

OBITUARY



Sonoma, California coast, July of 2010.

Neil Lancelot Whitehead (1956–2012)

Neil Lancelot Whitehead, an ethnohistorian of lowland South America who was a professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, died on March 22, 2012, in Madison. He was born in London on March 19, 1956, to Kenneth and Irene Whitehead and was raised with his younger sister Kim in the north London borough Harrow. Their father was a child of empire. Born in India to a father from Portuguese Goa and an Indian mother, Ken founded a company that published two journals on water systems, especially those installed across the former colonies. Irene was English, and she worked as a secretary. Neil's interest in colonial encounters surely began early in his life.

As a young man, Neil played rugby, pool, and classical guitar; pored over Nietzsche; and practiced politics, especially in the movement to get British troops out of Northern Ireland. He attended Balliol College, University of Oxford, and received a B.A. in psychology and philosophy in 1977. Studying philosophy instilled in him a deep skepticism about accepted realities, something that informed his lifelong work. Through political engagement, he met his

future wife, Theresa Murphy; married in 1986, they would have a son and three daughters.

Neil remained at Oxford to pursue a Ph.D. in social anthropology, but his pathway to a doctorate encountered major obstacles. Two trips to French Guiana in 1979 and 1980 failed to obtain permission for fieldwork. Returning to England, and after recovering from malaria, he had to fight for permission to write a historical thesis, but he succeeded. He was awarded the Ph.D. in 1984. A series of temporary appointments in London, Paris, and Holland followed while Theresa worked as the educational officer for the National Union of Public Employees and then as a lecturer in industrial relations at Slough College.

Whitehead joined the anthropology department at Wisconsin in 1993. He became a full professor in 2001 and served as department chair from 2009 until days before his death. By all accounts, he was a dynamic, charismatic teacher, especially noted for his course on Shamanism and the Occult Experience (Anthropology 666). Wisconsin enabled him to fully pursue his interests in hunting and fishing, often accompanied by students and colleagues. Once he arrived in class bloodied from gutting a deer, providing an eminently teachable moment.

Whitehead's first book, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit* (1988), a reworking of his doctoral thesis, focused on Caribs as they became known to and destroyed by European colonialists. Over time, his interests expanded geographically, to encompass the Caribbean and lowland South America, and temporally, to include contemporary peoples and those known only through archaeology (1996a; Rival and Whitehead 2001; Whitehead and Aleman 2009).

Whitehead's ethnographic vision was rare in scope, depth, and perceptiveness. He simultaneously combed through early reports for ethnohistoric detail and scrutinized claims historiographically to expose, among other things, the influence of the Enlightenment and other European projections and the questionable received wisdom of lowland South American ethnology. No report was accepted at face value, yet this was not postmodern deconstructionism. By clarifying the cultural overlay of the observers, he discerned realities of indigenous societies of centuries ago, revealing a complex social world far removed from the scattered slash-and-burn peoples who somehow survived this holocaust (1994).

His holistic conceptualization of the passage from first contacts with Europeans through all the encounters and transformations that followed led to new editions,

exegetically dissected, of documents ranging from Columbus and his contemporaries (2011a) through Hans Staden (Whitehead and Harbsmeir 2008), Walter Raleigh (1997), later colonial encounters (1995, 2004a), and up to recent times (Hulme and Whitehead 1992). He synthesized major developments in sweeping overviews (1994, 1996b, 2002a) and edited a volume of new ethnohistorical studies (2003). His erudition was astonishing. He seemed to have all this material memorized and could instantly cite chapter and verse on any historic, ethnographic, or theoretical point. It was a natural step for him to assume the editorship of *Ethnohistory* from 1997 to 2007.

Two major topics developed in his early research stayed with him throughout his career: cannibalism (1984) and war (1990a, 1990b). A shared historical approach to war led to a collaboration with me to organize a seminar on expanding states and indigenous warfare at the School of American Research in 1989. Our coedited volume (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992) made clear that, around the world, the warfare observed by colonialists or anthropologists was not a timeless expression of local culture or adaptation—as anthropological theory had it—but was a dialectical creation of local peoples interacting with powerful, intrusive outsiders.

