

Dialogue

Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology

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The Ocean Imaginary

SUBRAMANI

Responses

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An Interview with Subramani

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The Oceanic Imaginary

Subramani

[I]f we can imagine nothing else, then obviously we have nothing to warn other cultures about either.

FREDRIC JAMESON

I am a writer. I do not accept my condition. I will strive to change it: but I inhabit it. I am trying to learn from it.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

THIS ESSAY IS AN EDITED VERSION of the keynote address *Subramani* gave to the Eighth Conference of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, held at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, 6–8 July 1999.

Writing from Oceania came into focus as Pacific literature at the first conference of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (SPACLALS), held at the University of Queensland in 1977. For Pacific writers it was a historically important gathering; many were invited to attend, and for some it was their first international conference. Writers they had wanted to meet were present, including Witi Ihimera, Patricia Grace, and Maurice Gee from New Zealand; Kath Walker, Frank Moorhouse, Tom Shapcott, Rodney Hall, and others from Australia. Most important were the writers from Northern Oceania—John Kaniku, Kumalau Tawali, Bernard Minol, Taban Lo Liyang, and Benjamin Umba. The first SPACLALS conference displayed a robust energy that promised much in terms of future cross-border networking, dialogue, and a wider readership for Pacific writing (the organization has languished recently and is in much need of reenergizing). The prominence given to Pacific literature owed something to its newness and a great deal to the organizers' interest in postcolonial literatures.

I began working on this address with nostalgia. I thought it would be interesting to relive that first conference and write about the formal and

informal happenings there. But I realized that, in his own way, Chris Tiffin had already reprised it with his selection of conference papers, *South Pacific Images* (1978). His introduction to the volume provided a useful starting point for this address. Tiffin incorporated Pacific literature, with the briefest history, into the larger corpus of written literatures from Australia and New Zealand. He systematically charted the links between the literatures by referring to the common colonial experience, the emancipatory ideals in their discourses, and saw “forging relevant, satisfying, and sustaining images” as one of the functions of art. In one of the papers, Satendra Nandan described the role of the writer as a healer of wounds inflicted by colonialism, echoing an older preoccupation within what was then called “commonwealth literature.”

There were similarities to “commonwealth literature,” but also significant differences. For instance, Pacific literature was imagined as a regional literature and had a different genesis; its authors wrote from very different cultural and political circumstances. Nonetheless, like the other literatures represented at the conference, Pacific literature had incorporated the imperial language, together with its critical canons and discursive practice. There wasn’t much in the papers themselves that questioned the assumptions and attitudes in western aesthetics; for instance, the distinction between orature and written texts that might have vastly changed the audience of Pacific literature. Pacific writers first imagined Oceania against the historical background of colonialism and independence, and from the perspective of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society. *Mana* journal and articles and manifestos by Albert Wendt and Marjorie Crocombe on artistic and cultural revival were all part of a growing regional consciousness linked to an Oceanic literary and cultural formation opposed to colonial impositions. Although the conference papers did not adequately articulate alternative literary or artistic claims, there were hints of new or different initiatives. At this conference, Vijay Mishra first problematized the relationship between literature and locality, preparing the ground for him and others to more fully conceptualize the cultural politics of displacement (Tiffin 1978). Mishra’s concern was with the *girit* experience and the Indo-Fijian diaspora (1992). Subsequently, Teresia Teaiwa’s probing into the pathways imagined by the ancestral peoples of Oceania and the trajectories of their travel (1995), and Epeli Hau’ofa’s reflections on a larger Oceania brought the partly articulated experience of other Pacific diasporas into the same orbit (1993). The important work of dismantling

orientalism had begun in the region some time before Edward Said named the phenomenon (1978).

Implicit in these and other theoretical and critical papers was the understanding that discursive practices in Oceania must be informed by knowledge about the region. Such a shift in scholarship would alter the grids of knowledge and power in the region, making Oceania not just an object of study but also allowing it to produce its own cultures of scholarship. Oceania would be able to break out of the distorting, deforming organization of Eurocentric historiography and modernist projects that view the west as their center. In this regard John O'Carroll's suggestion of an archaeology of Oceanic human sciences (1992), similar to Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1980), is useful.

