

## Mind the Gap: An Interview with Neil Lazarus

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Neil Lazarus is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Warwick University, UK. His PhD in Sociology from Keele University focused on the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah and lent itself to an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature, which turned into his first book *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, published in 1990. He worked at Yale, Wesleyan, Louisiana State and Brown University before returning to the UK in 1999. Since then he has published a number of field-defining works, specifically issuing from a cultural materialist position, including over 40 articles, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (1999), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (2002, edited with Crystal Bartolovich), *The Cambridge Guide to Postcolonial Studies* (2004) and *After Iraq: Reframing Postcolonial Studies* (2006, special issue of *New Formations* edited with Priyamvada Gopal). His most recent book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), is a striking and insightful analysis of postcolonial studies past, present and future that will undoubtedly shape the development of the discipline. In this interview he talks about the idea of the postcolonial unconscious, the role of the intellectual and the future direction of his own work. I began by inviting him to chart his intellectual development from *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* to *The Postcolonial Unconscious*.

NL: When I was reading African fiction in the 1970s, before I left South Africa, it was [Ayi Kwei] Armah's novel [*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*] that really appealed to me. It came out in '68 and I read it in the early 70s, a couple of years later, and I remember being haunted by the question asked in the middle of chapter 6: 'How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders?' (80). I was particularly struck by that question because of course in the South African context we were still attempting to combat apartheid; so the idea that, for Armah, the promised future had already turned stale was quite hard to take on board. He was already beginning to compare the post-independence leaders with the older collaborationist or elitist forms of leadership that he saw as being the blight of the continent—and that was very difficult for me to get my head around. In the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa the future was always viewed in a very positive sense, and yet here was a writer from elsewhere on the continent who was arguing that the future had come and that it was a graveyard. When I was at university in Johannesburg in the 70s, there

was a close focus on South African political developments but not enough consideration of political debates and developments elsewhere in the continent. It always seemed to me that one of the things that South African intellectuals ought to be doing was looking at what was happening and what was being talked about elsewhere in Africa: in this context Armah's writings provided a lot of food for thought.

It has been interesting in recent years, particularly after apartheid, to see the way in which [Frantz] Fanon, who obviously is very important to Armah, has been taken up precisely in that context—with reference to 'the pitfalls of national consciousness'—[by] radical South African writers and scholars. In my first book I was trying to grapple with the ideological horizons of writers and politico-intellectuals generally who had been radicalised by the anti-colonial movement, but who then were trying to take stock of what Basil Davidson (1983) calls the set-backs of independence in the first few years. Armah is in many ways the most radical—if one thinks in terms of the combination of politics and the *form* of his writing (certainly he has proved to be the most unassimilable, the *enfant terrible*)—of that first generation of postcolonial African writers. I took his work as being symptomatic, or representative, which may have been an exaggeration, because he was very extreme. But certainly, the question of the failures of leadership was something that African writers east, west, north and south all seemed to be engaging with—Armah, Chinua Achebe in his novel *A Man of the People* (1966) and explicitly in *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977)—and there was a widespread sense that the great expectations of independence, as I called them, had been replaced with the morning/mourning after. That shift was my main concern in my first book.

Right from the beginning I had been struck by the apparent link between Armah's postcolonial pessimism and some of the formulations of Theodor W. Adorno, written in the context of the Holocaust and the catastrophic events of the mid-twentieth century generally. There are huge differences between Armah and Adorno, of course; but when I read the opening lines of *Why Are We So Blest?*, for example—'even before my death I have become a ghost, wandering about the face of the earth, moving with a freedom I have not chosen, something whose unsettling abundance I am impotent to use' (Armah, *Blest?* 11)—I thought that I could see a parallel with the 'Meditations on Metaphysics' in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, when he concedes that while it might have been too strong to maintain, as he once had, that 'after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems,' 'it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, can go on living' (Adorno, *ND* 362-63). Certainly, some of Adorno's thinking about the need to resist assimilation or accommodation even under conditions of near-absolute social conformism resonated with Armah's description of 'the man's' resistance to the gleam in *The Beautiful Ones*,

or with Baako's desperate attempts to stave off absorption into the corrupt order all around him in *Fragments*. Which is why I took Adorno's aphorism from *Minima Moralia*—'The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us' (Adorno, *MM* 57)—as the epigram for my chapter on *Fragments* in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, a chapter that I entitled 'Enduring the Conditional, Thinking the Unconditional.'

