

Seeing Indonesia From Behind Bars: An Interview With Vanessa Hearman

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In the aftermath of the 1965 military coup that brought right-wing General Suharto to power in Indonesia, (para)military death squads killed between half and one million alleged communists (especially union members, landless farmers, and intellectuals). Vanessa Hearman completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne on the 1965–1968 anti-communist killings and violence in East Java, and the New Order regime's struggle to win acceptance following the killings. She is currently a lecturer at the Department of Indonesian Studies, University of Sydney. In one of her current research projects, she is researching transnational activist and friendship networks born out of letters written by and to political prisoners incarcerated between 1965 and 1985 as part of the anti-communist persecution in Indonesia. In this interview, conducted in Perth, Australia, in July 2014, Vanessa Hearman speaks about political prisoners in Indonesia under the Suharto regime, their exchange of letters with pen friends around the globe, and what can be learned from these letters until today.

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Nach dem Militärputsch 1965, der dem rechtsstehenden General Suharto in Indonesien an die Macht verhalf, töteten (para)militärische Todesschwadronen zwischen einer halben und einer Million vermeintlicher KommunistInnen (vor allem Gewerkschaftsmitglieder, landlose Bauern und Bäuerinnen und Intellektuelle). Vanessa Hearman schrieb ihre Doktorarbeit an der Universität Melbourne über den antikommunistischen Genozid und die Gewalt zwischen 1965 und 1968 in Ost-Java und die Bemühung des „New Order“-Regimes, Akzeptanz im Anschluss an die Gewaltakte zu gewinnen. Derzeit unterrichtet sie am Department of Indonesian Studies der Universität Sydney. In einem ihrer derzeitigen Forschungsprojekte untersucht sie transnationale AktivistInnen- und Freundschaftsnetzwerke, die aus Briefen von und für politische Gefangene entstanden, die zwischen 1965 und 1985 als Teil der antikommunistischen Verfolgung inhaftiert waren. In diesem Interview, das im Juli 2014 in Perth, Australien, geführt wurde, spricht Vanessa Hearman über politische Gefangene in Indonesien während des Suharto-Regimes, ihren Austausch mit BrieffreundInnen rund um den Globus und was wir aus diesen Briefen bis heute lernen können.

ANTJE MISSBACH: Having just listened to your presentation, one of the political prisoners whom you are currently researching is Gatot Lestario. Can you tell us a bit more about this man and why you are so interested in his destiny?

VANNESSA HEARMAN: Gatot Lestario was imprisoned under Suharto's New Order regime in 1969, accused of attempting to resurrect the banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, *Partai Komunis Indonesia*). He was executed by a firing squad in Pamekasan, East Java, in 1985. Prior to his imprisonment, Lestario was a teacher and a member of the PKI's Regional Committee in East Java. While imprisoned, Lestario engaged in a substantial amount of letter writing to pen friends around the globe. Studying these letters reveals the personal thoughts of a former activist and teacher when facing death and provides an insight into his political ideas and how he imagined a better future for his country. Although not exiled in the strictest meaning of the word, Lestario was cut off from his former networks. Removed from his family and his professional career, in these letters, Lestario, as a representative of the Indonesian Left, discussed his ideas with his pen friends and in return received compassion and support. After his execution, his pen friends initiated a political prisoner fund to support former prisoners and their families, and in 1986, published *The Last Years of Gatot Lestario*, a book with his letters.

MISSBACH: As a historian, in your previous research projects you have relied extensively on oral history and personal testimonies that you have collected from survivors, both witnesses and victims. How did you come across the letters from Lestario?

HEARMAN: In 2010, I received a grant from the Australian Netherlands Research Collaboration scheme, which brought Australian researchers to the Netherlands and vice versa. I was looking for any material related to the PKI at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam. One of these files I consulted was a set of personal papers. In it, I found letters not only from one of my informants in East Java, but also a collection of letters from Gatot Lestario and his wife Pudjiaswati to various correspondents. I have to admit that it is strange to work with the written word, having worked intensely with the spoken word during my doctoral research. The inability to refer back to your source, your interviewee, was also somewhat novel for me. The letters are the legacies he has left behind. Lestario may also have written for communist publications in East Java, but I haven't been able to trace these so far.

MISSBACH: Why was Lestario able to write letters while imprisoned?

HEARMAN: Prisoners could receive letters and cards and there was a Christmas card sending scheme that the Society of Friends – the Quakers – organized. Lestario received one of these cards from a British couple and his correspondence with them began that way. There were also supporters of Amnesty International who wrote to him. His letters were subjected to censorship. Not all letters were sent through official prison channels, but there were helpful guards and visitors instead who helped with conveying letters and parcels.

MISSBACH: Assuming that life in prison was anything but bearable – how did everyday life behind bars impact on Lestario’s letter writing?

HEARMAN: His daily activities were often the same, which is perhaps why his letters often discussed things outside of the prison, such as his life before prison, political events in the world, and responding to the activities of his pen friends. There were, however, festive events such as Christmas, the anniversary of Indonesian independence, and visits from outside which broke the monotony for prisoners and about which he often wrote. So this is to say, that conditions in the prisons as reflected in political prisoners’ own words are also valuable to document.

MISSBACH: How does this context matter when it comes to contextualizing his writings? There might have been a number of things Lestario might have wanted to comment on in his letters, but had to refrain from doing so for the sake of his own safety.

HEARMAN: The extent to which he was able to express himself would have depended on the particular letter being censored or not, if it had gone through the official channels or not. Of course being in prison was a highly restricted setting for letter writing.