What I propose is the construction of a body of knowledge encompassing the kaleidoscope of Oceanic cultures and tracing diverse and complex forms of knowledge—philosophies, cartographies, languages, genealogies, and repressed knowledges. Such a mammoth project would blur the usual disciplinary boundaries, including the divisions of oral speech from written materials and of visual imagery from music and performance. And it would juxtapose the popular, commonsensical, and personal with the scientific. Such work would treat Oceania as a complicated, multilayered stage on which island scholars would reinscribe the new epistemologies—their own epistemologies. These would at once involve the critique of oppressive systems of thinking—enlightenment's assumptions about modernization as well as Oceania's patriarchal conventions and invented traditions—and entail an exploration into "Oceania's library" (the knowledge its people possess). Such an assignment would be deconstructive and thereby reconstitutive; its task would be to establish a set of problematics rather than to advance any ideological position, grand narratives, or complete theories. As O'Carroll pointed out, the project would avoid dreams of completion; it would allow impurities and accommodate important flaws. In such an arena, "literature" could begin to play its role, for "literature" is a critical site of Oceanic imaginary, and this work of reimagining includes the outlines of new epistemologies.

The new cultural paths established by this effort should enable island scholars to interrogate various imagined givens—tensions such as small versus large, indigeneity and introduced, identity and difference, spatial and virtual. It ought to demonstrate that these tensions originate from thoughts and categories that are alien to Oceania. In western intellectual

traditions the relationship between these tensions is often understood as dialectical, and there are possibilities for the tensions to play themselves out and create new ones. In Oceanic traditions, by contrast, they readily coalesce.

I am not proposing a naive retreat from conceptual work. What is called theory is important to the project: to plan, predict, make assumptions, prioritize, and strategize. Equally important is establishing technical and conceptual tools of research and rules of practice and method. This work is more, not less, difficult however, because it encompasses retheorizing the theory, and retextualizing the text.

The usefulness of such a reorganization of knowledge for scholars and literary critics is obvious; they can draw their authority from these reinvented epistemologies. For literary critics in particular, it offers a way of shifting outside western critical paradigms and developing a language of critique. And for writers and artists in general, it establishes the conditions in which they can think anew and articulate differently. I want to continue to make a case for a regional literature, not to be enclosed or contained by it, but simply to allow Oceanic imaginations to reach beyond narrow ethnicities and national boundaries in order to draw from a wider range of sources. For Islanders the nation-state would remain one of the sites of struggle, in all its complexity. But with their roots firmly in Oceania island scholars and writers can receive more freely from forms and styles of world literatures. Perhaps this notion explains why writers who began their careers outside the region, like John Pule and Sia Figiel, find themselves gravitating toward it.

Foucault's well-known work on cultural archives of knowledge, on philosophies and definitions of human nature, demonstrates one of many options for tackling this unfinished work in Oceania. In a number of significant ways, the new epistemological work will be different from Foucault's enterprise. Above all it will avoid Foucault's labyrinths as well as unnecessary pendants: this knowledge, this understanding of what knowledge is, should be available for daily use. Therefore Pacific Islanders will have to find the appropriate language to articulate it at both scholarly and popular levels of discourse. It is also necessary that this work of ordering reality be carried out by people whose cultural experience is grounded in the languages and imaginative worlds of the region, those who have actively produced the cultures but have been excluded from previous epistemologies. Above all, Oceanic scholars or researchers

must foreground issues that they themselves select as important. The most desirable qualification for this task would be a liberating imagination that enables island scholars to see how people construct their worlds and are in turn constructed by them.

Of the many variables that could affect or influence the production of the new epistemologies, I shall highlight three—the nation-state, Pacific displacements, and globalism.

I consider the nation-state first, from a couple of perspectives—as a subject in its own right in knowledge formation, and as a relationship between intellectuals and the self-interest of the nation-state. Both perspectives are worth pursuing, but for the purpose of this address I confine myself to a few general points about the second.