As a keen reader of Georg Lukács, I had also been struck very early by something that would also be noticed by Edward Said—namely, that it was possible to see something of Lukács' tremendous revolutionary optimism and dynamism in Fanon. Which meant, for me, that an analogy could be drawn: the passage from the rhetoric of uplift that characterises *History and Class Consciousness* to that of the last-ditch (non-)defeatism of *Negative Dialectics* is registered also in the passage from *The Wretched of the Earth* to *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

So, I was provoked by what seemed to be connections between Adorno and Armah [though], of course, they are fantastically different in every important way. The register of rock-bottom resistance in Adorno's work always appealed to me, particularly in the early 1980s when postcolonialism was cutting its teeth and also when poststructuralist theory began to be dominant in the Anglophone academy. I was dismayed by the absence of Adorno from these conversations in the early 1980s. Most of the work in the poststructuralist idiom, obviously, was opposed to dialectics. Adorno was at first not really looked at, at all. It seemed to me that, just as it was important to insist on the contemporaneity of African literature and its relevance (the corpus of African literature was really very little known in literature departments in the US and the UK), so too it was important to insist on the significance of Adorno and the Frankfurt school in general. The history of the reception of the Frankfurt School in the Anglophone world is rather different from the history of the reception of Adorno himself. While Adorno had been widely read by scholars with interests in political philosophy—in the US, especially—in the 1960s and the 1970s, he was not much read then by those with interests in culture. He began to get taken up by cultural theorists in the Anglophone academy only in the late 1980s, in a context of poststructuralist ascendancy. At just this time the work of other members of the Frankfurt School began to lapse into relative obscurity. (Walter Benjamin, never a formal member of the Institute for Social Research, is of course another matter). Thus Marcuse, who was probably the most widely read member of the Frankfurt School in the English-speaking world in the 60s and early 70s, found himself being, as it were, progressively *unread* in the 80s—circulation and appreciation of his work diminished not simply for incidental reasons, as happens all the time in the academy, but inasmuch as the emergent current of radical thought (I am referring to 'post-' theory in general) turned against all of the fundamentals on which his work had rested—dialectics, revolution, Hegel and Marx, the specific form of psychoanalysis articulated in *Eros in Civilization*, the critique of

instrumental reason, the critique of affirmative culture, the seemingly total critique of *One-Dimensional Man*, the commitment to the thought-figure of utopia, etc. I think that Marcuse's work continues to be misread; and that of Lukács also, incidentally. So, my work took on a counter-poststructuralist tenor at this point inasmuch as I continued to be concerned with questions of revolutionary struggle, intellectual commitment, national consciousness and so on. Those are the concerns that play themselves out in my second book, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (1999), which I had hoped to call *Hating Tradition Properly*—but Cambridge, my press, balked at this. The slogan, 'hating tradition properly,' from Adorno—who had written that 'one must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly' (MM 52)—was meant to gesture to the fact that so many writers and intellectuals of the decolonising era sought to take the resources to be found in elite or colonial forms of cultural representation and to direct them *against* elitism or colonialism. This was very much a signature of the thought of important leaders, intellectuals and writers from the third world generally in the period from about 1950 to about 1980, including Fanon as well as [C.L.R.] James, Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, and certainly the great African leaders such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, etc. of that period, as well of course politico-intellectuals there and in Latin America, South Asia and the Caribbean. So, that was the thrust of the *Nationalism* book. The book doesn't have a specific chapter on literature: it has one on cricket and national consciousness in the West Indies and one on African popular music, as well as a long chapter disputing the disparaging of nationalism in mainstream postcolonial studies. But I had been steadily reading literature all the time, and the range of my reading began to broaden, and this reading eventually issued in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. The book was meant to have come out around 2008, but I fell ill in 2006 and had to take medical leave. For a year or so, I couldn't write much, but I was able to keep up my reading of literature. I think that *The Postcolonial Unconscious* shows some benefits from the fact that its archive is comparatively wide.

