

Martha, My Mentor

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Martha was my PhD supervisor from 2010 to 2016. However, her supervision actually predates this. In 2000, I was briefly enrolled as her student at the Centre for Health and Society but, after having one too many babies, I was compelled to give up.

I first met Martha in the 1990s. She was teaching gender and anthropology at the University of Melbourne. I was studying for a Bachelor of Letters in anthropology at Deakin University. She said I could attend her classes—just to listen. Martha’s eyes lit up when she taught. She took us on journeys across the Pacific, through time and through the eyes of women.

At the time, I had already lived in Wamena (West Papua) for several years. I had a sense of what it was like to live in New Guinea. It seemed to attract tough types of white people. I found it hard to reconcile how Martha, so petite and beautiful and elegant, could live for so long, roughing it on a tiny Pacific island. Not only did she look urbane, but I also came to learn that she loves cosmopolitan food, cultivated gardens and the opera.

When I think of Martha, the word ‘brave’ comes to mind. She was brave to go to Tubetube as a young mum and brave to study at a patriarchal, snobby university like Cambridge, with two small children in tow. She has been brave to take on consultancies with mining companies and the Papua New Guinea (PNG) constabulary.

Her bravery appears in her writing as truthfulness. By ‘truthful’, I mean more than the ability to report accurately what people say, do and feel. To me, ‘truthful’ means conveying human experience and social situations in a way that is not curated for theoretical trends. It means having the courage to let the data speak—and not to filter to appease political sensibilities.

I will give a quick example of how Martha writes without concern for ideology or causing offence. In her essay, 'Police and thieves, gunmen and drunks: Problems with men and problems with society in Papua New Guinea', Martha explains that young men in New Ireland are often attracted to violence (Macintyre, 2008). She notes that for these men, violent activities may be experienced as 'exciting, even enjoyable' and valued as 'an expression of potent masculinity' (Macintyre, 2008, p. 180).

Martha points out that the problem of violence in PNG is historically grounded, rather than an outcome of cultural dislocation, in turn caused by social changes associated with the toxic influences of globalisation. While also relativising violence as something historically and culturally specific, she makes the singular point that violence hurts people, especially women and children.

Another example of Martha's truthful style comes from a lecture she gave last year. Martha describes a 'PNG native'—a word that Martha finds highly effective—expressing regret about an acid lake left by a mining company. His regret was for a lost opportunity to reap the rewards of development but not, as you might expect, for a now-toxic ecosystem.

The value of such ethnographic nuggets—that Indigenous people do not always live in harmony with their environment or that violence can be exciting—cannot be underestimated. The promise of anthropology to disrupt right-wing assumptions about race, gender and other absolutes is well recognised. Martha's work shows the power of being able to unsettle the 'truths' of the left. Running against the left-wing grain, after all, made Margaret Mead famous and, I believe, will justify the relevance of anthropology into the future.

I remember the pleasurable shock of having my left-wing assumptions unsettled when I took Martha's medical anthropology course. Martha helped push me beyond the 'beauty myth' paradigm—the theory that beauty is a myth created by companies to exploit female insecurities for profit. She pointed out that people, some more than others, are quite simply vain.

This is what I love about Martha's work—her ideas straddle binaries in social theory without trying to 'transcend them'. She illuminates cultural relativity while also advocating for human rights. Martha's work blends heart and head. This blend is also found in her supervision. She guided me as her PhD student with a perfect balance of razor-sharp intellect and profound compassion.

Martha's writing is solid, caring, classic and clear. She taught me that you do not have to speak academic to be sophisticated. Complexity comes from good data, rather than fancy prose. For example, in the paper I mentioned earlier, Martha uses her findings about the pain and destruction caused by individual acts of violence to expose the limits of 'partability'—a key trope in the dominant and relational theory of Melanesian personhood.

If the self is a research tool, Martha's truthful style communicates her character. Martha calls a spade a spade and people to account. Martha's radar for inequality and other injustices in Melanesia is not simply a sensibility specific to her fieldwork. She lives it in her daily life.

I'm sure everyone close to Martha has a story of when she went to bat for them, or for someone they know. Three memories stand out for me.

One occurred when the scholarships office refused me maternity leave, on the grounds that I had already taken maternity leave. Martha wrote them a letter stating it was against human rights to sanction a woman for her number of children.

Another time, Martha offered to write a letter to *The Age* in defence of my reputation. The director of *60 Minutes* had taken offence with an editorial I had written that exposed one of their episodes as a primitivist sham. The director wrote that I was a rubbish student and not worthy of my PhD candidature. Martha would not tolerate this.

Before I re-enrolled as her student in 2010, Martha gave me teaching and research assistant work. This helped me ease back into university. Above all, I am grateful to Martha for standing beside me for a good 16 years. Raising three kids without partner support, while doing a PhD, was not easy. One reason that I never gave up the dream to finish the thesis was because Martha herself didn't.

Thank you, Martha!

References

- Macintyre, M. (2008). Police and thieves, gunmen and drunks: Problems with men and problems with society in Papua New Guinea. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 19(2), 179–193. doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.2008.tb00121.x

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