

Danilyn Rutherford. *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 336 pp.

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Many readers of *Indonesia* know *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners*,<sup>1</sup> Rutherford's first book, as an ethnography of engagements between people of Biak, West Papua, and outsiders who become for them fetishized sources of danger, surprise, and power. Among nonspecialists in Indonesia it became known as an eloquent argument by example against epochalist accounts of national modernity, insightfully demonstrating, sometimes in considerable detail, how subjectivities and identities emerged not through "a sheer and abrupt break with the past," but as "contingent outcomes of engagements between emergent social worlds."<sup>2</sup>

*Laughing at Leviathan* extends Rutherford's keen double vision in broader purview. On one hand, it considers a wide range of engagements between people of West Papua and agents of foreign sovereignty. On the other hand, those engagements are framed as elements of a sustained critique of influential philosophical approaches to the state and state sovereignty. By intertwining these thematics, Rutherford demonstrates convincingly that anthropological orientations to the local and processual can be framed to speak compellingly and in unique ways to abstract, broad, interdisciplinary issues.

In *Laughing at Leviathan*, West Papua again figures as a region defined through its marginality to outsiders bearing projects of sovereignty from elsewhere: Tidore, the Netherlands East Indies, the Netherlands proper, and now the Indonesian state. Rutherford's aim is to show not just how those projects were imagined and prosecuted, but how, in particular situations, they produced and were limited by points of disjuncture, indeterminacy, and incongruity. Unsettling, sometimes unimaginable, consequences come to the fore when West Papuans were engaged not just as would-be objects of sovereignty, but as "audiences" for its sociosymbolic realizations. Rutherford argues that sovereignty's legitimacy presupposes such audiences, and that these witnessing entities are never fully governable, definable, or controllable by sovereign power. Agents of sovereignty discover this most immediately when they get the unsettling feeling (known to ethnographers as well) that they are being "drawn to see [themselves] through new eyes" (p. 36). On the other side of the divide, West Papuans engage this same feeling as a source pleasure and power. Rutherford searches out traces of these self-limiting lines of difference, and reads them diagnostically to show the limits of sovereign power to project successfully exclusionary categories on West Papuans.

This theme brings *Laughing at Leviathan* into close engagement with a very different, ontologically grounded political philosophy of the state associated with Giorgio Agamben.<sup>3</sup> In effect, Rutherford shows how people of West Papua have

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<sup>1</sup> Danilyn Rutherford, *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners: The Limits of the Nation on an Indonesian Frontier* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> Agamben Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

recurringly eluded the kinds of the exclusionary categories that are sanctioned by and sanctioning of sovereign power, as Agamben argues in *Homo Sacer*.<sup>4</sup> This argument hits closest to home at the book's end, in Rutherford's account of the exclusionary, self-legitimizing violence perpetrated by the Indonesian state in Western Papua in 1998 and 2002.

The book opens, though, with laughter as a thematic that is broached with Orwell's story about his time as a military policeman in Burma. Laughter can be an embodied, situated response to the strange, uncertain, or ridiculous, and then it can mark limits of sovereign power as it is performed. Rutherford also borrows cold mirth from Furnivall's account of the Netherlands East Indies to open the first chapter of Part I of her book, "Geographies of Sovereignty," and introduces also his conclusions about the limits of Hobbes's Leviathan as a model for understanding the constitution of society. Laughter like this is heard also in fictional accounts of colonial power (e.g., Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Douwes Dekker's *Max Havelaar*), but in *Laughing at Leviathan* Rutherford seeks it in prosaic records of projects of power—imagined, some prosecuted, none fully completed—in West Papua.

Chapter three develops the notion of spectral or "alternative" audiences as part of a diagnosis of Dutch fixations on West Papua in the aftermath of World War II, and its efforts to repossess the region. These were partly licensed by the region's perceived distinctness from the rest of the former empire, but such claims on territory the empire never really controlled, Rutherford argues, were also driven by the sense of an audience of European nations, compounded by the durable anxieties of racial division and sexual morality. Chapter four moves to 1998 protests by West Papuans against the Indonesian state, which are described not as protonational resistance to a neocolonial project, but part of a continuing engagement with outsiders that has millennial roots reaching back to the Korero tradition (which Rutherford discussed at length in her first book, and returns to later in *Laughing at Leviathan*).