In 1989, dredge miners working in the Mazaruni River in Guyana turned up a gold breastplate of unknown style (1990c). The Mazaruni pectoral gave major support to a conclusion of Whitehead's historical investigations: El Dorado was not (just) a fevered fantasy but a Euro-refracted image of an indigenous reality (1992). He returned to Guyana in 1992, working with the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology and with Lokono and Patamuna assistants to survey archaeological sites in interior southern Guyana for signs of complexity—such as urn burials in caves—that would dispel the accepted view of the area as a demographic and cultural backwater. He found them. Seventeen years later, in 2009, he began a project with Michael Heckenberger and George Simon to excavate a 15-hectare site near the Berbice River (Whitehead et al. 2010). Dated to circa 3000 B.C.E., this is one of the oldest agricultural sites found in eastern South America. Its scale, mounds, and domesticated landscapes will become—when more is published on the site—an important part of a fundamental reappraisal of South American prehistory.

This quest to understand ancient societies of Guyana would take Whitehead in an unimagined direction, as described in chapter 1 of his masterwork, *Dark Shamans* (2002b). Within half an hour of his arrival at the Patamuna village of Paramakatoi in 1992, the local nurse arrived to insist that what he really should be studying were the Kanaima, shamans who were thought to become were-jaguars through death sorcery, physical mutilation, and cannibalism.¹ Whitehead had no more than a vague notion of Kanaima; he certainly had no intention of studying them, and there was other work to do. But unknowingly, he had stepped into a conflicted world riven by hostile networks and agendas.

The first cave to which his local assistant brought him had no urns, but there was a small vessel containing some human remains. Whitehead touched the pot and took some bone for dating. That was fateful. He quickly learned that the remains were left by Kanaima, who used pieces of victims to determine future targets. For his actions, Whitehead was indelibly marked among the Patamuna, and by Kanaima themselves, who poisoned his food. His physical condition, and growing evidence of Kanaimas' deadly intent, made him leave the area. But his struggle with Kanaima had become personal and an intellectual challenge. He returned in 1995 and 1997 to focus on Kanaima—and they focused on him. *Dark Shamans* is a harrowing read.

Yet this is no adventure tale. *Dark Shamans* is a deep inquiry into a very disturbing potentiality of human existence. Kanaima killings express a profound cultural discourse on violence, not atavistic savagery. They are performative acts of ancient sacred scripts that have been transformed in response to waves of colonial intrusions, and they mirror all the complexities of local society and politics. Even for those Patamuna who wanted to expose the killings so as to invite police suppression, the symbolically structured practice testified to the potency of their own ways. The Kanaima cult was a menace, but it was their menace, an affirmation of their culture and history, apart from and more powerful than anything of the outside world (Whitehead 2006). And if sorcery cannot be “real” by standards of science, it was as real as anything for the Patamuna—and sometimes for their visitors. Whitehead's sensibilities were permanently affected by this personal engagement with the darkest of dark, and the struggle never left him. In retrospect, the woodcut on the cover of *Lords of the Tiger Spirit*—a man locked in death struggle with a jaguar—seems eerily prophetic.

This passage into the occult commenced the second phase of Whitehead's career. All his earlier interests remained, but sorcery, violence, alterity, and the ethics of investigation moved to the fore. Assault sorcery had emerged here and there as an anthropological topic, usually in reaction to its prominence in some parts of New Guinea, Africa, and elsewhere. But it is a troubling topic and so was rarely pursued. Soon after *Dark Shamans*, a coedited volume crystallized nascent issues through South American cases (Whitehead and Wright 2004). Magical death was one dimension of a much broader engagement with violence.

Whitehead had been primed to face violence and terror early in his life by a trip to Belfast during the worst of the killing. When he later theorized it, he stressed that violent acts enact and amplify local understandings, which cannot be understood without extended hermeneutics of the practitioners' symbolic worlds, the “poetics of violence.” As distasteful as it may be to us, perpetrators often see extraordinary violence as good, even sacred, and it is anthropology's responsibility to understand that. But studying extreme violence entails extraordinarily difficult ethical and epistemological dilemmas and disputes (2009a), as were on clear display in Guyana as well as in a School of American

Research seminar that Whitehead organized in 2002 (2004b).

