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# Ethnography as an Act of Witnessing Doing Fieldwork on Passion Rituals in the Philippines

This article juxtaposes two narrative accounts of ethnographic fieldwork on the Passion rituals of Central Luzon in the Philippines. Framed from two distinct cultural and temporal contexts, these narratives highlight the limits and the possibilities of reflexive participant observation in understanding and depicting Filipino religious culture. The authors problematize the assumption that the researcher is the sovereign determinant of fieldwork parameters and local "informants" are merely complicit with the former's empirical strategies. The act of witnessing, they argue, is a fluid process of exchange conditioned by the expectations and desires of the researcher's interlocutors and the researcher's own anxieties over the academic and personal prospects of his or her work.

**KEYWORDS: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION • FIELDWORK • PASSION RITUALS • ROMAN CATHOLICISM • REFLEXIVITY**

In this article we present two perspectives on the nature of anthropological participant observation through narratives of our respective fieldwork on the Passion rituals of Central Luzon in the Philippines. These rituals recall the suffering and violent death of Jesus Christ in a way that evokes the “spectacular”—a word derived from the Latin *spectare*, which means “to see, to behold.” The scale and visceral impact of bloodied self-flagellants and ritual nailees before our very eyes stimulate our senses in a way that directly confronts our affective and even emotional fortitudes. In this way Passion rituals are as much defined by the spectator’s act of witnessing as they are by the importance of reiterating the soteriological significance of Roman Catholicism’s master narrative.

Eyewitnesses to Christ’s crucifixion are indeed crucial to the Passion narrative even in its biblical account. There was Simon of Cyrene; Veronica; the wailing women of Jerusalem; the Roman soldiers and bystanders who mocked Christ; the two criminals crucified along with him; his mother, Mary; Mary Magdalene; and finally the “beloved apostle” who stood by him to the end. It is important to recall the spectrum of biblical witnesses because doing so highlights the impossibility of nonparticipation in rituals that commemorate the Passion. The audience in these reenactments—including tourists, journalists, pilgrims, and even bystanders—are all inevitably part of the drama. The sheer presence and witnessing of the audience, be they believers, nonbelievers, agnostics, atheists, church critics, or cynics, play into a phenomenological authentication of the master narrative. In the very act of ethnographic research, then, the anthropologist who studies the ritual is, by default, an embodied participant in the reality observed. With this premise we reflect on our respective positionalities in the production of anthropological knowledge.

Through our fieldwork narratives, we seek to unpack some theoretical and methodological issues regarding participant observation by casting the spotlight on the ethnographer as a “human instrument,” one who is inevitably part of the “drama” of observation. The main theoretical investment we make in the first section is to emphasize the need for a greater acknowledgement of the agency of “informants” in the nexus of anthropological research and theorizing. Our narratives aim to highlight how anthropological insight (about Catholicism or any other topic) is determined by the *roles ascribed to us by our informants*, perhaps even more so than the observational roles we anthropologists assume for ourselves in pursuit of ethnographic accuracy. In

this respect the narratives place under the scrutiny the underproblematized relationship between “participation” and “observation,” particularly regarding the question of ethnographic authority in the fieldwork encounter itself.

In the second section the German anthropologist Peter Bräunlein shares research he conducted in the late 1990s on Passion rituals in Kapitangan, a barangay within the municipality of Paombong in Bulacan province. His research in a way reflects the roles assigned to him by his interlocutors in the field. In doing so, his narrative highlights issues regarding power, positionality, and gossip in the course of knowledge production. In the third section the Filipino-Australian anthropologist Julius Bautista reflects on his own research in San Pedro Cutud, a barangay in the city of San Fernando in Pampanga province, where he likewise found himself placed in often challenging and constantly shifting participatory contexts in the rituals he was observing.

In debates about the practice of anthropology much has been written that fetishizes the dichotomy between “foreigner/outsider” and “native/insider” (see Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1995; Borofsky 1997). Passion rituals have been examined by both “foreign” (Barker 1998) and “native” anthropologists (Zialcita 1986, 2000). Rather than rehash a polemic of empirical exclusion, we feel that it is more productive to consider the lessons we have learned from the juxtaposition of these two accounts, which, while framed from varying cultural and temporal positionalities, address common issues about the possibilities and the limits of anthropological participation.

### **On Fieldwork: Becoming Comfortable with Heterogeneity, Ambiguity, and the Production of Partial Knowledge**

The anthropologist Harry F. Wolcott (2008) characterizes ethnography as “a way of seeing.” The phrase is well chosen because it alludes to the multiple meanings of the English verb that refers to the faculties of our eyes as well as of our brains. To be sure, doing ethnography means “looking at,” “observing,” and “perceiving.” But it also involves the more cerebral pursuits of “conceptualizing,” “understanding,” and “finding out” what is beheld by the senses. Wolcott characterizes fieldwork as a dynamic interaction of perceptual faculties, such that visual, aural, and other sensory sensations cannot be separated from the instantaneous process of attributing meaning on what is being observed.

As a way of seeing, the practice of ethnography is conventionally thought of as “participant observation.” The two concepts, “participant” and “observation,” are typically considered a single epistemological act on the part of the anthropologist, particularly in the classic canons of ethnography (Malinowski 1922; Mead 1928; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Douglas 1963, to name but a few). But it is worth noting that these are two distinct acts of engagement with the realities of the ethnographic present and as such bear the possibility of friction. Some anthropologists have noted, as does Annette Lareau (1996, 219), that the act of “participating” in the social or cultural phenomena being studied can undermine the actual act of recording and documenting it. “The seduction of participation,” she says, “sometimes overshadowed the goal of participation; and the cost was a lack of carefully collected information” (ibid., 219).