Rutherford's approach can be seen more clearly to be semiotic in Part II, first as she considers the work of missionaries (chapters five and six), and then the Papuan nationalist movement as it has emerged since the end of the New Order (chapters seven and eight). Each chapter centers on a sociosymbolic dynamic or open-ended interplay between what she calls the "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions of sovereignty. This simple spatial metaphor allows for parallels between engagements in broadly different modalities: between fixed hierarchies and local markets, imposed values and engaged interlocutors, abstract prescriptions and concrete situations. There is also a strong resonance with uses of these same terms by Johannes Fabian in his own book on the limits of a project of colonial sovereignty in the Congo,<sup>5</sup> but, unfortunately, this parallel is not noted or discussed.

Chapters five and six describe unintended consequences of Dutch missions of conversion, and multiple uses of unfixable religious truth. Chapter five centers on Noefoorsch, the language missionaries partly discovered and partly devised as a vehicle for their unitary message in conditions of enormous linguistic diversity. Rutherford is able to present Noefoorsch as emblematic of the guiding intent and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

broader consequences of the project it was supposed to serve. Missionaries found that they could neither fully regiment use of this language nor fully understand and gauge its effects. This was because they were addressing audiences oriented not to the eternal truths they sought to convey, but the ability of concrete messages to “evoke encounters in distant worlds” (p. 133). Chapter six traces this kind of indeterminacy through some of the text written as vehicles of transcendent doxa but taken as authoritative as much for their alterity as their intelligibility.

Such dynamics, or “Signs of Sovereignty in Motion,” recurringly “conjure up audiences,” as Rutherford likes to put it, which mark sovereignty’s limits. Under a semiotic profile, the plurality of outcomes of such projects can come to the fore, and provide a context for understanding how recent, bloody moments in a struggle for independence are driven by a sense of nationalism that draws on a local sense of the power of prayer. The book’s final expository chapters are about videos that represent new versions of West Papuan nationalism.

The first, discussed in chapter seven, is the widely circulated 2002 manifesto *Why Papua Wants Freedom*, which Rutherford reads as a means for engaging outsiders in ways that resonate with her previous discussion, as an audience of outsiders who are also a source of authority. Before reading chapter eight, readers will do themselves a favor by watching the other two videos, which are available on YouTube. The first records a landmark speech by the nationalist Philip Karma, at a 2004 raising of the West Papuan flag, and the second is a nationalist mashup of the Obama Song video, by will.i.am, that circulated widely during the 2008 American election cycle.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion of these videos centers on use of personal pronouns, which are easily isolated elements of texts, and accessible for interpretation and comparison because they bring meaning and context together so transparently. Use of so-called “third person” pronouns in *Why Papua Wants Freedom*, for instance, serves an effort to conjure up a “transcendently extranational” audience that ratifies and is ratified by a national “we.” This counts as an important, wonderful example of what Benedict Anderson called the modularity of nationally imagined communities.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter eight provides a fine-grained reading of physical gestures, pronoun use, and other oratorical techniques used by Philip Karma in his famous 2004 speech, to “conjure up” a different audience of outsiders, with and for his copresent listeners. Then Rutherford turns to the strategies used to appropriate the “Obama Song” into a larger manifesto that partly enacts the kind of sovereignty it claims for people of West Papua.

*Laughing at Leviathan’s* expository chapters each began as a separate essay, but they cohere well partly because they coalesce around the theme of sovereignty, partly because they are all insightful, and also because they are all written with a certain lightness of touch. Each shows an orientation to situated particulars, but engages theoretical and comparative issues by making them parts of an argument carried out

<sup>6</sup> For the Philip Karma video, see “Filep Karma: Freedom for West-Papua speach [sic]. 2004,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul-wT09p9Bc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul-wT09p9Bc); for “obama song for west-papua,” see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MoJH5mGH7o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MoJH5mGH7o), both accessed September 10, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 1991).

by examples more than by sustained, overarching critique. Rutherford does this by allowing the sense of key terms to shift from issue to issue, and chapter to chapter. Her discussion of "audience" sometimes echoes post-Habermasian discussion of "publics," while in other places it is shaped by the semiotic tradition grounded in the philosophy of Charles Peirce, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and Erving Goffman's treatment of interactional subjectivity. But the work is constructed so that significant knowledge of these and other kinds of background knowledge are not crucial to follow the argument: by wearing her knowledge lightly, Rutherford lets readers engage more directly with situated particulars, and move among them.

This is one reason *Laughing at Leviathan* is such a remarkable work of syntheses between ethnography and social theory. Readers of *Indonesia* should give it their close attention, but it will conjure up other audiences, beyond Indonesian studies, in a range of fields engaged in critical and social theory.