SG: That leads onto my next question, which is basically about methodologies of reading. At the start of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, you raise the question of canon formation. To my mind there are two overlapping issues: firstly, the idea of an 'English' literary canon; and secondly, the emergence of a 'postcolonial' literary canon. *The Postcolonial Unconscious* is, in this respect, a masterstroke in its breadth of coverage and goes some way to challenging literary canons, both English and postcolonial. In 'Conjectures on World Literature,' Franco Moretti contends that the question is not '*what* we should do—the question is *how*' (Prendergast 148). Talking about the great unread, Moretti asserts that '[r]eading "more" is always a good thing, but not the solution' (149). The vastness of the task, for Moretti, highlights that we need a different approach, but it seems to me that his suggestion for a

methodology of ‘distant reading’ is not an entirely plausible solution, mostly because how can we read everything and how can we *not* read everything? So, I want to ask you more about ‘close’ and ‘distant’ reading. Is there a methodology, perhaps a *bricolage* between the two, that doesn’t compromise the integrity of either, but allows for sustained and sensitive analysis?

NL: Yes, there are about four questions in there! Actually, this opens onto a very interesting discussion. At some level my answer would have to be autobiographical. My Ph.D. was in sociology, my first position in the States was a (non-stipendiary!) postdoctoral position in sociology (at Yale) and then I moved, via a postdoctoral fellowship in a Centre for the Humanities, to a regular post in an English Department. Since then, I’ve gone through periods where I’ve felt that while my colleagues in literature studies know how to read, they seem to have little specialist knowledge of the *world*; so I have put on a sociological hat, only to feel that while my colleagues in sociology have well-developed interests in various social developments, they don’t know how to *read*. There seems to be something plainly missing within each of these disciplines. And it might be that my solution has been to try to come up with a ready-made way of being able to deal with questions of sociology—by which I mean also, following Lucien Goldmann, history; Goldmann argues that all sociologies are histories—while at the same time registering the specificity and force of literature. At some level, that is no doubt what I have been doing.

Within postcolonial studies, particularly, there has been (and, I would say, there remains) a dominant, privileged mode of reading. Actually, I would go further than this: all orthodox ‘postcolonialist’ readings tend also to have the same *content*; I mean that to a significant (and depressing) degree, all orthodox ‘postcolonialist’ readings are the same. Moreover, the reading endlessly produced and reproduced strikes me as being massively attenuated. The claims made for its representativeness are unwarranted; I think, in fact, that they’re untenable. And so, I’ve always wanted to read against this particular grain—against the grain of a certain kind of...cosmopolitanism (I’m not sure that this is quite the right word here), but I mean a certain approach that favours decentredness, catachresis, instability, ambivalence, the migratory, the diasporic, the in-between, etc. As it happens, the more literary works I’ve read and the greater my geo-cultural range as a reader, the more woefully attenuated this paradigmatically ‘postcolonialist’ way of reading has seemed to be.

I think that there are questions of value that enter into this as well. The ‘pomo-postcolonialist’ tendency has led to a hypostatisation of certain formal aspects in literary works (self-consciousness, contingency, a stress on incommensurability and the failures of language to signify, etc.) whose one-sidedness again seems to me narrowing and impoverishing. It takes nothing away from the significance often attributed to [Rushdie’s] *Midnight’s Children* or the work of Coetzee, for instance, to argue that there are other forms of writing and that value might be found also in