This scenario is evocative of the kinds of methodological debates that anthropologists have been having for at least the past four decades. The post-Enlightenment assurance in the normativity of detached, objective recording of ethnographic data has been problematized by those who view participant observation as an activity entangled in complex knots of culture, history, and power (Geertz 1973; Rabinow 2007; Crapanzano 1985; Dumont 1978). The prominence of postcolonial critique has raised critical questions about what (mainly Euro-American) anthropologists really can know about the knowing subjects they have been studying. Western scholars studying Southeast Asians have come under scrutiny for “exoticizing,” “Orientalizing,” and misrepresenting the ethnographic “other” (Said 1979; Asad 1973; Taussig 1986). This “crisis of representation” has encouraged a focus on the ethnographer himself or herself, with sensitivity to the imbalance of power between researcher and subject.

We can derive insight into these issues through the ideas of Georges Devereux (1908–1985), who as early as the 1960s investigated the relation between the observer and the observed. Within field research, he argues, a strictly objective point of view is impossible. The observer’s behavior itself is susceptible to bias due to personal anxieties, transference, and countertransference. Therefore, the influence of the researcher’s subconscious mindset on the social scientific data is a matter of fact. The only way to proceed “from anxiety to method” is a constant self-reflexive attitude on the part of the ethnographer (Devereux 1967). Just as the quantum physicist has to know every source of irritation affecting his equipment in order to judge

the validity and limits of his findings, so too must the anthropologist proceed. Anxieties, crises of relationship, and the experience of outright repudiation in the field are not annoying disturbances of the data-collecting mission (which are usually omitted from the final transcript), but are themselves ethnographic data that are important in and of themselves.

Whether or not we share his psychoanalytical basic assumptions, Devereux’s conclusions are valid even in the face of poststructuralist and postcolonial critique (e.g., Jackson 2010). He teaches us that knowledge production is a relational process that takes place in an encounter between researcher and the other. The use of the first-person “I” is a methodological decision that emphasizes an introspective voice in the production of “reflexive” ethnography. Our main point here is to suggest that an awareness of the human instrument is not simply a matter of including the ethnographer’s intellectual and personal biography in the analysis. Rather than an exercise in navel gazing, reflexivity involves the ethnographer’s recognition of a responsibility to thoughtfully problematize and/or reformulate his or her epistemological practices and categorical apparatus, in a way that is critical of all practices that restrict the role of those he or she encounters in the field as mere “informants” who are passively complicit in his or her empirical regimens.

We have to acknowledge that a certain loss of empirical sovereignty is sometimes part of this commitment to reflexive ethnography. This commitment implies, as McLean and Leibing (2007, xviii) outline, “becoming comfortable with ambiguity, contradictions, heterogeneity, and the real consequences . . . of knowing that we have only ‘partial knowledges.’” To heed such limitations in methodological terms means that ethnographers must attend to the full spectrum of their sensory, emotional, and sentimental makeup. As Jackson (1989, 9) puts it, such a commitment may mean ethnographers should sometimes

desist from taking notes, to listen, watch, smell, touch, dance, learn to cook, make mats, light a fire, farm—such practical and social skills should be as constitutive of our understanding as verbal statements and espoused beliefs. Knowledge belongs to the world of our social existence, not just to the world of academe. We must come to it through participation as well as observation. (cf. Drum 2001, 58–59)

## **Peter Bräunlein: A Familiar Religion in an Unfamiliar Place**

The insights above have prompted me to make myself conscious about the premises of my fieldwork experience and the extent to which this involvement has encouraged the production of “partial knowledges” (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Studying Philippine Passion rituals as a German anthropologist has its limits, the implications of which have occupied my mind for quite some time. As a baptized Catholic, I grew up in the predominantly Protestant city of Nuremberg in the 1960s and 1970s. Occasional holiday sojourns in my grandmother’s family in the Oberpfalz, an arch-Catholic rural region close to the Bohemian border, confronted me with a kind of Passional Catholicism, represented in the hyperrealistic Baroque imagery of Christ’s torture and execution. This Catholicism was definitely different from the urban Catholicism I came to know as an altar boy later on.

For Germany, as for almost all Western societies, the era of the “long 1960s” was a period of rapid transformation and modernization. Through the “cultural revolution” of those days, tradition and hierarchy were generally put into question. In a climate of an increasingly valorized individualism, Catholicism, a hierarchical religion ruled by an old man in Rome, seemed to be a premodern relic and hindrance for many aspects of life. For an adolescent in Germany of the 1970s the quest for alternatives was a given. Alternatives to a grave religion full of pain, guilt, and penance weighed heavily on my shoulders. My decision to take up the study of anthropology was certainly such a quest for alternatives and an attempt to escape from the grip of religion. It was, needless to say, this socioreligious background that evolved in a modernizing West Germany that influenced my perspective on Catholicism in general and on Philippine Catholicism in particular (Bräunlein 2009, 2012a).

Decades later I found myself in the Philippines doing fieldwork on “my” religion in a faraway place. I encountered the somehow familiar religious milieu, which I had previously rejected, resurfacing as though in disguise. Holy Week in Kapitangan resembled a funfair more than a solemn Christian celebration: lots of booths with children’s toys, kitchenware or textiles, noisy pop music, colorful balloons, food stalls, candy-men, gamblers, and some bloodstained flagellants barging their way through the crowds. My assumption that ritual crucifixion might be connected with sin, penance, and atonement was wrong. Totally unexpected was the discovery that the

persons nailed to a cross were all faith healers who acted in a trance by orders from “above,” guided by the Santo Niño or the Nazarene.