In Oceania, as elsewhere, there is considerable distrust of intellectuals, sometimes for pursuing ideas for their own sake, and also for intervening in public affairs. The relationship between intellectuals and the nation-state is often, unavoidably, adversarial. But it is not necessary for it to be antagonistic. The educational and political engagement of intellectuals in post-coup Fiji, especially in the recent constitutional process (I have in mind the work of the Citizens Constitutional Forum) has offered at least two lessons about the intellectual's role: first, an adversarial role can sometimes lead to positive contribution; and second, when intellectuals overcome their own cynicism, and resolve the old tension between detachment and involvement, they can affect the course of historical development. The question of the sources of their authority and legitimation is a valid one; in Fiji it was assumed that there were general principles on the basis of which they could take their stand in order to advance knowledge and freedom, and that there is always a space from which they can draw attention to a crisis or national dilemma. The least they can do is “keep the conversation going.”

In Fiji the intellectual's role of “speaking truth to power,” in Said's words, hasn't ended with the constitutional changes. In the previous regime the nation-state had to be protected (because it is a space for a range of social and cultural legislations) from right-wing excesses; the present multiparty government places the whole of civil society in an oppositional role. The new government had only been in office for a month when the gap between ideology and practice began to show; it has generated a host of issues to watch and resist. Evidently the memory is rapidly fading of the last ten years of post-coup reconstruction, which engaged

not only politicians but all citizens, and out of which the new constitution has emerged. Politicians are the quickest to forget history; it is the responsibility of intellectuals to keep vital issues turning restlessly in the nation's collective memory.

I would like to return to the subject of knowledge and power, and how they are mutually implicated. The way this research was conceived, as a site of balancing, resisting epistemologies, is reinforced by Hau'ofa's effort in *A New Oceania* (1993). I have already referred to Hau'ofa's intervention. His reflections on the genealogy of belittlement and Oceania's interiorization of myths and metaphors of smallness and dependency, propagated from the metropolitan center and reinforced by nationalists, separatists, and provincialists, makes his book an indispensable text in the task of making the region a geocultural and epistemological location. The epiphanic moment in his essay, the discovery of "scenes of grandeur" in a poetic image leading to the ontological awareness that space is not purely of the mind nor of the world but a creation of their interplay in the imagination—is worth revisiting for inspiration. And also the lyrical final lines, which are relevant to the theme of imagining or reimagining Oceania:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding. Oceania is hospitable and generous. Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Ocean is us. We are the sea, we are the Ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. (16)

Hau'ofa has addressed, in particular, a certain type of Pacific intellectual who constantly reminds Islanders of their smallness, isolation, limited resources, dependency, and the fragmented nature of their cultures. For Oceanians, such cynicism naturally works against their utopian project of producing a sea of artists and writers. Hau'ofa's *A New Oceania*, with a similar agenda, advanced an enlarged vision of Oceania that doesn't exclude the Pacific Islanders who live abroad. That is the second variable I want to consider in relation to the research proposal I have described.

An important imperative in the epistemological possibilities that I have been examining is seeking connections. One of the active connections that must be made is with the Pacific that is displaced, communities that have shifted away from island residents' experience, and that drift into the island orbit only in narratives of remittances or of "emigration as an

investment.” These narratives remind Pacific peoples that there are more Cook Islanders, Niueans, and Tokelauans living abroad than in their own countries. The trend is similar elsewhere in Oceania—Tonga, Sāmoa, and Fiji. Fiji has attracted the most attention in recent diasporic studies, which tend to overshadow other Pacific diasporas. In Pacific literature itself they feature prominently. Oceania’s very first novel, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973), and Wendt’s later work, *Ola* (1991), are classic texts within the definitions of diaspora worked out by scholars of the subject like James Clifford (1994, 310). The key elements in their definitions are expatriation, collective memory, dreams of ancestral home, visions of return, and self-definition in terms of a lost home. These are persistent themes in an important strand of Pacific writing. They are evident in the works of two authors who have recently joined the ranks of major Pacific writers—John Pule from Niue, and Sia Figiel from Sāmoa.

