Jeremy Harding — Ideas Letter Podcast

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Leonard Benardo: Greetings, New Books Network listeners. I have the pleasure of being here with the writer and author Jeremy Harding, who has a new volume out on Verso entitled *Analog Africa: Notes on the Anti-Colonial Imagination,* a set of essays he has written over some years, mostly for the *London Review of Books*, but there's a brand new chapter as well.

And it's a brilliant tour de force of thinking about culture and politics within this anti-colonial imagination. I'm wondering if we could begin, Jeremy, by … if you could define a little bit, a) what is meant by "analog Africa," and if you could also say a little bit about what you mean by the anti-colonial imagination. And I ask because I'd like to move on a little bit to other forms of the colonial, the decolonial, the post-colonial, and see how they contrast if indeed they do with your conception of the anti-colonial imagination. So over to you.

Jeremy Harding: Thanks so much, Lenny. It's a pleasure to be talking to you. It's rare. We live on different sides of the Atlantic. Thank you also to New Book's Network for hosting this event through Lenny's organization.

Yeah, analog. The subtitle has the word anticolonial, but the main title, *Analog Africa*, is conceived because most of the essays that are published in this book deal with the period of time when analog was the method of transmission of information.

It ties up not only with some of the subjects in the book, for example, a grand tour of colonial ethnographers in the 1930s, but also with anti-colonialists who were either filmmakers or writers or photographers, in the post-World War II period. All this stuff was done on analog, but it's also my own experience as a journalist when I first began reporting from Africa in the 1980s, which is to say that we communicated by fax, we communicated by telex. If we were lucky enough to have a phone where the line worked, we used that. We shot our photographs on cellulose and our films on cellulose. And also I happen to associate modernism, European modernism, and to some extent American modernism, with those media.

And I think that many of the people that I've put into this book, many of the artists, were great. They had a great understanding of European and American modernism. And I associate this modernism with analog media, as I said. So that gives you some idea of why, to me, it's *Analog Africa*.

Although towards the end of the book there's a section called "Remasters," where the book goes on to discuss near-contemporary forms, in fact, contemporary forms of African anti-colonialism or retrospective anti-colonialism, I think, which are highly dependent on digital technologies. And I discuss those and the way that these great artists, a couple of them, and a great Kenyan writer, Binyavanga Wainaina, were using digital, actually, but to evoke and continue the sensibilities of the analog era. That's the first point.

The anti-colonial imagination, Lenny, I mean it's a good question because it's such a broad term that I've used there, but I think what I'm trying to hint at is work by artists, whether they're photographers, filmmakers, writers, painters, who might have gone on to explore their work in all kinds of ways with all kinds of reference points. But because of the colonial encounter, which was still ongoing in many of the cases, in most of the cases I write about, they found their work turned towards this key preoccupation, which was when will our countries, our people, be decolonized. And this has implications for the work. The work is no longer simply a kind of art for art's sake. But the key challenge then to these producers of art and cultural product is: do I have to do propaganda? Is propaganda slightly kind of naff, in some way betraying my instincts and calling as a cultural producer, or is there a way to do smart propaganda, which actually honors what it is I do as an artist?

Whence the question about the anti-colonial imagination, because I think it's a complex imagination, which is always aware that it might drift into a kind of coarse propaganda. Always aware that, if it's good, it has to keep its own values at heart and be loyal to those. It produces a wealth of enormously interesting work in my opinion.

Leonard Benardo: You describe your ambitions early on, and I quote, by saying, "My larger hope is to celebrate the ingenuity with which African artists challenged the colonial order on their own terms." I'm wondering, Jeremy, if we could speak a little bit about the question of agency. Because what I have found, in some writings, especially in the frame of the post-colonial, is sometimes the absence of agency. And you are committed, it seems, to ensuring that no matter how intense the struggle, no matter how violent the environment, that people are never simply left to someone else's devices, that there is always agency, there are always opportunities to negotiate around even the most thorny

political situations. And that's evident in every figure whom you contend with in this book. And I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about that commitment to agency, if you will.

Jeremy Harding: When I was working in parts of Africa, as a reporter, it was clear to me that whether things seemed to be going badly or seemed to be going well, people involved in the anti-colonial struggle and I'm now thinking of after the mid-seventies when a second wave of anti-colonial struggle began after the liberation of the Portuguese colonies, when Portugal withdrew in '75.

There was a new dimension that opened, which was that Angola and Mozambique, above all, were faced with the full might of white minority rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. They were the neighboring states, and they asked Angola and Mozambique to pay a very, very high price for their independence and also for their willingness to give basis and intellectual and material support to anti-apartheid movements, anti-white minority rule movements in neighboring countries.

My impression was, at its worst, that Angola and Mozambique were being hammered into the ground by their neighbors. Now that situation eventually changed, but in the early eighties, right through to about 1987, in a way, it couldn't have been worse. And yet everybody I met had yes, agency, as X would say, everybody was committed.