What I observed in Kapitangan threw strange light on “my” Catholicism. I was pondering about dichotomies such as “Western” versus “non-Western Christianity,” elite versus folk, and about the question of whether it still made sense to systematize religion in that way. Such initial attempts of creating order by the strategy of dichotomizing were driven by impulses to distance myself from the somehow threatening aspects of my own religion. For the local actors on the Passion stage and the people in the audience observing crucifixion rituals, most of whom insist that they are “100 percent Catholic,” such dichotomies were unknown or irrelevant (Bräunlein 2012a).

In the Philippines I met Noel, who subsequently became my research assistant. He was in his late twenties then and belonged to a well-educated but skeptical generation. Even though he was raised Roman Catholic, Noel did not hesitate to express reservations about crucifixion and faith-healing practices. He was not a trained anthropologist, but could intuitively understand my distanced and analytical perspective on Catholicism. Deep in the midst of Philippine Semana Santa Catholicism, my image of a homogenous Catholic culture became questionable, and I discovered critical voices and religious skepticism. Thus, it was through Noel’s eyes that I perceived Philippine Passion rituals in a new light. Noel enabled me to detect the multilayered discourse of a seemingly predominant Catholic culture.

### **Role Ascriptions: Father of the Niño, Instrument of God, Anthropologist on the Cross**

During my fieldwork in the years 1996 to 1998 my wife and young son accompanied me, at least part of the time. The recognizable family constellation of father, mother, and child made it quite easy for the local people to assign a clear social role to me. Their behavior toward my blond-haired son of preschool age (fig. 1) offered interesting lessons about the affective aspects of the devotion to the Christ child Santo Niño and about the affective nature of Philippine religiosity in general (Bautista 2010). When his mother or I was inattentive, all available soft parts of my son’s body were squeezed and rubbed, accompanied by yells of exaltation. Oftentimes he was called Niño, and it was especially his nose and the color of his skin and hair that caused admiration and enthusiasm. Touching and rubbing the saints are common practices of enhancing intimate closeness with them, and interestingly their faces are modeled on the European-Mediterranean type.



Fig. 1. Peter Bräunlein with son Moritz and research assistant Noel Salcedo, Malolos, Bulacan, 1998



The relationship to saints is thus governed by a regime of beauty and power, but also by a longing for sensuous and affectionate contact (cf. Bräunlein 2009, 2010; Cannell 1999; Zialcita 1986).

Albeit my social role as a father was clear and unproblematic for many of my interlocutors, the profession “anthropologist” or “religionist” and the agenda behind my research activities were not. The explanations I offered—doing academic research, interviewing people, collecting data for a book—were somehow accepted, but conjectures grew simultaneously. Regularly I expressed my strong interest in Philippine Catholicism, especially in Passion rituals, and explained that my university and the German government shared this interest. Despite polite and affirmative nods, this argumentation was not entirely convincing, I guess. Speculations about the *real* motivations behind such statements arose. Additionally fantasies about the possible exploitation of my person for different purposes began to be conceived. Hence, during the years of intermittent fieldwork, different roles were ascribed to me. While some role ascriptions changed over time, and others did not, the following were the most persistent.

First, I was assumed to be a journalist. This was quite understandable because the most obvious activities of journalists are the same as those of anthropologists in the field: interviewing and filming. As public events that always draw the attention of the popular media, ritual crucifixions typically result in the elevation of their protagonists to a kind of celebrity status. One lady who was being nailed to the cross for her tenth time when I met her in 1996 (fig. 2) had something to say to the people of the Philippines in particular and to the whole wide world in general. She saw me, the foreigner from far away, as sent by God to write down her marvelously mysterious yet nonetheless burdensome and touching life story. The message was clear: It was my destiny to become her biographer and make her known in the West. Who and what could oppose God’s will?

Second, I was considered as a potential follower of a faith-healing group and a de facto arbiter of competitive disputes between them. As mentioned above, all of the persons undergoing crucifixion are healers who have attracted an entourage of sympathetic followers and associates. The ambition to increase the number of followers and spiritual capital is part of what I have called “charisma management” (Bräunlein 2010, 485–92; 2012b). To win over a white foreigner with university affiliation as a dedicated follower would definitely add prestige to the healer and her group. My obvious



Fig. 2. Anthropologist Peter Bräunlein side by side with Mother Paring, who was nailed to the cross for the tenth consecutive year in 1996. In this photograph the bodily posture was directed and arranged in every detail by Mother Paring.

interest and frequent visits were interpreted as a particular interest in their spiritual message and healing abilities. This presumption mobilized efforts to convince me of their close relationship to God and the true nature of their calling. Oftentimes the impassionate argumentation led to a comparison with other healers, and I found myself caught up in a maze of gossip. My research brought me into contact with many people and inside stories. This knowledge made me an eventual source of information that could be used against the rival. Because the competition for my attention and the claim for exclusive truth never ceased, I was frequently urged to take sides. “You can compare,” it was said, “you can judge who is really chosen by Santo Niño. You can distinguish between those who are interested in material and selfish things and those who fulfill God’s will. Do you believe me? Tell me, whose side are you standing on?” At the same time, everybody knew that I communicated with all sides. With increasing regularity, I declared neutrality for myself. Nevertheless, moments of doubt also affected my self-understanding as a fieldworker. My strategies of systematization and objectification rarely succeeded as I became entangled in ongoing subjective negotiations in the field. Only later did I realize that these troublesome experiences of conflicting truth claims, gossip, doubts, and rumors were opportunities for learning something about a hidden dimension of the society I studied. Doubt was a gift in the fieldwork experience (Cook 2010a).

