact studies. He would go out on the boat with them and dive and go and see what they’re doing, look at their results and look at what they’re analysing.

We realised that a lot of what local people thought were the environmental impacts were not environmental impacts. What they really needed to be worrying about were other things like acid rock drainage, which is long term and has dire effects on the environment. Often, they would be demanding roads through here and roads through there, which the mine would be prepared to do because that was a relatively cheap thing. It was just cutting swathes through forests or wrecking rivers. I thought long and hard, and I talked to lots of people. They’d say, ‘Smoke, right? Pollution.’ They’d read the papers about acid rain, and they’d say, ‘We’ve got acid rain falling all over our island’. I thought ‘If they’re going to ever have to mount some kind of lawsuit and say they’ve got acid rain, I’m afraid they’ll just be laughed out of court’. I looked into all these stories they had about what kinds of pollution there were and their effects. It was fascinating, that research. I realised it came from bits and pieces that they’d hear on the radio about acid rain or water pollution or chemicals. I realised what they thought was air pollution was in fact the steam coming from the geothermal vents. The one ecologically good thing that the mine introduced is the generation of electricity by geothermal plant, and everyone is worried about this steam that rises up.
The tailings are bad enough, but the silting up of rivers kills anything before the tailings do. It just wrecks the whole ecology. At Porgera, the rivers are really stuffed because of soft waste, which is not toxic but has completely altered the courses of rivers and the flow and everything. I got very absorbed in that gap between what people worried about and what all the scientists working on it were telling me. I found out as much as I possibly could. It was good working with someone like Simon, who was trained as a marine biologist and has a science degree, and understood it when they were talking about these various chemicals and their effects and when they're neutralised.

I thought we’re not really going to change the older people, but we could try to get them at schools to institute education that directly gives them the knowledge to understand the processes. I worked very hard with Simon to set up an education program with the Department of Education in PNG. We fitted it into the normal curriculum so that when they are learning about acids, for example, they would learn about things like the effect of exposure of rocks to the air and why that made acid and that kind of thing. And with pollution on Lihir, in particular, we saw the density of population and shortening of fallow, which people really knew was the problem. But they would say, ‘It’s pollution from the air. We’re not getting big yams. They’re poisoning the ground.’ I applied for independent funding to do research that would build on the effects of the shortening of fallow right through the island and the trees and tree cover. We did independent research that could feed back both into this education program and to a more considered and well-informed discussion of a combination of environmental and social impacts.

**Lihir Environmental Education**

**Martha:** We did a pilot project working with the Education Department, people in the school and Maureen Mackenzie. She’d been the first person I’d ever supervised. She was a graphic designer, though she’s not anymore, who had taught in PNG’s School of Art. She really had great ideas about how to produce things that would be used, so we got the school curriculum, and we designed it. We used pictures of Lihir, schematic pictures of Lihir. We used Papua New Guineans as much as possible, and we just went through these things with the science teachers in Lihir and in Moresby at the Curriculum Development Branch. This bit is for the teacher, and this is what the students have.
Then we tested it. Raising questions that students raised, testing their knowledge. You can see we used on the cover a schematic picture of a Tolai chemist who was on the island. So people could recognise him as ‘the scientist’. And this woman was a renowned gardener, we used the pattern on her dress that people would also recognise—and a very familiar, if schematised, face.

We tested it on New Ireland as well as in Lihir, at 13 different schools. And we discovered that people loved learning new words. The kids all said, ‘We want to learn the meanings of all these words properly’. We added a glossary. We were saying to them, ‘Really you didn’t have to worry about acid rain on Lihir, the stories you’ve heard refer to China’. We did that for acid rain, smoke, what is dangerous smoke, what happens to smoke and steam—the difference between smoke and steam. And they could do little exercises on smoke and steam.

We got some funding from the mining company to begin the research, but that vanished when the person who supported it in the company left. In the end, I used my own money to print the booklets, because we
thought that the mining company and the Education Department were going to finance printing the booklets and they both refused. [laughs] But, getting the cooperation of the Education Department to design and test the pamphlets was wonderful. The one we prepared on acids, that was great, that was probably the one that students liked best. Because we made it all up ourselves—they had very poor teaching on this at the local level.

Then, being an eclectic anthropologist, I had taken an interest in the traditional ways of building houses. When they were preparing the brown matting that Lihirians use on blinds, on their houses, they used noni fruit roots. And if they’re mixed with an acid, it goes brown, and if they’re mixed with a base, it goes yellow. We could suddenly get all the kids doing litmus tests and finding out what was acid and what was base. We did that in the hope that eventually people understand acid rock drainage. I see this as my sort of activism. I would rather contribute to the education of PNG kids than wave a flag saying, ‘I’m more radical than you’ or write books that are read by very few people.