In the Niuean writer’s novels, *The Shark That Ate the Sun* (1992) and *Burn My Head in Heaven* (1998), the displacement drama is enacted most intensely. Here home is truly a “scattered, damaged” concept. The protagonists’ existence is defined in the borderland of state houses, prison, stolen cars, a public park, a home for juveniles, and other people’s homes. A sense of a Niuean past is retained through letters, food, legends, and songs. Pule invents a suitable form for his novels, combining the generic modes of realistic and fabular fiction—fictionalized autobiography juxtaposed with letters, poems, and legends inside overarching fragmentary narratives that do not strive for a fixed meaning.

The relevance of Pacific diasporas to island scholars’ epistemological projects is that they challenge the notion of culture as enclosed, with the stress on rootedness and indigeneity. They broaden the epistemological frame. At the same time their links with the core of Oceanic knowledge act as a reminder to those scholars of the apparent dangers in Pacific writers becoming cosy in Eurocentric discourses—living joyfully in contemporary postmodernism, for example.

This is the impression one gets in Wendt’s *Ola*, where the locale is fully diasporized, and the main character floats in a postmodern limbo. There is much in the various postmodern outlooks that is seductive: freedom from authoritarian constraints, free flow of ideas, opportunities for travel, for readings and for visits, a global market for possible bestsellers. One can visualize in it new human possibilities in the proliferation of differences and multiple heterogeneities, bringing to global attention communities, ethnicities, genders that had previously been subalternized.

Already postmodernity is entrenched in Oceania through the reorganization of economic activity that followed advanced capitalism's encroachment in the region. High-tech media and consumerism are giving rise to new social and cultural formations in most parts of Oceania. In literature, postmodern thought is embedded in the works of the younger generation of Pacific writers like Sia Figiel, John Pule, Sudesh Mishra, and Teresia Teaiwa. Fortunately they are also aware of its reactionary politics and its indifference to local struggles. Postmodernism, as the expression of late capitalism, in which the movement is away from meaning, a style that is inclined toward the pleasures of form, the playful, and the pastiche, that talks endlessly about the "death of man" and the "end of history" has little utility in postcolonial societies, where the real problem is the threat by transnational capital and its capacity to destroy all previously accepted values. The changes in the culture of scholarship that I have been arguing for ought to demonstrate that modernism, postmodernism, and realism are not the only discourses available to Pacific writers, that there are possibilities of multiple modes of representation working simultaneously and taking into account the trajectories of Oceania's increasingly complicated universe. Though not yet well articulated, these modes allow for new theories that analyze new social conditions, economies, cultural interests, communicational technologies, and new forms of organization that transcend old boundaries and situate Islanders within the global context.

Reimagining Oceania means exploring new cultural paths through a multiplicity of tensions and contradictions. I have referred to the problems of postmodernity and some of its creative values. At the same time, island scholars ought not to overlook the consequences for their own agendas of the redesigning of global political and economic systems by corporate capitalism. Globalism has opportunities as well as great threats. The corporate vision that "sees nothing odd or difficult in the idea of unlimited economic growth and unlimited consumption in a limited world" is bound to lead, in Wendell Berry's words, to "a postagricultural, postreligious, and postnatural world" (1996)—in essence a posthuman world. It has been correctly pointed out that the rising tide of corporate capitalism will not lift all boats, either in Oceania or elsewhere, and that "the only boats that will be lifted are those of the owners and managers of the process; the rest of us will be on the beach facing the rising tide." From the point of view of Oceania there is much to justify such a gloomy prediction: the requirements and demands of the market and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are destroying fragile local economies, the

excesses of free trade are ravaging the natural world, global climatic changes are threatening the islands, and culturally homogenizing technologies are effacing local differences.

The western utopian vision of corporate leaders and their allies in government is inadequately challenged. In Oceania, problems of globalism are only half-articulated. So far, there are no counter-narratives. One of the aims of this address is to suggest that a counter-vision will probably emerge from the manifold projects of producing non-Eurocentric epistemologies. A site of resistance, perhaps the site of most effective resistance, of course, is literary production itself. It is no coincidence that this view is being strongly endorsed by postcolonial thinkers on problems of globalism. North Korea's Pak Nak-Chung, writing on the subject of literature and globalism, pointed out that it is folly to neglect the field of literature in struggles against the invasion of global consumer cultures (1998).

