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Stephanie Weparu Aleman  
*University of Wisconsin, Steven's Point*

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**A Cabinet of Curiosities:  
Notes on the Life of Neil Lancelot Whitehead (1956 – 2012)**

**STEPHANIE WEPARU ALEMÁN**  
University of Wisconsin, Steven's Point



The first “cabinet” of Ferrante Imperato in 1599.

Sitting down to write a remembrance of Neil Whitehead is an ominous thing. Worse than any dissertation, writing about Neil has no beginning and no end. Rehearsing a list of his publications or his educational institutions and courses of study seems surreal and the whole project seems to resonate with his laughter at my having sat down to do it at all. Be sure then, that his small comments would have been interjected as he read about himself, so as his colleagues, students and friends, please indulge in imagining what these comments would have been. I have recently written several other pieces regarding Neil’s work and his death and it seems that I am only able to write about him from the perspective of our longstanding relationship and the many things we said and did together over a period of some 20 years. As an undergraduate, a PhD. graduate, a collaborator and a colleague with Neil, we underwent many changes together as we journeyed through academia, Amazonia and the personal lives of families and children. In the swift flow of all that passes between friends, there were always consistent themes that marked my interactions with Neil. We were together in many different types of situations from the field in Guyana to his home in Madison with Teresa and the kids, to conferences across global venues to a duck blind on a Wisconsin marsh, from many years in classrooms together to constant invitations to tea with

academic debate and tobacco for condiments. Some of the underlying themes of our discourse included things that the average academic colleague would not have known about Neil and it is to these I turn and mention but a few, to suggest some of his finer qualities.

One could describe Neil's life and Neil himself as a cabinet of curiosities. Let us enter such a cabinet for a moment and see a bit of what he left inside. The creation of these spaces and the need to do so was a topic on which he loved to expound. Everything from accounts of stuffed mice dioramas depicting historical events to skulls and taboo objects from far-flung locales were of great amusement to us both. But Neil's very brain was a *wunderkammer*- a room of wonder. Some say that a cabinet of curiosities is a form of propaganda itself. Neil would love to talk of this and of the objects in his cabinet. Along with the historiography of his written works that he would expect us to produce, these remembrances fished from the stream of his existence can aid in our creating a lasting legacy for a colleague we have not even begun to understand how to miss.

Neil had a great passion for history, for representation, for images and for objects. He fed this passion out of the vaults of his friendships, from which the most beautiful of treasures emerged to adorn his expanding cabinet of curiosities. He continuously quoted Freuchen's famous line from the Inuit that "gifts make slaves like whips make dogs" and made all around him question the nature, obligation and intimacy of reciprocity and exchange. When I gazed around Neil's office at home and my own at school in the days just after his death, I felt the weight of such gifts, endless exchanges of bits and items between us- and the weight, like a whip, gave me comfort against the howling chill of grief. This is something he would easily have understood and made me realize how I now understood the fetish of objects, how material symbols hold our emotions because we simply cannot hold all of them for the duration of our lives.

His aesthetic for fine works of cultural significance and craftsmanship and in discerning subtle ironies in representation was infectious and immediate. Any undergraduate could tell you that it was a special thrill to bring Neil an object, an image, an unknown textual reference, a bit of YouTube video and have him hold forth on his delight over its 'discovery'. He immediately found a place for all that aroused his interest among the ideas he liked best to promote. In his use of the visual anthropological canon in teaching for example, we would enter into a familiar discussion each time we used the "Highland Trilogy"<sup>i</sup>, both of us continually reignited with compassion for Joe Leahy. Neil would actually come to tears watching Joe melt into the legacy of post-colonial New Guinea and I would remember this when I encountered Joe again each time. Neil loved to witness *Dedehewa* healing and fighting for his community in Chagnon's "Magical Death" and lamented the loss of his dog in "The Feast". He felt for these men as well as other persons and their artifacts of cultural experience caught on film. The feelings renewed each time he reconsidered their narratives. When Waiwai people came to Wisconsin from Guyana, he was overtly grateful when I brought them to stay at his house. He exerted himself to show Amerindian hospitality in the strongest possible ways and continually thanked us for allowing him to do so. Many of our conversations over the years conveyed his intense caring and interest in absent friends and far away colleagues. He held a special place for TS Eliot and Coleridge, quoting them often. At his memorial service on the lake in Madison, I wanted to cry out to the assembled mourners- "*Beware his flashing eyes and floating hair, weave a circle round him thrice and close your eyes with holy dread, for he on honey dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of paradise*".

Neil had a long standing love affair with Sherlock Holmes, or rather with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Endless Holmes references peppered his everyday speech from “you are always disputatious when you smoke that pipe!” to “come let’s sit together for half an hour and try to forget the miserable ways of our fellow men”. He had a plethora of Shakespeare ready to hand for any occasion, remarking quite recently on my troubles as a state employee of public education in Wisconsin under some administrative duress with a quote from Hamlet “let them call you what instrument they will, though they can fret you, they cannot play upon you”. One of my own favorite moments was the cry of joy he gave when I reminded him of Melville’s quotes in *Moby Dick*: “better a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” and “many a white man has dreamt of being a black man on a cannibal island”. He told me he was “gobsmacked” at having been reminded of these cannibal references.