We did one booklet on gardening and fertility, once again using these very famous gardeners as the caricatures or avatars. That was the one that students and teachers on New Ireland really responded to. Partly, they recognised all the things from the pictures as being their own plants. We also did one project with primary school kids that was on useful plants. They would have a day when they would bring in useful plants, and they planted them, and they made gardens with useful plants. I really felt that that was what was needed to build up, both a kind of pride in their environment, and in the knowledge that they had, because they had to go and ask their elders about all these plants. We did one on bilas, decorations worn at feasts, which of course was the most popular, and everyone had to come dressed in traditional items. They discussed it ahead of time in class, and each child came with one piece of bilas. They had to find its local name, its habitat, and how it was made, that kind of thing.

That was a great project too. I really enjoyed doing that with them. We also did some that were more scientific. We did a big study on yams, when I persuaded a colleague John Petheram, an agronomist, to look at the effects of shortening fallow. By chance, he was supervising a PNG student, Bazakie Baput. They came to Lihir and Bazakie wrote his Master’s thesis on the problems of short fallows in Lihir. I think that I used some of my funds and the company gave them accommodation. That project involved women because they were the only ones who knew the names of
the plants, how they grow and the important fallow plants. We made big posters to go in the schools on yams. We also did the same with fish and traditional fishing techniques.

**Police Project**

*Martha:* While I was working in Lihir, I was approached by AusAID to help with the design of a project aimed at improving relations between police and local communities. This was because I succeeded in getting a policewoman stationed at Lihir. Someone in the police force had said, ‘There’s this woman who is very concerned about having more policewomen’. AusAID had this large project with the Royal PNG Constabulary where they were trying to improve community relations and the involvement, conditions and status of women in the police force. They hired me to do that in conjunction with their HR consultant. I was initially asked to do the design of just that component of the project. I had to work with the person who was doing the design for assistance with criminal matters and with another person dealing with the finances because they’re shambolic in the police force. There was a person who was also like the quartermaster, dealing with equipment and uniforms and all that kind of thing. There were several of us who did that design.

That was such an eye-opener; I was really excited by that project. I went around to every province. I had hardly been out of the islands. Milne Bay and New Ireland were the only parts of PNG I’d worked in. I’d got to work in Moresby for quite a while, and then you did it a month at a time, here and there.

Aid project people shouldn’t be paid the rates they are, in my opinion. It’s kind of worse than making money out of mining. That sort of boomerang aid is something I really got concerned about when I worked with AusAID. I had no idea how it worked until then.

Anyway, I went around and I had to interview people in villages. Some of it was ethnographic, more sociological, but with an ethnographic component in the interviewing with all the women police, and there's not a lot of them. But, I chose places where there was a critical mass of policewomen, such as Wabag, Madang, Goroka, Moresby and Lae, and interviewed all the policewomen there about their careers, about problems they’d faced in getting promotion, discrimination against them in various forms.
In towns, they would get the Chamber of Commerce people and the government people and local representatives of churches and other organisations. It was fascinating. You'd have day-long meetings where they would discuss law and order issues from the perspective of ‘how do we improve policing?’ It was just the most wonderful research to do. I just learned so much about what Papua New Guineans think in that context. And, because people wanted to participate, you weren’t trying to draw people out. People really wanted to tell you things.

What they wanted varied across different places. I found real regional variation that made me puzzle over, ‘Why is this such an issue here and it’s not seen as an issue there? And why are these sorts of behaviours common in this area?’ It just presented so many questions. I like that sort of research. I like pondering.

I’d go home every night exhausted because, boy! Aid work is really hard work. You have to do the research and that night you have to prepare the report. If you get behind, you’re stuffed. We would work until midnight, every night, typing up what we’d learned during the day and what the implications were for the design. I discovered all kinds of things. A lot of people wanted to talk about things that were not directly related to anything we could do. It was like learning about contemporary PNG in this concentrated way, and comparative, and overall and just fascinating. That was why it was wonderful.

It plunged me into a lot of other research about ‘what do they do with community policing?’ It had been very big in some areas of the United States, and in some areas of Canada and in some places in Germany. I embarked on reading all this literature on community policing. The gender aspect I could quickly deal with. I was very familiar with arguments about improving women’s status in the workplace. So, I’d have meetings with policewomen. But, that was also fascinating, seeing people in their jobs, seeing the difficulties they faced and having a lot more sympathy for policewomen than I did when I started.

When you study hard problems, it’s often very sad and even very depressing at one level. But, I also think—and I faced this the most in studying El Salvadoran refugees from a horrendous civil war—you also are forced to confront the kinds of issues of representation that have been left out of
academic debates. What do you write about, as an anthropologist, when you are having to deal with human cruelty, with horrifying discrimination, with real criminality and evil sometimes?