Literature in its critical, creative engagement with "the problems of the age" can and does provide the space in which to consider where the imagination shrinks in postmodern culture, and where it is stimulated in new or unexpected ways. I would like to turn to Sia Figiel's two novels, *Where We Once Belonged* (1995) and *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (1996), which are pivotal texts, to consider the impact of aspects of postmodern culture.

They are daring experiments in storytelling, in "the novel as performance"—narratives that blur the boundaries between orality and writing as well as past and present, reality and illusion—they suggest the repertoire of forms available within Oceania. They have immediate relevance to what I am pursuing here, in the depiction of the fetishization of commodity and the role of images from mass media in the construction of imagined selves. The protagonists in *The Girl in the Moon Circle* are part voyeurs with shared tastes and pleasures derived from images on the television screen. The gaze of the girls transcends the national boundary, annexes the modern or the global to the local. The media images subvert the preexisting modes of communication. For the girls the fantastic is no longer expressed solely through myths, legends, and rituals that enter the social life only on special occasions; for them fantasy is always present in images from the media, and migrants returning home. In Figiel's irony, the postmodern is at once repressive and emancipatory. The novels raise the unsettling question, What if we can imagine nothing else?

In recent debates on globalization and oppositional discourses, the functions of the university feature prominently. One can't speak of new knowledge formations or Pacific literatures or oppositional cultures in

Oceania without mentioning the University of the South Pacific. It is unavoidably a site of contradictory developments, with its contradictory mission of serving island workforce needs, for serving those also means serving the workforce needs of transnational capital (by simply raising the level of education, it facilitates the economic and cultural penetration of globalism). At the same time, the university is a postcolonial institution, a location where creative and critical thinking is possible: it has promoted the writing of Pacific-oriented histories and has been a catalyst in the growth of Pacific literature. Recently it has moved considerably forward in these directions by giving Pacific studies the highest priority and supporting new initiatives like the Oceania Centre, the Pacific Writing Forum, and a chair in theatre arts.

The support for Pacific vernaculars has come less enthusiastically from both the university and the nation-states themselves. Only recently Fiji's new constitution has relocated the vernacular languages in governance and nation-making. This move should have an important influence on the future of multiculturalism in Fiji. Throughout Oceania in nationalism's own agenda of self-determination, many of its peoples have been marginalized because of their lack of competence in the English language. English, "the lingua franca of money and power" (Jameson 1998, 63), is the medium of education, the language of cultures of scholarship and of creativity. Languages that carry the memory of the region have had their roles stripped from them. The discontinuities between national memory and language almost define present identities in the region. The university's recent decision to offer majors in Pacific vernacular studies could eventually increase critical and cultural discourses in Oceanic languages. It is possible that the subaltern languages in Oceania will, through the globalist process, forge new alliances with Pacific diasporas and thus strengthen their overall status and prestige. Writing in as many subaltern languages as possible will illuminate larger communities of imagined lives and express the region's heterogeneity more fully. The relocation of vernacular languages is part of the very ground of the new epistemologies, of course; they will modify the English language's monopoly on representing Oceanic peoples, and thereby give rise to the exciting possibility of another stratum of intellectual and literary formation in the region.

It is not the intention of this address to undermine what has been achieved by writing in English. Writing in English has already played a vital role in imagining Oceania. However, Islanders haven't yet grappled

adequately with the issues of dominant and subordinate languages in the problematic of representation. Island scholars have paid scant attention to creating a genuine space for greater democratization of representation. One of the most undemocratic spaces is the classroom. In this space power has always been disproportionately distributed because of different levels of competence in the dominant language. If the linguistic situation is reorganized, and the subordinate languages are given proper status in the curriculum and in pedagogic practice, a different narrative of achievement and success would follow. Needless to say, there is an urgent need for radical reform of education and pedagogy throughout Oceania.

Oceanic writers are aware of the problem of representing in the English language characters who speak, feel, and imagine in vernacular languages. They have learned the strategies of appropriating and reconstituting the English language, so meticulously described by Helen Tiffin and others, so that Pacific literature can “convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (1989). Of course analyzing and representing others is a valid activity (otherwise intellectual life would not be possible), so long as the writers don’t prevent the unrepresented from representing themselves—subalterns can speak through writers as well as for themselves. But the problem remains of reaffirming authentically the voices of marginalized and unrepresented peoples.