Third, I was suspected of planning my own crucifixion. My research-related curiosity brought me to Kapitangan at regular intervals, and my insistent inquiry nourished this peculiar assumption. At first glance this assumption seemed apparently absurd, but on second thought it contained a certain logic. Interview questions with regard to technical details as well as health and infection risks, inspection of the hands and feet of the crucified, meticulous film documentation—such observations seemed to substantiate the suspicion. In fact there have been (and there still are) cases of foreigners who underwent crucifixion in the Philippines and whose histories have yet to be written (Bräunlein 2010, 13–15; 2012a, 392–93). In 1998 the Hudyo, the helpers with the skills to use a hammer, offered me their service. Ka Edong, chief of the Hudyo explicated: “You are here, we guess, because your ultimate concern is your own crucifixion, isn’t it? That’s why you were studying the way we perform the crucifixions in the churchyard of Kapitangan. Meanwhile you know our skills. We promise you to do a perfect job. You will never regret that.”

Edong’s offer stunned me. This moment triggered a sort of “critical experience” that forced me “to radically reflect on and reconsider [my] research project” (Shore 1999, 25). Until that moment, I would not have dreamt of this, but now I had to take a position. Participant observation sometimes demands transgression of limits. For research reasons, one or another fieldworker becomes an initiate of African sorcery, an ordained monk or nun in Thai monasteries, a Geisha in Japan, a member of a drug dealers’ gang, or even a participant in a sadomasochistic community (Stoller and Olkes 1987; Terwiel 1973; Cook 2010b; Dalby 1983; Bourgois 1995; Newmahr 2011). The hermeneutic credo of Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founding fathers of anthropology, was to reveal the emic perspective, the insider’s view of his or her world. What would be better suited for my research ambitions than experiencing crucifixion personally? Edong’s suggestion confronted me not only with the epistemological question—What is the additional value of such an experience?—but also with possible social and academic consequences. Would my colleagues or the wider scientific community appreciate that? What about the Philippine media (“German anthropologist crucified in Philippine Holy Week ritual”)? Will my reputation as an academic researcher suffer? Or will such a sacrifice in the name of science enhance my prestige? How far should I go?

### **Julius Bautista: On Being Nailed, and Missing the Point**

I echo some of the vagaries of participant observation through a reflection on three subject positions on ritual nailing, including that of my own as an ethnographer-witness and active participant in crucifixion rituals. I had decided to study these rituals following ethnographic research on the most revered icon of my birthplace, the Santo Niño de Cebu (Bautista 2010). I have maintained strong sentimental and affective connections to the Philippines, which has made the task of familiarizing myself with the linguistic and logistical terrain of Pampanga a smoother process. So although a good part of my upbringing, my nationality, and institutional affiliation are not Filipino, there were many aspects of fieldwork in Pampanga that felt intuitively familiar.

The context in which I make these reflections on fieldwork is the performance of the Via Crucis or the Pasion y Muerte, a dramatization of the fourteen Stations of the Cross depicting the various ordeals Jesus Christ underwent leading up to his nailing on the cross. The production involves

a cast of about forty local, nonprofessional actors who, upon arriving at each station, deliver lines from a Passion story script written by an amateur dramatist in 1955. The play is directed by the dramatist's grandson, a man I have come to know as Direk (colloquial shorthand for "director"), who had inherited this role from his father before him (fig. 3). The performance takes place along a 5-kilometer route around the streets of the village of San Pedro Cutud. The play progresses to a purpose-built hill, called a *buro*, at the outer rim of the village. The play is witnessed by as many as 20,000 to 25,000 spectators, who amass every year to witness the climax: the nailing of the lead actor, the Kristo, to one of three crosses affixed on the *buro* (Zialcita 1986, 2000; Barker 1998).

I began conducting formal research on this Passion play in 2010, although I have always had knowledge of these rituals from having been interested in Filipino Catholicism for several years (see Bautista 2010, 2011). But I recall with great clarity the first conversation that I had with Direk during which I was shown an old news report from, oddly enough, *The Scotsman* (McGinty 2006). It read thus:

**DOMINIK** Diamond, a Scottish television and radio presenter, yesterday broke down in tears and refused to be nailed to a wooden cross as part of a re-enactment of the passion of Christ in the Philippines. What was to be the culmination of a Channel Five documentary provisionally titled *Crucify Me*, charting the presenter's journey to rediscover his faith, ended when Diamond was unable to go through the ordeal, which involves four-inch nails piercing the hands and feet of devotees.

I was since told by those in Pampanga who actually witnessed this scene that Diamond exited amid a cacophony of boos, wolf whistles, and jeers. Others said that people had tried to pelt him with all sorts of objects, even when only a few minutes before he was showered with adulation and cheer. He left on board a commissioned ambulance, siren blazing, never to be seen or heard from in Pampanga again. Direk, who had been instrumental in allowing Diamond to participate in the Via Crucis, was exasperated and dismissive when I asked him to recall the moment of Dominik Diamond's exit: "Palibhasa nagpapakitang tao lang yun; gusto lang sumikat" (Obviously he was merely showing off; he just wanted to be famous).



Fig. 3. The cast of the Via Crucis with Direk standing at the center moments before the start of the street play, San Pedro Cutud, San Fernando City, Pampanga, Holy Week 2013

Direk's denouncement of Diamond did not come from a vacuum, but was rather thought of in relation to an existing disdain for those who would seek to exploit the ritual as a platform toward the attainment of wealth and public notoriety. Direk thought of such pursuits as brandishing one's selfhood—"nagpapakitang tao"—in such a way that puts into question the "sincerity" of those who seek to participate, engage, and witness the ritual. What he was alluding to was a certain kind of cultural theft in the act of direct empirical engagement. Immediately he emphasized that this extends to "researchers who are all very nice in the beginning but [like Diamond] disappear and never return once they have gotten [the right photo]."