The challenges of confronting things like, ‘What causes these problems? What can possibly be done? How can anthropology write about these subjects in ways that have any purchase, that can assist with people understanding them?’ I find those the kind of real challenges and sometimes, I’ll admit, in some of my writings, I express the frustration that people don’t want to know these things. I have written so much about violence against women in PNG and all these people who come to it as if it’s something new and some new problem that is arising because of modernity. I just thought, ‘I’m sick of this’.

And I’m also sick of people saying there’s not enough research on it. Who needs to do more research to find out that there is too much violence against women in PNG and something should be done about it? I wrote that. I wrote critical things about some of the ways that aid programs intervene in these things. Mainly because I think they don’t do the sort of research that I’ve done over the years to really understand what’s going on, to see why these violent people are tolerated and why they do it. That’s why they come in with assumptions about middle-class Australia or Canada or whatever as solutions. Finding a safehouse is a very difficult thing anywhere, and it’s impossible in a PNG village. Why do you fund a project that costs millions, that’s allegedly for safehouses and then say it doesn’t work? You could have known from the outset that was not going to work.

**Alex:** We were talking earlier about the perception that some people have that you’re not a critical voice in mining. But it seems to me that you have expressed the fact that you are a critical voice.

**Martha:** Yeah. One of the reasons I have never chosen to be or become one of the, what Colin [Filer] calls, the radical opponents of mining, is partly because I thought, well at this stage in my career it was going to appear terribly hypocritical, and I’m going to have to do all sorts of self-justifying nonsense now, I don’t want to engage in. Partly because, coming from Australia, you’re ultrasensitive of speaking for others. I felt I could join forces. If anyone on Lihir objected to that mine, I would have been behind them, to be honest. But, I didn’t find any people objecting to the mine. If I objected to the mine, it would be only as an outsider.
That’s why I worked so hard on this education thing. I’d rather engage with the Papua New Guineans and have a generation of kids who grow up being able to understand what is happening to their environment, rather than clutching at this bit of half-baked information that they gave about acid rain or water pollution.

**Alex:** The result of this police study, was it published, was there a report?

**Martha:** Yes, but that was an utterly internal thing and, of course, because you’re dealing with criminal material, I think that’s quite right for that to be private. I did a report dealing with human rights abuses by the police, and since they often weren’t charged, these are just allegations.

I wish I’d been asked by Human Rights Watch to do the police project report because they had a public report which drew on my report. They had access to it, which really pissed me off because I asked AusAID if I could publish some things from that report and not disclose names or people or places even and they said no.

**Alex:** There’d be some people who would say if you have a certain kind of material then you have no choice but to breach your contract.

**Martha:** Yeah, and never get back into PNG again and be sacked by the university for breaching contracts. I made myself unpopular enough with the police commissioner as it was, and that was seen as overstepping the mark. I was never asked to do any more work for the Australian government because of that.

**The Australian Journal of Anthropology (TAJA)**

**Martha:** When I retired, in 2008 technically, I had seven postgraduates whom I had to see through, most of them nearly at the end of their candidature. I knew the end was in sight, or thought it was. I realised when I resigned from my job that I had a lot more recognition than I had thought I had within my own profession. I thought, ‘What are the skills that I have? I can write, and I’m a good judge of what’s interestingly written.’
TAJA had been in-house, based in New South Wales at the University of Sydney, and all the editorial board were from Sydney. I thought, ‘I’ll make it a national and international editorial board, so we can send things to people, like Fred Myers for items on Australian Aborigines’. That it’s not quite so parochial. I got people from other places to be on the board, who worked in regions where a lot of Australians worked, in South-East Asia, in the Pacific, in Australia. I did come in with a change agenda, if you like that terminology.

Advice to Students

Alex: My last question for you is, what are some of the things that you’ve learned in the course of your career that younger scholars need to know?

Martha: I suppose the thing that I do push is: keep reading. Don’t get stuck in your own little groove. Read widely, not just anthropology. The other thing is a piece of advice I got when I was going into the field. Bill Heaney was teaching at University of Papua New Guinea. He gave me a pen as a present as I went into the field and his advice was, ‘No matter how ill you are with malaria, no matter what’s happened, write every day’. That was the best advice I think I got. It just forced me to think: ‘I’ve got to write every day; I’ve got to write what happened’. Because even when I didn’t have time or a lamp was out of kerosene, when I got to writing up, those notes were just so useful. Even those sketchy little things like what happened would remind me of other things that day. Regarding fieldwork, that’s the best advice that I got, and I always give it to my students.

The thing that bothers me most with a lot of academic life is the lack of scholarly humility in many people’s writings. They don’t acknowledge that these questions have been asked, in a variety of ways, many times before. It annoys me when we see these constant claims of novelty and originality. Maybe it’s from studying history, where you have to be aware of who preceded you and where you fit into that. I think too often anthropologists get an inflated sense of their own importance.