These sorts of questionings about representation and subalternity led me in the direction of writing a novel in Fiji Hindi. It had to be Fiji Hindi, not standard Hindi, because that was the language of the subalterns I wanted to write about. Besides the sheer exhilaration of creating in a language that I had abandoned at high school, writing the novel was like revisiting the “archive” of that language. The process alerted me to the fact that there were histories, secrets, silences, omissions, nuances, intuitions, ironies in the language that no amount of what Rushdie calls “chutnification of English” (1991, 414) will be able to draw out of the memories of subalterns who dream and imagine in a different idiom. There is no substitute for writing about the subaltern in the subaltern’s own language. Naturally a writer who has emerged from subalterns and speaks their tongue will be several steps closer to the subaltern voice. A special space of creative potentialities is the in-between bilingual “double vision.”

Having written the novel, I now appreciate more fully the laments of J S Kanwal, the Hindi writer, on the situation of the vernacular writer—the lack of professional support, and problems associated with publication

and distribution (1980). The vernacular writer is discouraged and disadvantaged in every aspect of writing and publishing. This self-imposed limitation in Oceania further reduces the space of resistance.

I began this address by referring to the first SPACLALS conference in 1977, which coincided with an early phase of writing in Oceania. At that conference the main concern was with reinscribing authentic images. That led me to define a broader epistemological project in Oceania, which, I maintained, ought to increase Islanders' artistic and intellectual freedom: through changes in representational strategies, shifts toward multiple discursive, figural, and transgressive practices, and new ways of connecting with larger Oceania that include the Pacific diasporas, island writers ought to produce various forms of counterimaging to globalism's utopian quest. Literature must strive to withstand globalism, because globalism's market economy reduces literature to a commodity.

Now I would like to state what I believe "imagining Oceania" should mean to Islanders in the next millennium. The most challenging role for intellectuals in Oceania is to address the question, Is there a life outside the global system? Scholars could begin addressing this question by recognizing that there are no examples of political, intellectual, or artistic movement in the world that have the power to overthrow globalism (the only significant opposition has come from religious fundamentalism) and that no amount of boycott, legal challenge, or moral outrage can completely prevent its flow. There is no single ideological answer. There are, however, a range of oppositional cultures—cross-border alliances of environmentalists, human rights advocates, indigenous peoples' movements, nongovernment organizations, but nothing like the all-encompassing anticolonial movement that once captured Oceanic imaginations.

These oppositional cultures are likely to grow in importance as the failures of globalism's millennial dreams become apparent with increasing poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, crime, violence, ethnic conflicts, homelessness, and cultural and environmental disruptions. The issues of social justice, local self-sufficiency, and ecological well-being are all pointing toward the unavoidable conclusion that in order to rebuild the world from its present beleaguered state, people will need all the resources of their imaginations to chart alternative paths. Some of the answers lie in political and economic localization and the nonmonetized social economy that once characterized identity in Oceania.

The conditions of writing have altered radically. Globalism presents a

different sort of challenge for Oceania. Whereas in the 1970s, when Pacific literature was born, intellectuals believed that the writers' task was to unravel and discover myths and metaphors that would reflect the true essence of their culture and society, at the close of the twentieth century the world has become too heterogeneous, too complex for that task. One of the new roles for the imagination is to interrogate empty symbols, transmitted through mass media, that have become reality for some. But the role of writers doesn't end there: they have to fabricate a creative space of their own whereby they can prevent the closure of the Oceanic world by its reabsorption into the global paradigm.

I would like to end by reading the two quotations that I selected as epigraphs for this address. The first is from Fredric Jameson, who has helped me immensely to understand the relationship between advance capital and postmodernity: Jameson wrote, "if we can imagine nothing else, then obviously we have nothing to warn other cultures about either" (1998, 63). The second quotation is from a writer who has redefined the role of intellectuals in public affairs—Salman Rushdie: "I am a writer. I do not accept my condition, I will strive to change it: but I inhabit it. I am trying to learn from it" (1991, 414).

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