works that are very different from these in their formal dimensions. (Not that Coetzee's work is formally similar to Rushdie's, by the way.) I've been particularly concerned to dispute the disavowal of realism that is so central a pillar of 'postcolonialist' criticism. I think this hostility to realism entered postcolonial studies through poststructuralist criticism: anti-realism was certainly a staple of poststructuralist literary theory in the 1980s, in the work of such critics as Catherine Belsey, where the argument was that realism was authoritarian. I recall scholars like Terry Lovell and Penny Boumelha arguing at the time against this poststructuralist caricature of literary realism (the debate played itself out partly as a war of periodisation: Lovell and Boumelha wrote about the nineteenth-century novel; the most influential poststructuralist anti-realists, like Stephen Heath, tended to be scholars of modernism). But one encountered anti-realism everywhere in the theoretical 'avant-garde' of the 1970s and 1980s. What I found when I began reading widely in 'postcolonial' literature was a gap between what postcolonial studies was tending to address with numbing regularity and what one typically found represented in the literature itself. I also discovered that there was a big gap between the range of works typically selected for discussion in postcolonial studies and the range of works typically discussed by scholars of the older nation- or region- or language-based paradigms in literary studies ('African,' 'Indian,' 'Latin American,' etc). However limited these previously established paradigms might have been (and indeed remain), this gap seemed to me also to shine a light on the tendentiousness of postcolonial studies.

Although I am interested in questions of literary value, at the sociological level this is not a concern. I remember my friend Khachig Tölölyan once playing devil's advocate and saying to me: 'what would you do if I said that all the writers you are interested in are of no significance in a literary sense?' It was a challenging question: I had to think about it before answering that actually it wouldn't make any difference to me; for much of my interest lies in representational schemas, in socially and culturally dispersed ways of seeing and thinking. It's very obvious that Nadine Gordimer is a wonderful writer; 'close' reading skills can help to draw out her significance; but 'distant' reading skills can help to situate Gordimer's work alongside or in juxtaposition to other writers (including South African ones) whose work might not be as good as hers, but whose project might be similarly articulated or might raise similar questions. By the same token, the 'literature of disillusionment' in post-Independence African writing includes many mediocre writers as well as Armah, Achebe, Ngũgĩ, Soyinka, Awoonor, etc. It seems to me that there's an epistemological value to finding those sorts of connections. Particularly if you're interested in questions of ideology, when by definition you're not focusing only on elite formulations, when you're looking for representations in the round, 'distant' reading can give you some of the information that you need.

I think ‘close’ reading works best where the literary texts being discussed ‘open themselves’ up to precisely that kind of analysis. A brilliant example can be found in Richard Godden’s contemporary work on Faulkner, or in Roberto Schwarz’s work: in both of these, detailed and knowing attention to form is—and precisely because it views form as, in Schwarz’s words, the ‘abstract of social relations’—very far from being formalistic. It always seems to me that the best formal readings are not formalistic, but are *socio-formal* in some way. You can have socio-formal readings that would satisfy the strictest ‘close’ reading criteria: I try to read this way some of the time in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. But I am interested also in making general and ‘diagnostic’ sorts of discoveries, which, as Moretti points out, close readings tend to *disenable*. These are nevertheless very valuable for literary studies.

SG: Sticking with Moretti in a roundabout way, in ‘Conjectures’ he talks about Jameson’s Law. Obviously, the title *The Postcolonial Unconscious* gestures towards Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Could you tell me more about how you arrived at that title and what it means to you?

NL: Yeah, I am never very good at coming up with titles. When I was writing this book, I had it in mind that it was going to be called *Mind the Gap!* And the gap was between what ‘postcolonialist’ criticism tends to address and what ‘postcolonial’ literary works tend to disclose. It was precisely in thinking through the question of ideology that I turned to the category of the unconscious, [...] meaning [...] the field of vision, or the problematic, that structures postcolonial thinking or postcolonial studies as a discourse, discipline or sub-discipline; and that was how the idea of ‘the postcolonial unconscious’ came up. Is there a set of assumptions which a very large number of postcolonialist critics tend to hold even if they don’t talk about them or even if they don’t raise them explicitly? It seemed to me that there were; these make up the postcolonial unconscious: assumptions about the historical conjuncture, about literary form, about emergent tendencies in society, about political action very generally. And obviously, then, I am writing in criticism of the particular ‘unconscious’ that governs postcolonial studies. I am arguing not only that these structuring assumptions need to be brought into the open (because some critics have been bringing them into the open), but also that they must be contested. I recognise that this rather commits me to arguing against ‘the postcolonial’ as a notion, as such.

