

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR NEIL LANCELOT WHITEHEAD

Neil Lancelot Whitehead, an internationally renowned anthropologist and ethnohistorian of lowland South America, died in Madison, Wisconsin on March 22, 2012 of liver cancer. He was chair of the Department of Anthropology until a few days before his untimely death. Born in 1956 in London, he grew up in the borough of Harrow with his father Kenneth, himself born in India, mother Irene, and sister Kim. He attended the Merchant Taylors' School, founded in 1561, then matriculated at Balliol College, University of Oxford, now marking its 750th anniversary. He earned a BA in psychology and philosophy in 1977, continuing in Oxford's doctoral program in social anthropology. He prepared for ethnographic research in French Guiana under the supervision of Professor Peter Riviere, a distinguished anthropologist of lowland South America whose work focused on the history of European exploration of Amazonia, interests that clearly inspired his postgraduate student. Due to difficulties in obtaining permission for ethnographic research, Neil Whitehead submitted a largely historical dissertation, for which he was awarded the DPhil in 1984. A revised version of the dissertation became his first book, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana* (1988), on the violent encounters between the Caribs and Europeans. In 1986, he married Theresa Murphy, whom he met through their mutual engagement in the movement against the presence of British troops in Northern Ireland.

After a series of temporary positions, Neil Whitehead accepted a faculty appointment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1993, moving permanently across the Atlantic with his wife and two young children. He was promoted to full professor in 2001. Professor Whitehead flourished at UW-Madison, rising to prominence as an ethnographer, ethnohistorian and editor. His intellectual interests in colonial encounters and in warfare and violence are threaded throughout his scholarly career. He became widely known for a still influential volume he co-edited with R. Brian Ferguson, *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare*, published in 2002 by the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, based on a conference funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. Professor Whitehead began a field research project in Guyana in 1992 that was originally intended to focus on the region's ancient societies by way of an archaeological field survey, searching for evidence for European visions of El Dorado, the South American city of gold. He indeed published several articles on the topic. But he quickly became embroiled in Patamuna assault sorcery, known as *kanaima*, in which, he recounts, shamans transform themselves into spirit jaguars and physically attack and mutilate their victims, resulting in a lingering and painful death. Touching a burial urn left in a cave had made him, he writes, along with his Englishness in this former colony, a current and future target for sorcery attack. Professor Whitehead returned to the region in 1995 and 1997, with support from the UW Graduate School and external funding agencies, to carry out ethnographic research on *kanaima*. This eventually resulted in his remarkable account, *Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death* (2002). His interests in magical death—the poetics, performance, and ideologies of violence—and the violence of the state, from colonial encounters to the wars and asymmetrical engagements of the American military, unfolded as a consequence of the Patamuna experience.

Professor Whitehead was editor of the journal *Ethnohistory* for the decade beginning in 1997, changing its focus from largely North Americanist to an international one. He also edited or co-edited a series of sixteen volumes. These range from new editions of the Guiana explorations of Sir Walter Raleigh (1997) to German sailor Hans Staden's 16th century account of captivity and cannibalism in Brazil (2008, co-edited with Michael Harbsmeir) as well as major scholarly collections such as *Histories and Historicities in Amazonia* (2003), *In Darkness and Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* (2004, co-edited with Robin Wright), nineteenth century travel writing in South America (2004),

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Anthropologies of Guyana (2009, co-edited with former advisee Stephanie Aleman), and *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology* (2012, co-edited with Michael Wesch). The 2012 edited volume reflects Professor Whitehead's growing fascination with "the post-human," an extension of his intellectual interests in human-animal relations. The latter resulted in "Loving, Being, Killing Animals" in an edited volume in press on writing animals into South American history. Neil Whitehead would no doubt be pleased that his editorship and authorship continue in the post-human domain. He is listed as senior editor, with Swedish anthropologist Sverker Finnstrom, of *Virtual War and Magical Death* (Duke, 2013), whose chapters range from the virtual warfare of drones, high-altitude bombing, U.S. Army human terrain systems, and computer gaming to the magical assaults of indigenous sorcerers. Another co-edited volume, on ethnopornography, is currently under submission. He also became fascinated with the poetics of Goth performance, joining the band Blood Jewel, traveling to Kiev, Ukraine for the Children of the Night Festival, and theorizing it in his writings.

Professor Whitehead's classroom teaching included an innovative course on "The Anthropology of Landscape," seminars on "Contemporary Theory in Cultural Anthropology," and "The Anthropology of Shamanism and the Occult," which he insisted bear the number Anthropology 666. His challenging graduate seminar, "The Anthropologies of Violence and Sexuality," theorized both violence and "ethnopornography." He was a demanding, supportive, and fiercely loyal adviser to the many graduate students he supervised on subjects ranging from suicide bombers in Ramallah to landscape and ethnogenesis on the Guyana-Brazilian border. His students counted themselves as his close friends, and he and Theresa often invited them to their Shorewood Hills home for feasts of venison or walleye that he had himself procured. Neil Whitehead is survived by his wife Theresa; his children Luke, Florence, Rose, and Natalie; his sister Kim; and his nieces Begum, Indira, and Banu. Felled by an untreatable cancer at the height of his intellectual powers, he leaves behind a legacy of brilliant, often provocative, scholarly writings that will long continue to influence the discipline of anthropology.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
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