Feeling implicated in this statement, I was quick to emphasize to Direk that I wanted to understand the Via Crucis in a way that was different from the many media personalities who have gone before me. I explicitly distanced myself from Diamond and, it must be said, placed myself above the likes of him and the throng of camera-toting personalities, who make a once-a-year appearance in the lives of the cast only to disappear into oblivion. Unlike "those people," I was different because I wanted to understand the production's internal dynamic—the emic perspective, as anthropologists call it—and I was willing to devote the necessary time and effort to achieve that goal. "Whatever it takes," I said, for I was after all an anthropologist.



It seemed obvious to Direk that the only way for me to achieve these grandiose epistemological ambitions was for me to “get on with it and have yourself nailed.” Direk offered to facilitate my nailing and promised to take care of me throughout the process. My thoughts raced with excitement, and yet, thinking of my family, I was unable to give him a definitive response. Sensing my hesitation, Direk took my hand and pressed his thumb firmly in the middle of my palm. “This is where we will drive the nail,” he said, with the coolness of a physician explaining a medical procedure. “You’re an anthropologist; this is what you want, right?” Feeling his finger against my flesh triggered a strange sensation that, while not painful per se, evoked a very real premonition of the physical ordeal. I fought the instinctive urge to recoil my hand and began to question whether I was indeed willing to do “whatever it takes” in pursuit of ethnographic accuracy. Direk’s action had not even pierced my flesh. And yet he had, in a most casual stroke, placed a big dent in my anthropological hubris.

Although I had seriously considered the prospect, I was leaning toward respectfully declining the offer. This was not because I was intimidated by the pain, but because I felt that my motivations would not be consistent with those explained to me by flagellants and nailees I had spoken to up to that point. Although I was brought up Catholic, I did not have any specific religious motivations for pursuing nailing. More specifically, I had no compelling reason to initiate a divine transaction—a *panata*, as it is called—for which self-mortification would be the reciprocal act. Yes, my crucifixion would enable me to experience the ritual at the level of sensation: of the nails driving through my palms, the sun scorching my body, the sounds of the crowd witnessing my ordeal. But without those religious motivations I would not be engaging in quite the same act that I was attempting to understand. In a very crucial way my physical participation in this ritual would mean that all my attention would be on the sensory experience of pain, and in that sense it would be little more than a kind of misdirected empiricism. Confronted with the prospect of being nailed, I realized that the full immersion in experiential authenticity does not, in and of itself, result in “perfect” ethnographic accuracy. In other words: I would be nailed, yet I would miss the point.

I also realized that my anthropological quest for authenticity was no less self-serving than the media personalities I was deriding. There would be a possibility that my actual crucifixion would attract interest from the academic

community who would, in truth, be the main spectators of my physical-intellectual endeavor (Wolcott’s “way of seeing”). But if academic notoriety was my motivation, nothing would absolve me from the judgment leveled at Diamond, who “just wanted to be famous.” The very epistemological values that I thought distinguished me from “those others” did in fact connect me to them.

This realization led to the insight about those we engage with as “informants” in the field. In anthropology classes I was taught to think about “informants” as unproblematically complicit with our self-initiated research agenda. Direk demonstrated that informants are sensitive to and can even be critical of our motivations for engagement. They are more than just sources of data, but active determinants of how our research unfolds. “Fieldwork,” in this sense, is not an empirical exercise that is determined exclusively by the strategic and logistic prerogatives of the ethnographer. Rather, we are just as much subject to contingency and are beholden to a large extent to the agenda of our interlocutors. This idea was made even clearer to me in the days after I mulled over the prospect. For as it turned out the parameters of my research was already determined for me in a phone call I received from Direk a few days later.

### “God Knows Hudas Not Pay”

Direk had been thinking about the offer he made to me, but apparently had come up with a better idea. Would I be interested in being part of the cast instead? He reiterated that this was a privilege that has only been granted once in the long tradition of the Via Crucis. Indeed, he was making an exception to a rule that all cast members must be a local from the town of San Pedro. A few hours later, Direk sent me a text message with more details of my role: “You are Hudas.”

I admit to have been taken aback, if only because the significance of playing Judas Iscariot was not lost upon me. Direk himself had previously showed me a newspaper article from 2006, which reported about the difficulty of finding anyone to play the Judas character (Lakanlale 2006, 1). According to Direk, Hudas’s reputation for deceit and treachery “sticks” with the person playing it long after Holy Week. There was also an oft-repeated rumor that those who played the role in the past had met with great misfortune, and even untimely death, because, echoing the popular aphorism commonly found in many public spaces in the country, “God knows Hudas [who does]

not pay.” And yet I was still eager to pursue the role, confident that it would enable me to build rapport with the cast members, to share intersubjective space with them, and to arrive at an embodied knowledge of the way the production was staged and performed.