SG: Perhaps. It definitely opens the door to some controversial questions regarding the shape of the field and what we mean when we deploy the term ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postcolonial studies.’ These questions, though, are indicated not only in the title of the book, but also in your approach to some key figures, perhaps most notably, Jameson. You argue in Chapter Two that Jameson’s work—in this instance ‘Third-World Literature in the

Era of Multinational Capitalism’—has been misunderstood, perhaps grossly so. He is very clearly a pivotal figure for you. Why is it so important that we recuperate his work?

NL: For me there are two things. One is later developing in my own work: my current work—the work that you and I are both doing as part of the Warwick Research Collective (WReC)—draws on Jameson’s thinking about combined and uneven development. Jameson shows fantastic skill in focusing on formal unevennesses and reading them as the correlates of social processes: his ability to move between the categories of modernisation, modernity and modernism is often quite brilliant and superbly productive and generative, also, at the level of method. I write about some of this in my new book.

But I’ve always been struck also by the importance of Jameson’s arguments about ‘national allegory’ in the third-world literature essay: it’s a brilliant concept, a brilliant ‘hook’—students ‘get it’ very easily; it serves as a perfect heuristic tool in the discussion of any number of ‘third world’ works. I wanted say something in defence of the notion of national allegory because it’s been so important for me in thinking through Ayi Kwei Armah, for instance, or cricket in the West Indies; and so many writers—so many—seem to take it up or to mobilise it as a category, consciously or, more often, unconsciously.

My chapter on Jameson derived from an increasing awareness of how the terms of engagement with his ‘national allegory’ essay had been set by the ‘Ahmad affair’—[Aijaz] Ahmad’s massively influential critique of Jameson. The more I read that critique, the more convinced I became, not only that Ahmad had misread Jameson fairly profoundly (this it is not so difficult to establish), but also that Ahmad had been followed into error by any number of postcolonial critics who nevertheless disliked him intensely. The sequence is rather remarkable: while Ahmad is often dismissed as a vulgar Marxist by postcolonialists (who are themselves anti-Marxist, or non-Marxist), his critique of Jameson is taken for some reason as being definitive, unanswerable. I initially found this mystifying, I must say. Eventually I began to piece it out through the idea that what postcolonialist scholars were finding in Ahmad was a ‘third-worldist’ critique of Marxism. Now this isn’t actually what Ahmad had articulated: Ahmad saw himself as publishing a Marxist critique of another Marxist theorist, i.e. Jameson, whose work he was objecting to because it wasn’t rigorous enough. But his article does sound a ‘third-worldist’ note on certain key occasions: it does play the third-worldist card. And what Ahmad says in this mode was seized on as being unanswerable by critics from Gayatri Spivak to Sara Suleri to Frederick Buell. In fact, I would say ninety five per cent of the people who have read Ahmad’s essay have tended to view it as being decisive. I became very interested in the relatively few scholars who didn’t read Ahmad’s essay thus: Neil Larsen, for instance, or [Madhava] Prasad, or more recently [Ian] Buchanan. Since the turn of the century, not least because of the writing of these critics,



there has been a new opening to Jameson's essay, but if I recall Ahmad's essay came out in [1986] and for at least a decade and until about 2000 his essay was 'unreadable' in postcolonial studies: by which I mean that pretty much everybody who read it moved very quickly to deplore it. (Meanwhile they were, of course, reading Jameson's work on postmodernism much more appreciatively). It seemed to me that one of the potentially great methodological and conceptual resources in postcolonial studies—the notion of national allegory—was being ruled out of court because of the way in which the 'debate' between Jameson and Ahmad unfolded.

SG: Much of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, it seems to me, can be characterised by the drive towards recuperating, or at the very least re-evaluating, not just Jameson, but how other seminal figures in the field of postcolonial studies have been taken up, with whole chapters also devoted to Fanon and Said. Would it be fair to say that the common thread is that postcolonial studies, as a field of study or discipline, took a wrong turn somewhere quite early on?