My growing feeling as I contemplate these memories is that we must ingest Neil. He was a transgressive figure, crossing and writing about crossing borders and violating boundaries. He was especially keen to cross boundaries that were perceived as benevolent rather than constraining, where crossing seemed to be a violation that stripped things of their prejudice while retaining their mysteries. Most of his work was a subtle form of resistance and a not so subtle commentary on social justice. In the days following his death, I began to channel titles and ideas that seemed to come unbidden from Neil. I couldn’t breathe properly, there were too many images that didn’t seem to belong to my own consciousness and I seemed to be acting as an open conduit that he rushed through to think and work. I would have shouted at him to slow down, but he would never curtail his stride and so it would have been no use. I felt overwhelmed then, as if Neil’s intellect was yearning through me to take on and give commentary to a variety of subjects and dialogs that my own work didn’t regularly address, as if he were literally taking interest through me. I felt his unique interpretive process extruding issues through my mind. It was a transgression that I had come to expect of him in life but one I was unprepared for in his death. This tells me that he will continue to exist within those who take up his sense of exploration and adventure, seeking out boundaries to cross.

Along with his passions for objects and images, he cultivated a lifelong passion for adventure writing, travelogue and explorer’s narratives. In later years he developed this into a passion for exploring the internet and its symbols, the creation of cyber worlds and social networks and he became deeply engaged with this medium. Through all these changes and more I watched Neil go from a professor one approached with awe, to a human, to a shamanically charged supernatural force to a mere mortal again, ultimately succumbing to a mortality of which he was always painfully aware. It was this awareness that fostered his pleading sense of engagement, his fierce demand for reciprocity in thought and deed. He gave generously and expected a return, but he never withheld under any circumstances.

When I was in the field with the Waiwai during a rainy season I wrote to him of Malinowski and drugs in a tent, of deep ennui, and ‘kill all the brutes’...you could write things like that to Neil without shame or moral anxiety. When I had malarial fever spikes, I often saw and heard Neil in my hallucinations, sitting at my hammock, saying ‘well, so what’s all this then’? Or once, I feverishly imagined I was lying at the edge of a vast canyon on the edge of a cliff, with my cheek against a cool piece of rock, when Neil came over the horizon dressed as Peter O’Toole was in “*Lawrence of Arabia*.” He led me to a tent full of variously decorated knives and disappeared. It seemed completely plausible even after I woke sweating with the cyclical break of fever the early morning hours would bring. Once, upon my returning from 8

months in the field, he eagerly questioned me for days, sometimes about ethnographic detail, but mostly about my sense of fear and the somatic experience of rainforest life among Amerindians.

Neil had a voracious appetite for knowledge and experience. He served up much in his own canon for us to devour and I urge each of you to break off a piece, ingest it and work it into something that is both his and your own. Like myriad flowering plants of knowledge sprouting from a skull, Neil's insights and his method of conveying them as well as his process for garnering data and experience should flourish and grow for the benefit of others. It is all of us who can facilitate this growth and fertilize this knowledge.

But beyond what we can think, our collective bodies can become fitting repositories for his vital energies that flowed so relentlessly towards an earnest and sincere compassion and engagement with our own vital energies for the brief number of years we were fortunate enough to share breath with Neil. His own engagement with the somatic, visceral aspects of the human condition can offer us an opportunity for mimesis.

Through the way in which he chose to express himself from metaphors of "castigation with a silken lash" to a desire for us to see the pre-colonial contact period in the Americas as "phantasmagoric"; from lords, shaman and soldiers to victims of development and dominant historiographies, Neil expressed an activism that transcended mundane protest and mass action. Because he chose the venue of scholarship, his activism may have seemed less dominant, but he wanted to create voice from histories that had suppressed them and amplify the voice of modernity that echoes out of places we like to create as ancient and traditional.

With regard to his abiding interest in human violence, he wanted us all to come to terms with our own proclivities and prohibitions and recognize the use and consequences of violence among others. He wanted to provide a meaningful way in which to reveal hidden, structural violence that emerges as overt, physical violence as well as the forms of symbolic violence that manifest in discreet acts.

He did not contain his interest in conflict and damage to interhuman exchanges however. He had a deep understanding of the interactive exchanges we make with other species and beings. He wanted us to contemplate what was an animal, what we continually changed as criteria for humanness and why. He wanted us to explore the relationship between killing and loving, the predatory cosmos and 'grateful prey'. He was not content merely to represent the beliefs and practices of others. He viscerally wanted places he was able to shed light to offer advocacy for the human populations of the world and especially the people of lowland South America. When cornered for a sound byte regarding why Anthropology was important, he would state that the anthropologist makes the 'other' more accessible and provides a representation of tolerance that has incremental benefits for us all.

Over the course of the last two decades, everything I did both intellectually and academically and sometimes personally, was fed first into the crucible of Neil's intellect. All my decisions received the hard firing of his attentive review. As it is now, I attempt to recreate an aspect of his opinion when I work and can often hear his eager praise and admonishments as I proceed along any thesis like birdsong and howler monkeys on a deep forest trail. Over the years of our friendship, we must have discussed every topic known to human discourse, from a very recent and heated debate on Ralph Nader to a discussion of the *vagina dentata* trope in Amazonian mythology. But I now wonder if I will create works that are brittle and porous without his temper. Never the less, I know whatever I do and whatever I produce would go into his vast cabinet of curiosities, along with what we all do now and what we do in our various futures. He has issued keys to this cabinet to us all and invites us to unlock the door and fall in.

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<sup>ii</sup> 2005. Three-part film of contact in Highland New Guinea, by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson (distributed by Documentary Educational Resources).