Being Hudas in play rehearsals encouraged me to think about conceptual issues regarding the subjunctive component of ritual acts, which, as Adam Seligman and others (2008) argue, presumes that the participants of ritual can, like thespians in theater, oscillate between the “real world” of their normal lives and the “as if” world of religious ritual. In this sense there is a clear division between ritual/performance space and the real world of “sincerity.” Yet it was Direk himself who made me doubt that the Via Crucis’s efficacy was limited to the milieu of performance alone. The limits of the subjunctive are demonstrated by persistent negative rumors about Hudas, even when the person playing the role is “out of character” in the mundane realm of the “sincere” world. In the case of the Via Crucis, it is not just the cast members who willfully create a subjunctive “as if.” Just as in the biblical scene of the Passion, spectators, audiences, and observers cultivate this space against which ritual protagonists perform. The Via Crucis extends beyond the ritualized context of the Passion play such that ritual, as Catherine Bell (1992, 116) observes, is “able to deploy [schemes from the shared culture] in a variety of circumstances beyond the circumference of the rite itself.”

This fluid nature of ritual, and by extension the unpredictable nature of my attempts to study it, was reiterated to me when, after a few days, I received another text from Direk informing me of yet another change in my role.

### San Juan: The Exemplary Witness

“You are San Juan,” read the text message, without much more elaboration except for details about the next rehearsal session.

In biblical exegesis, the apostle John (San Juan) is typically known to be the same person as a certain “beloved disciple” or the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is referred to six times in the Gospel of John, and his testimony is crucial in the biblical depiction of Christ’s Passion. The Filipino priests that I have spoken to have told me that, when all other apostles had fled or went into hiding for fear of implication with Jesus, the beloved disciple was among the very few, apart from Jesus’s mother and the centurions themselves, to witness first-hand the crucifixion and death of Christ. John 19:26 testifies that Christ’s mother, Mary, and the beloved disciple were bequeathed to each other by Jesus himself during the final moments of his earthly life. As such

the beloved disciple is crucial in the reiteration of the universal expansion of the Holy Family in which he represents all of us as children of God. Moreover, John 20:1–10 records that the beloved disciple is one of the first to bear witness to Christ’s Resurrection when he rushed to Jesus’s tomb ahead of Simon Peter. Upon seeing it empty, the beloved disciple “saw and believed,” and in that sense he is a direct counterpoint to the doubting Thomas. It could be said, then, that the beloved disciple is Christianity’s exemplary witness, having several times been placed in positions of beholding first-hand the soteriological force of Jesus’s act of ultimate sacrifice and triumphant return.

In the Via Crucis, San Juan’s main role was to be the “companion” of the Virgin Mary, and as such I was to stick with her throughout the play, even as she recited her lines. I could not help but feel a certain kind of privilege about being asked to fulfill the role. Aside from being the only “outsider” cast member of the play, I was allowed to be part of the “inner circle” of the logistical planning sessions for the Via Crucis (fig. 4). This privileged access meant that I occupied a position somewhere in between that of ritual protagonist and privileged observer, which enabled me to



Fig. 4. Julius Bautista as San Juan poses with cast members playing Roman centurions of the Via Crucis moments before the start of the street play, San Pedro Cutud, San Fernando City, Pampanga, Holy Week 2013

gather information not through the meticulous recording of details but, as Jackson was earlier quoted to say, in an embodied way of *listening, touching, laughing, performing*.

As with the Hudas role, being San Juan afforded me with not only a different theatrical persona but also a different observational perspective. In embodying this specific biblical persona—one whose act of witnessing is crucial to our scriptural understanding of Jesus's Passion—I had a chance to experience all the physical tribulations that the cast went through. This portrayal involved a long walking journey through streets packed with all sorts of spectators, for whose sake I was required to stay “in character” by not taking any rest or nourishment. This experience made me realize that self-mortification was not just an act reserved for the main protagonist, who would be nailed to the cross at the culmination of the performance. The sheer experience of heat, exhaustion, dehydration, and the suffocating congestion of the crowd was in itself a physical ordeal, which cast members oriented toward their respective personal relationships with God.

Aside from the religious component, the San Juan role gave me insight into other less expected aspects of the Via Crucis. There is a competitive “industry” of data and footage gathering that descends upon Pampanga during Holy Week, in which the most sought-after prize is exclusive access and proximity to the main cast. I, like my other cast members, found myself obliging to the numerous and constant requests to be asked to pose for photographs, while having to answer the same kinds of questions over and over, being touched, groped, shoved, and pushed. The religious subjectivities crafted during the performance were just as much affected by being objectified by the audience and by the “industry of spectatorship.” In short the act of witnessing enabled me to experience how *the state of being witnessed* was itself a challenge that had to be overcome in the pursuit of one's own personal spiritual goals.

Yet there were also some very important epistemological, and indeed conceptual, issues that arose from this position, which speaks of the vagaries of the act of witnessing. I did not expect that being San Juan would place me in situations of discomfort, not only physically but also ethically and even morally as well. These were issues that manifested in the roles afforded to me by those on the periphery of the performative and religious landscape of the Via Crucis, as I describe in the final narrative.

### Dodong's *Panata*

During one of the rehearsal sessions, I encountered a man who wanted to be nailed to the cross. Dodong was a 40-year-old welder from Leyte in Eastern Visayas. Using his entire savings, he travelled alone to San Pedro Cutud after seeing the crucifixion rituals on television. He said he wanted to be nailed to the cross because he was committed to absolving himself of a grave sin, which he would not reveal.

Upon meeting him, Direk was very reluctant to allow him to be nailed to the cross, and his reaction to Dodong was harsh, even cruel. Direk insisted that Dodong reveal his sin. The conversation between them felt strangely like a confessional, in which Dodong was expected to lay himself open to the authority of an assessor if he wanted absolution. In spite of Dodong's tears of contrition, Direk was very skeptical about his motivations, claiming that crucifixion was not based on atoning for sinfulness but on *panata*—or a promise of vow fulfillment or thanksgiving. Direk was forthright: “I will only allow him to be nailed if he can show me that he understands what *panata* means.”