NL: Well, that goes to the question of the postcolonial *unconscious*. I would say no, it didn't take a wrong turn; it *is* a wrong turn. Taking a wrong turn suggests that initially it was on the right track, as it were. It seems to me that the field was conceived in, or subject from the start to, a misprision, a misconception. The field has, therefore, tended to produce various kinds of resourceful and sometimes brilliant readings under the sign of error. And it seems to me that the central problematic of postcolonial studies is third-worldism. The key thought-horizon that has to be grappled with in thinking this through is 1975: I see 1975 as the moment at which the great anti-colonial revolutions, the whole movement of insurrectionary anti-colonialism, are seen to come finally to an end. 1975 is the moment at which Vietnam wins the war and then begins to lose the peace; it's the moment of the collapse of fascist dictatorship in Portugal, which brings about the liberation of Guinea Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, but then again the immediate attendant problems there; the moment of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, etc. So, '75 marks a watershed and that watershed is the moment at which, particularly in the West, an earlier radical and progressive identification with third-worldist, anti-colonial nationalism and revolutionary struggle begins to shade over into a critique of all these. There is a move from the third-worldist heroization of Ho Chi Minh or Fidel [Castro] or Ché Guevara to a very different outlook. Vietnam in the late-1960s gives way in the 1970s to the Iran of Khomeini or the Kampuchea [Cambodia] of Pol Pot or the China of the Cultural Revolution. After 1975, nationalism is seen to be dangerous, unstable and atavistic; and also, of course, Marxist energies are seen to be exhausted. Postcolonial studies is born in this period after 1975. There are bigger things to be said, and I try to say them in the book, about the geopolitical dispensation as a whole and the great boom of 1945 to

1973 that has also ended, so that the period from 1975 on is a period of austerity and crisis, with the rise of neoliberalism and the powerful retrenchment of right-wing ideologies, which of course postcolonial studies is trying to combat. But the world in which postcolonialism exists is so different to the world of the great activists of anti-colonialism—Walter Rodney, or C.L.R. [James] or [Jawaharlal] Nehru, or these sorts of figures. My sense is that postcolonial studies articulates this changed dimension, but it tends to overstate its significance; it argues for the collapse, for the exhaustion, and in fact, for the falsity of that earlier moment. This overstatement seems to me the fundamental structuring error of postcolonial studies.

One of the reasons I've been interested in developments [such as] the Arab Spring, or other contemporary developments globally, is that they make it possible to refer in a fairly direct way to imperialism as an unbroken project across the long twentieth century, from 1898, say, to the present. The sorry misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan enable one to reconnect the dots, where postcolonial studies has tended to propose that the world turned on its axis around 1975. What this means is that we need to offer a different historical narrative of the period 1945 to the present than you find in postcolonial studies. Significant aspects of the unconscious of postcolonial studies are of course replicated in much postmodernist thought, and so you find some of the emphases characteristic of postcolonial studies elsewhere as well, and therefore in disciplines outside of the literary (sociology, for instance, history, political science) in which postmodernist thought has made an impact. Some of the important radical alternatives to postmodernism in these disciplines—for instance the work of the great world-systems thinkers: [Giovanni] Arrighi, Samir Amin, [Immanuel] Wallerstein—need to be read more widely by scholars in postcolonial studies. Does this answer your question?

SG: It does indeed, and I think it's helpful what you say: there are different histories to be found, or maybe different theoretical staples, in other fields that cast a new or different light on the issues that are of central importance to postcolonial literary studies. We've mentioned her briefly already, but Spivak's name comes up a lot in postcolonial studies and in Chapter Three you take to task her theorisation of subalternity and representation. Moving towards a more positive constructionist mode, as you do in this book, could you talk a bit more about the possibilities of representation as you see them?

NL: Most of the criticism of Spivak in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* is a reiteration of work [I've] done previously, particularly in the *Nationalism and Cultural Practice* book. There I thought I was fighting the good fight and engaging in a version of the culture wars, in some ways, so at great lengths debating Bhabha's work, or Spivak's work. In the new book I didn't want to be doing that anymore: I was far more interested in a positive specification.