MISSBACH: What (methodological) limitations did you encounter in analyzing these letters?

HEARMAN: To obtain more of his letters and contact more of his pen friends to gauge their responses to their correspondence with Gatot Lestario would be highly beneficial. Amnesty International in France was very kind in helping me track down one letter writer in the northeast of France. I have managed to trace another pen friend in Arizona to whom Lestario wrote. It was her letters that are stored in the IISH. There are also ethical issues. The letters in Amsterdam led me to Peter and Doreen Brown – the couple of pen friends in London who had compiled Lestario’s letters into a book. When they heard that an Australian researcher was coming from Amsterdam to ask some questions about Gatot Lestario, they cut short their summer holiday and returned to London – that is how much they cared for this distant pen friend they once had. During the course of the day I spent with them, they could not decide among themselves whether I should have access to his letters that formed the basis of the book. They were custodians of a large bundle of letters from Lestario’s other pen friends as well. In the end, they copied and sent them to me in Australia, but as these letters were not addressed directly to them I would now have to seek the permission from the letters’ recipients if I were to use the letters in a publication. I would have to track down the letter writers to do this. So, it’s about dealing with ethical issues in terms of personal letters.

MISSBACH: Why do you think it is important to shed light on these letters and what can be revealed through them more generally about the Indonesian Left?

HEARMAN: Other than the letters of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, some of which were published in *The Mute’s Soliloquy: A Memoir*, Indonesians do not have access to these

letters. Letters prisoners wrote to their families are not publicly available, as many family members probably still feel concerned about disclosing that they had relatives in prison. The Indonesian Left, which was sizeable prior to 1965, was largely silenced through the imprisonment, killing, and exile of its leading figures from then onwards. This silencing of experiences was particularly true in the 1970s and 1980s, when many other prisoners were released from prison and the New Order regime consolidated its rule. The fact that prisoners were active in writing to overseas pen friends, encouraging them to campaign for and support them from abroad, is therefore of interest for the history of the Indonesian Left.

MISSBACH: Did you have a chance to meet or interview people from Lestario's political network or from his family?

HEARMAN: I met one of his political comrades in Indonesia. Unfortunately, before I had a chance to interview her exclusively about him, she is now largely unable to speak about him because of her advanced age. His wife Pudjiaswati died of cancer in the early 1990s, shortly after her own release from prison. So far, I have not been able to trace their two children in Indonesia.

MISSBACH: While imprisoned, how closely was Lestario able to follow ongoing events outside of the prison walls? Did he comment on them in his letters?

HEARMAN: His letters always discussed events outside of Indonesia, such as the nuclear arms race, Pakistan, Palestine, and so on. Indonesians of his generation, particularly those from the Left, tended to be knowledgeable about world politics, much more than Indonesians today tend to be. Also, he might have had access to newspapers and probably to television while in prison. His pen friends also supplied him with information through magazines, books, and their letters. His defense speech, copies of which were made available and circulated also outside of Indonesia, contextualized the Suharto regime within world politics and the Cold War.

MISSBACH: His pen friends overseas – what kind of people were they and how had they gotten in contact with Lestario (in a world without mobile phones and internet)?

HEARMAN: They came from all walks of life, but they shared a concern for human rights, which they expressed concretely through writing to death row prisoners. They obtained his name through the Society of Friends (the Quakers) and Amnesty International Networks. If he wrote back to one person, for example, that person might have also asked his or her friends to write to him. Sometimes other prisoners received letters but were uninterested in letter writing, and so Lestario (and others, too) might have taken over replying and adopting the writers as their pen friends instead. The pen friends were interested in Gatot's background, his family, for example, and what it was like to be in prison. Gatot told them a bit about his past, his education, his previous work as a teacher, his case, and his punishment, and also what the communists were trying to do in Indonesia, viewed through a 1980s human rights trope. He was very critical of the New Order regime. He wrote about the prison administration,

about growing a garden, reading and writing, and the celebrations that occurred in prison on special festive days such as Indonesian Independence Day on 17 August or Christmas.

MISSBACH: Having come across such a treasure, do you plan to extend this research in the future?

HEARMAN: I have another bundle of letters written by an Amnesty International member in France and a political prisoner in the same prison as Gatot Lestario, which I plan to analyze alongside the Lestario letters. I also plan to write to more of Lestario's pen friends in order to explore their motivations in writing to him. Incidentally, Brenda Capon, a British woman who wrote to prisoners in the same prison in the 1980s, has written a book (*A Sweet Scent of Jasmine*, 2006, self-published) about the friendship she developed with these men through letters. I assume there are many such letters that many men and women all over the world are storing or have thrown away. The possibilities are endless! Perhaps there are copies of letters held at the Amnesty International secretariat or the Society of Friends house in London, but I have not explored these places as possible repositories yet. One of my major research areas is on transnational activism by Indonesians during the Sukarno period, which I am working on with Dr. Katharine McGregor from the University of Melbourne. This letter writing research has some connections to that project although it obviously deals with the post-Sukarno period and the Indonesian activist in this case is highly immobile and is unable to travel and campaign directly. But the methods of building connections, adapting a global message to a local context, and interpreting one's world for others in order to motivate their action and so induce change are all common themes that this research has in common with research on transnational activism.

MISSBACH: Good luck with your upcoming research endeavors and thank you for the interview!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antje Missbach is research fellow at Monash University in Melbourne. She has written widely about the long-distance politics of the Acehnese diaspora. Currently, she is finalizing a book entitled *Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia*.

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