Desperate and dejected, Dodong turned his attention to me, assuming that, as a cast member, I would have some influence in changing Direk's mind. He pleaded with me, explaining that he would not be able to bear going back to his home without achieving his objective. This put me in a somewhat awkward position as a knowledgeable insider. As an ethnographer, I had knowledge about *panata* in the way that it was understood by other *nailees*. As San Juan, I had the connections to be able to introduce him to the right people and perhaps even put in a good word for him. To help him could well have been a simple matter of “coaching” him to say the right things about *panata*, or at least helping him phrase his own intentions in a way that would elicit Direk's approval. I spoke with him casually and somewhat tentatively, asking whether he understood what Direk had said about *panata*. Was there anything that he was thankful for in his life? To this question, he remained largely unresponsive, except to ask, again and again, if I could help him. It was at that point that one of the cast members playing a centurion (still in costume) escorted him out of the rehearsal area, in a scene that was evocative of Christ's own capture at the Garden of Gethsemane.

I did not see Dodong again until Good Friday, when I, along with the Via Crucis cast, arrived at the crucifixion mound. He told me that he had been able to get a “*nailee's* permit” from the administrative secretary at the village

administrative hall. I was very nervous for him. He was, after all, a first timer who had never experienced self-flagellation, much less nailing. I worried about whether he would be able to cope and encouraged the other nailees (all of whom had done this several times before) to suggest some “tips” to Dodong. All suggested that he think about his panata and about the significance of this act for his relationship with God. Dodong remained silent but nodded as though he understood completely what they were talking about.

As the beloved disciple stood by Christ in his moment of crucifixion, I witnessed up-close as Dodong was tied to the cross by the Roman centurions. Dodong’s reaction to the actual nailing was a fairly “standard” exclaim of pain. There was nothing out of the ordinary that distinguished him from the other nailees or signified that he was a neophyte. As the centurions left him hanging on the cross and moved on to the other nailees, I stood alone beneath Dodong’s cross, watching, observing, and feeling. After about five minutes, Dodong looked down upon me to ask how long he had been up there. Upon my reply, he asked that he be brought down, which I conveyed to the centurions, who immediately responded. Although Dodong seemed a little lethargic from the experience, he refused to be taken to the medical tent in a stretcher, in spite of the insistence of the medical crew, and lifted himself up to walk on his own two feet.

As we sat together at the recovery tent, I noticed tears running down his cheeks. I asked what the problem was, even though I already suspected that his weeping was not a reaction to the pain of his physical wounds. He told me he was sure that his nailing was sufficient fulfillment of the promise he made to God. At that moment, it occurred to me that he was expressing notions of panata that was consistent with all the other nailees I had spoken to. He said that it was my earlier conversation with him that had given him “a way of negotiating” with those officiating the Via Crucis, thereby allowing him to facilitate his own nailing. He thanked me profusely for my intervention, even though I insisted that I had nothing to do with his “success.”

Even at that moment, I reflected on the three nailing episodes that I encountered and the way they revealed the fluidity, contingency, and unpredictability of the act of witnessing. I thought about Dominik Diamond, who was derided for his lack of understanding and respect for the spiritual motivations of nailing (panata) in Pampanga. Seeking to distance myself from Diamond, I recalled that I had declined to be nailed because my

research knowledge of panata enabled me to evaluate the incompatibility of my personal motivations. Ironically, here was a tearful Dodong, who may well have facilitated his own nailing because of my privileged knowledge of panata, which, in spite of my hesitations to influence his situation, had led to the production of the very scene that I would document and subject to ethnographic observation.

### **Provisional Conclusion: Turning Around to Face Our Interlocutors**

The photograph on the cover of Clifford and Marcus’s widely cited volume, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), depicts an anthropologist, Stephen Tyler, “in the field.” He is seated in a thatched bench, engrossed in writing field notes. It seems like he has already written many pages, which he has stacked neatly to his left. He has removed his hat and draped a wet cloth over his sunglasses, apparently to stave off the heat and humidity. Behind Tyler sits a dark-skinned man with an ambiguous, seemingly detached, and even bored expression. One would assume that he is Tyler’s “informant,” although he does not seem as engrossed. In fact the man does not seem particularly preoccupied with anything at all. He just sits there, with Tyler’s back turned to him, as though he is waiting for the anthropologist to complete the business of furious note taking, after which the anthropologist will resume the business of “data collection” for which he, as informant, is both the subject and the interlocutor. In the background of the photo, barely visible, are three other dark-skinned figures: a woman holding an infant and another child staring almost playfully at the camera. They seem even more peripheral to the dynamic that binds the ethnographer and his informant. Were they consulted for their views? Do they influence the scene? Are their views important? Will the anthropologist turn around and talk to them at all? Are they, in Edward Said’s words (1979, 86), elements in a dynamic who “had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except as pretexts for a text whose usefulness was not to the natives”?

In this image the act of ethnographic witnessing seems to be driven by the prerogative of the ethnographer. Although Tyler, in the words of the volume’s editors, “hovers at the edge of the frame—faceless, almost extraterrestrial, a hand that writes” (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 1), he is unmistakably the central



focus of the scene being depicted. He possesses an ethnographic authority over his “native,” whose role as informant is clearly defined as beholden to the whims and directives of the ethnographer. For it is the latter who has the luxury to suspend time for everyone in the ethnographic frame, and it is he who has the capacity to resume it when he has recorded the information that *he* needs for *his* purposes.