Around the question of representation, Said did so much in the last decade of his life, the last two decades really. Unlike Tim Brennan, I tend to view *Orientalism* (1978) as an anomalous text. Brennan argues that there is a unity of tone and substance through all of Said's work, and particularly that the Foucauldian dimension of *Orientalism* that nearly everyone finds there—and that most praise and some lament—[...] is not there. I don't think that this is correct. It would be more accurate to say, I think, that *Orientalism* is a text in which Said's Foucauldian lexicon leads his own conception somewhat astray. Certainly, in *Orientalism*, he puts forward arguments about truth and representation, or representation and history, which are very different from the views that he puts forward in almost all of his other work. My own view is that he breaks decisively with Foucauldianism in *The World, The Text and The Critic* (1983) and is very consistent about this from then on. I found Said's arguments about representation, alongside the work of Pierre Bourdieu particularly, to be very interesting and suggestive. I was particularly struck by the need to answer a couple of questions. One was about what intellectuals can do: what does intellectual work consist of? What is the specificity of intellectual work? And then, within the terms of that general question, there is the more specific question, of interest to literary scholars, about the specificity of *literary* work where representation is concerned. Said gives some answers to both of these questions. There is, however, a certain romanticism of the intellectual in Said; Bourdieu, I think, is a better model in a way than Said at that level, though that's a very high level.

For me representation has to do, obviously, with truth telling, the ability to make connections, the idea of universalizing. Bourdieu speaks about intellectual work specifically as universalizing 'the conditions of access to the universal' (2011). So much of what one finds across the range of 'postcolonial' literary work is a kind of testifying that creates communities and creates bonds between communities, but that animates and arms. Manlio Argueta's *Cuzcatlán*, for instance, is centrally invested in trying to find formal means to enable it to represent in a way that is true or that honours the particular customs, conventions, belief systems, or ideologies of the people being represented. This is always a problem for writers because they are simultaneously inhabiting that universe, but then also not inhabiting it. Writers are tremendously resourceful, but also careful, I think, or usually are careful, to think about the problems of representation: how to avoid the difficulties of elitism, for instance, or of patronisation. I have found it very interesting to think about their various strategies, not least because the disciplinary discussion of subalternity is, typically, so austere as to suggest that literary or historical representation is either impossible or else, at the least, suspect. One of the texts I find absolutely astounding in this context is Multatuli's nineteenth-century novel, *Max Havelaar* (1982), where he starts talking about what is the *truth* of his fiction and argues that what is true in fiction is not necessarily true in reality. There's a 'general' truth that exceeds or escapes empirical

or juridical observation. But I felt that there's something very specific that happens in literature—whether or not it also happens in other forms of writing, such as history. I think it does, you know, but I'm not a historian, so I don't want to get into that debate fully: I'm more interested in what we demonstrably find in literature.

SG: I was going to ask you next about the role of the intellectual, but we've covered that, so I'll move on to ask you about the work that you've been doing since the publication of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. I know that you are co-writing a monograph with some members of WReC. Could you tell me a little more about that project?

NL: I was often invited to give talks while I was working on *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. In these presentations, I would quite often say, 'look, here are some key issues that you find, some key thematics, in the literature,' and very often I would get a question back from somebody in the audience—a modernist, say—who would say 'well, what you're talking about is observable also in D.H. Lawrence,' or something similar. It wasn't an objection; it was a question about the specificity of 'postcolonial' literature. I think there are some specificities, some emphases that one tends to find only in 'postcolonial' writing, but I'm not sure how fundamentally important these are. I understand that they make what we do, as postcolonialists, different from what Americanists or modernists do, for example; but I am not sure that we should insist on the gap between ourselves and Americanists or modernists. I think that it might be necessary for us to dissolve the borders between postcolonial and other zones of literary critical activity. This thought builds on others: thus at one level it reflects the long-held difficulty of positioning Latin America or, for that matter, the United States, as 'postcolonial' formations. (Are they 'postcolonial' in the way in which Nigeria or Jamaica or Singapore are 'postcolonial'?) How does one deal with Irish, Scottish, and Welsh literature and cultural production, etc? Are there links between the enabling conditions of Scottish writing and the enabling conditions of South Asian or sub-Saharan writing today? Do you put them together? With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the development of new forms of literary understanding in the post-Soviet or post-Communist world, scholars are often asking questions about whether the post- in postcolonial is the same as the post- in postcommunist. And there one might issue some very interesting challenges. So, there's been a push, as it were, towards a more expanded field, in which it seems to make no sense to privilege the received idea of the 'postcolonial.' Why would one describe Ukrainian or Estonian literature as 'postcolonial'? It would make more sense, surely, to dissolve the category of the postcolonial and look for some way of grappling with the commonalities between 'postcommunist' literary production and that in various states and formations in the former colonial world, as already Basil Davidson did in his book on Africa and the nation-state where he focused on Yugoslavia