Whitehead pursued this interest in violence collectively, as editor of a Duke University Press book series entitled "The Practices and Cultures of Violence," through a University of Wisconsin multidisciplinary working group on "Legacies of Violence" begun in 2004, and in a coedited volume (Strathern et al. 2006). A more radical expression of that interest was his creation, with Jeff Fields, of Blood Jewel, a Goth/Industrial band. Fields did the music, Whitehead the visuals—a fetishistic mix of sex, guns, and blood spotlighting the attraction of violence (2009b). The band performed at the Children of the Night festival in Kiev, allowing Whitehead to make side excursions to Balkan centers of old vampire legends and to Chernobyl, the horror of modernity. Through Blood Jewel, he attempted to break free of the ethnographic posture of "I want to study you" and replace it with "I am like you." "Observant-participation" aimed not to explain Goth but to understand it through experience—by being Goth.

Whitehead repeatedly engaged the violence of today's world. One of his last essays countered Steven Pinker's paean to modernity's supposed peaceability by highlighting the violence that saturates the "American" imagination (Whitehead 2011b). Blood Jewel's "SpeedKilla" mixes photos of the Virginia Tech and Columbine shooters with moments from the film *Taxi Driver*, the videogame *Grand Theft Auto*, and other sexual and violent images to shock us into seeing that violence is a national fetish and that the "irrationality" of rampage shooting acts through cultural scripts eagerly consumed by millions.² He explored the poetics of terrorism (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008). He provocatively recontextualized the current issue of the military's use of anthropology. Is standard fieldwork all that different from human terrain teams or even torture, he asked, when the goal of all is to make subalterns tell us what we want to know for our own agendas (2009c)? Whitehead's final, coauthored book returns to magic and violence in a new way, reconceptualizing the wars of today and tomorrow, in which war is not limited in time or space but is omnipresent through social transformations and virtual expressions and in which technology comes to occupy the same battle space as witchcraft (Whitehead and Finnstrom 2013).

In *Blood Jewel*, Whitehead shape-shifted into "Detonator," self-manifesting his theoretical interest in alterity. He roamed the Internet, seeking out varieties of disembodied sociality, self, and agency, of deception, and of sexuality ("outercourse"). The members of radical network Anonymous were his heroes (their signature mask watched over his lake-side memorial service). The ever-expanding virtual universe was one aspect of what was probably his most radical proposition: that anthropology must move beyond the human. "Human," after all, was an Enlightenment construction, reluctantly extended to "savages" and often not shared by them, as when animals have souls and societies, ancestors had fur, and men can become were-jaguars. Today the category

"human" erodes, not just virtually but with extension of rights to animals and with machines that are becoming less distinguishable from their makers. In "posthuman anthropology," people, animals, spirits, cyberbeings, terrorists, primitives, and criminals all must be reimagined together (2009a in press; Whitehead and Wesch 2012).

These latest writings are highly theoretical, with pages of argumentation, one idea flowing out of another, expanding or contradicting a spectrum of contemporary thinkers. For Whitehead, freeing what he called "the anthropological project" from an ideology of modernity that stretches back to the Enlightenment, which also reflects and serves the cannibalistic needs of power, is our immediate challenge. These scattered articles will surely be the most influential and controversial of all his works.

Whitehead published 18 books in all, including coedited volumes, and about 80 articles. He received the 1998 John Henry Breasted Prize from the American Historical Association for "Indigenous Cartography in Lowland South America and the Caribbean" (Whitehead 1998) and the Rasputin Award in 2002 from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Center for the Humanities/International Institute for *Dark Shamans*. As editor of *Ethnohistory* (1997–2007) and the Duke University book series "The Practices and Cultures of Violence," as a collaborating author, and as a caring mentor, he actively encouraged the writing and professional growth of many young scholars.

Although his death prevented a grand synthesis of his writings, and although he sometimes stretched points too far, Neil Whitehead was one of the most original and brilliant theorists of contemporary anthropology. How sad for the field that he will not be here to participate in the debates he started and to keep pushing them, and us, forward.

A few days before his death, Neil watched a last movie with his daughter Rose. It was *I, Robot*. He is survived by his wife Theresa; children Luke, Florence, Rose, and Natalie; his sister Kim; and nieces Begum, Indira, and Banu.

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NOTES

1. Interviews with the nurse, Sago Williams, can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JF_U-0Jh1eM and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htvAoriC5jo&feature=relnfu>.
2. See <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2257789884387800897&hl=en>.

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