The photograph is a snapshot of an ethnographic scenario that our own narratives have sought to problematize. In our experience the researcher is not the sovereign determinant of the parameters of the anthropological encounter. “Doing fieldwork” is, rather, a fluid process in an often unpredictable sociocultural milieu, whereby ethnographic authority is not possessed solely by he or she who initiates the business of data gathering and “fieldworking.” Those we have encountered in our respective intrusions into the lives of our interlocutors have hardly ever sat in passive amenability to our ethnographic directives. Rather, they have been constantly assertive in directing us to fulfill certain roles in accordance with their own priorities, often in ways that have challenged our own sense of what participant observation and the act of witnessing could and should entail. The “work” of “fieldwork” is conditioned by, on the one hand, the expectations, desires, and prerogatives of the researcher’s interlocutors and, on the other hand, by the researcher’s own upbringing, emotional predispositions, cultural backgrounds, and his or her anxieties over the academic resonance and institutional prospects of his or her work.

For Bräunlein, being a Westerner was the most influential factor of his fieldwork (fig. 5). This insight may seem self-evident or even simplistic, but the related expectations and projections determined the whole approach and communicative parameters of his research. He realized soon that he was caught up in a nontransparent web of interests. As a white foreigner—associated with wealth, prestige, and power—he evoked fantasies of participation. Despite these attributions, his prevalent feeling was one of powerlessness. Role ascriptions such as media representative, potential follower of a religious group, or potential nailee were linked to a subtle, sometimes outright, competition for social prestige and spiritual capital on the part of ritual protagonists. The ongoing attempts to win him over led to euphemistic and sermonizing rhetoric, manipulation strategies, and multifarious versions of the “truth.”

For Bautista, being a cast member of the Via Crucis was an experiential platform, which enabled him to productively access the logistical and, as it turned out, the sentimental dynamics of the play itself. Being assigned different biblical personas also resulted in shifting epistemological perspectives. As Hudas, he was confronted with the realization of the porosity of the ritual space, problematizing the distinction between the subjunctive “as if” world and the “real” sincere world. As San Juan, he was cast as the quintessential witness, in a way that enabled an embodied appreciation of the physical and emotional aspects of ritual performance. In the course of this embodiment the San Juan role reiterated the crucial influence of being objectified by the gaze of the crowd in the formation of religious subjectivities. Yet being San Juan also presented unexpected awkward insights that were not part of the research design. Being seen as enabling Dodong’s crucifixion, in spite of his hesitations, nevertheless challenged the idea that an ethnographer conducting participant observation can truly remain outside and uninvolved in the very creation and perpetuation of the reality he or she seeks to document.

Taken together our narratives point to a measured engagement with the “sensual turn” in anthropology, which addresses the relationship between sensory experience and cultural expression (Jackson 2010). In contrast to Tyler’s seeming fixation on note taking in the *Writing Culture* photograph, there are circumstances in which we must heed Jackson’s call to “desist



Fig. 5. Peter Bräunlein, at the rear of the procession, as witness and observer of the ritual of *pasang cruz* (carrying the cross), Santo Rosario, Paombong, Bulacan, 1997



from taking notes” in favor of being attentive to our other sensory capacities during fieldwork. Yet we have also learned to be mindful of the limits of a fully participatory approach. Gaining experiential knowledge through physical participation in ritual crucifixion—that is, through nailing—might seem obvious as an epistemological vista, but for various reasons it was not viable for either Bräunlein or Bautista because it would have led to a kind of empirical misdirection.

The reason for Bräunlein’s spontaneous refusal of Edong’s request had a lot to do with the emotional well-being of his young son. The boy’s vision of his own father—wearing a wig and a cast-iron crown on his head—being nailed to a cross, irrespective of whether this scene was in reality or in a photograph, left the father no option. The father–son relationship outweighed any potential research advantages. Beyond that, there were substantial epistemological reasons against a staged crucifixion. One argument draws inspiration from the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1974), who became famous for his article “What Is it Like to Be a Bat?” We are able to know almost everything about the neurophysiology of a bat’s brain, he argues, and to empathize with its “bat-ness.” In the end, however, we are unable to comprehend the subjective dimension of a bat’s consciousness.

Likewise Bautista’s declining of crucifixion was borne out of a sense of doubt regarding the epistemological benefit of full experiential immersion, given that his nailing could never be a channeling of specific religious motivations in the same way as it was for those whose lives he studied. Indeed an appreciation of the sentimental and religious inflections of their panata would not have been possible under the conditions of sensory overload—where all his attention, emotions, and energy would be focused on the physical sensation of pain. For him, having been placed in other participatory roles within the ritual space enabled a far more conducive epistemological platform to craft a productive relationship between ethnographer and informant, even though these roles were determined solely by the prerogatives of Direk.

What both episodes did point to is the need for a far more inclusive recognition of the intersubjective intimacy between anthropologist and “informant”—a recognition premised upon an awareness of the latter’s role in affecting the ebb and flow of the ethnographic encounter. In relation to Tyler’s photograph, such recognition would entail the anthropologist turning around to face his interlocutor and actively involving the latter in both the empirical and textual act of ethnographic praxis, thereby acknowledging the latter’s contributions to the production of knowledge.

The ultimate goal of the anthropological enterprise is to gain an understanding of the culturally “other.” Participant observation is basically a method of immersion into unknown cultural terrains, “being simultaneously ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the other culture” (Watson 1999, 2). Ethnographic work, then, is a paradoxical one that calls for an appreciation of “the impossibility of total comprehension while still striving to accomplish the ideal” (ibid., 5). In the end it matters little whether one is an insider/native or an outsider/foreigner. Either of these positions must acknowledge the process by which, as Brodkey (1987, 74) puts it, “each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so.”

## Note

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