and Africa to show that in the nineteenth century the forms of nationalism were quite similar.

I also think that it's very important to combat the theoretically untenable notions of the global that one finds in globalisation theory or in its literary correlates, in which the notion of the transnational is used. In trying to think about what can become meaningful in literary studies, the idea of 'world' literature suggests itself as precisely the literature of the capitalist world-system, and that's our answer in WReC, isn't it, to the question of what 'world' literature is: it's the literature of the modern capitalist world-system. In which case, 'postcolonial' literature is to be understood as one of the branches of 'world' literature, whose *differentiae specificae* have to do with the *colonial* moment and its aftermath. Colonialism unfolded within the wider framework of capitalist development, so what one might look for in postcolonial studies are the forms assumed by the imposition of capitalism in the colonial world, and that will be relatively different from the forms assumed in the capitalising process in places like Estonia or, for that matter, China. You can, however, offer a comparative reading across and between those different social formations. That's the very interesting project that the group of us at Warwick are engaged in.

SG: Why is capitalism so important as the organising principle as opposed to religion or something else along those lines?

NL: Well, for me, following Jameson again, if there is a master narrative that can be mobilised without creating reductionist readings, it is precisely the narrative of capitalist development. If one works with the idea of capitalist modernity, one is arguing for forms of development that are nowhere the same, but are interlinked and driven by a certain specifiable logic. It wouldn't make sense—for precisely the reasons that one is a Marxist rather than a Weberian, for instance—to speak about religion or culture or race, in this respect, as many scholars have done. I think the strongest challenge there is to the Marxist narrative of capitalist development is the Weberian counter-narrative of modernisation, which pluralises the Marxist emphases on modes of production and class struggle. In such theorists as [Anthony] Giddens, and in much of the work in postcolonial studies, an idea of modernity is mooted that refers to capitalism only contingently: what is talked about instead is rationalisation, instrumentalism, science, 'the west,' etc. It seems to me that one of the most challenging questions confronting us as Marxist theorists is how to make sense of the 'law of uneven and combined development'—how to come to terms with capitalism's 'combined unevenness.' It is obvious that capitalism doesn't have the same aspect in the United States as in Malawi, for instance. How then is 'capitalism' to be defined, such that it can account both for the United States and Malawi, without casting the relations between them in allochronic terms, or in terms that would reduce Malawi to a flawed and belated copy of the

United States? What I find in Marxism is a theory that is not predicated on a unilinear conception of history; that works with difference and articulation even as it retains its materialist and determinist emphases. The complaints that Marxist theory is inevitably homogenising and that it is constitutively Eurocentric are simply false.

SG: Finally, Neil, is there anything you'd like to conclude with?

NL: I suppose the sense that, the further I proceeded with the book, the more it seemed to me that reading widely, reading as much as possible, was itself helping me to see connections. You don't read simply to put your discoveries in place, you read to have your understandings modified and restructured. I encountered along the way a number of works that were extraordinarily wonderful to read, works of which I had not heard: Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's *Egyptian Earth* (1954), Lao She's *Rickshaw* (1937), and many others, so much work that I never would have thought of approaching previously, but just by following my nose and reading I found extraordinary linkages; and then I needed to find schemas with which to understand these. A methodology came into view through this means, even if it was in some senses unplanned and also unexpected.

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