If they were failing, you owed it to them to listen to what it was that they felt was going badly. If it was going well, you owed it to them to give an account of how the tables were turning, how the full independence of Angola and Mozambique, for example, was at last within reach. And South Africa, I should add.

So agency is a key term across all the players. As far as this book is concerned, we're dealing with artists, cultural producers, if you like. And they have… it goes back to this dilemma about do I do hard propaganda or do I actually commit to what it is that my values, aesthetic values and ethical values, are.

There is a kind of tension in the artist, I think, about whether or not pens should be thrown down. The paintbrush should be thrown down. And one should simply join the struggle, take up arms. In fact, in a couple of cases, it was a bit of both. But this question of agency and this wish to throw one's weight as a cultural producer, painter, artist, filmmaker, writer, whatever it is, behind the struggle was immense and unmistakable. There is never any question for me

that people were robbed of their agency even when they were losing, even when they were being defeated.

Leonard Benardo: You mentioned right now a Lusophone Africa, you know, which has suffered by comparison with other parts of the continent and you have hung in there and focused your attention and your writing and your mind on different aspects of the Lusophone, if you will, imagination. Why is that? What drew you perhaps more to the Lusophone dynamic than others?

Jeremy Harding: I think it was a force of circumstance, Lenny, because really when I was visiting Africa in the 1980s, I was never based there or never for more than about seven or eight months. It was those Lusophone colonies, Angola and Mozambique, that were really in the thick of stuff. And my main interest then, which has remained ever since, was how can I report on the outstanding places in Africa where full decolonization hasn't come. Sure, in Angola and Mozambique, the Portuguese flag was lowered and the national flags went up in 1975. But immediately, a war, which started as a kind of disturbance and disruption and kind of destabilization . . . wars began in both those countries and independence was sort of kicked into touch. And I think it's a coincidence, really, that I happened to end up thinking so much about Angola and Mozambique; the coincidence being that these were the guys in the firing line from Apartheid South Africa, I'm afraid to say from Washington as well.

And we're having a very, very rough time of it, as you say. So, yeah, it was kind of logical that I'd end up thinking a lot about these places.

Leonard Benardo: You're opening chapter in which you follow this extraordinary trip in the early thirties from Dakar to Djibouti, with its main protagonist Michel Leiris, it's extraordinary how you are able to address the ambivalences so thoughtfully without any finger wagging or tut tutting that Leiris embodied, similar to [Albert] Camus. In your piece on Camus, it's very hard for one to give Camus' history without putting, you know, their finger down on a scale and saying it in the end he was X.

You don't do that. You don't do that with Leiris. And I'm curious, just as a writer, is it a kind of intrinsic commitment you have to human ambivalence that forces you into a position not to take sides as it were.

Jeremy Harding: Yeah, good question. With Leiris, who was a young French ethnographer who went on this crazy royal progress by French ethnographers from the west coast of Africa to the east coast of Africa, that took two years.

Leonard Benardo: And it was financed by the state?

Jeremy Harding: Largely by the state, but there were also private donations. This was an expedition to swell the ethnographic museums and various museums in France.

But it was basically a kind of expedition of pilfering, robbery, taking stuff without consent, sacred objects and all the rest. And Leiris, who was the secretary of the mission, kept a diary. And the diary is magnificent and it shows the writer in all his ambivalence, although I feel by the end that he's turning pretty decisively against this venture, even though it was the career move for him.

But, he's become an anti-colonialist. And another thing about this book of essays of mine is that there are white people in it. I mean, this is something we might go on to discuss later. I mean, I don't think that anti-colonialism was confined exclusively to Africans. There were many Europeans who got involved in the anticolonial struggle, including actually in Angola, after independence, many of the Portuguese Army officers joined in the independence movement and helped go into fight as the next wave of the struggle began.

So anti-colonialism belongs intrinsically to Africans. I can't stress that enough. But there were many, many sympathetic Europeans, and Camus was one of them, to go back to Algeria and Albert Camus.

The problem with Camus was that he didn't believe in independence for Algeria. And he had a dream that there could be federation and there could be a way forward without a ghastly war. This idea was a busted flush. It was never going to work. There'd been too much suffering inflicted by French colonialism on the indigenous population of Algeria.

But, he argued his case very well. And of course, I happen not to agree with it, history didn't agree with it either. It's very interesting to watch Camus's progress through this nightmare of conscience that he . . . the hole that he dug himself, I feel. And as a young man, he'd been a very brilliant reporter from Algeria in his twenties and thirties, I mean, he'd been a down the line kind of left wing communist sympathizer. We often find decolonial movements, anticolonial movements, linked up with old forms of Marxism and ripped into the colonial administration for the poverty it inflicted and the misery and exploitation it inflicted on indigenous Algerians, but he couldn't take the following step which was that there would have to be independence in the end.

I can't judge, I can't judge these things, as you say, but I can describe them. And I know where my own sympathies lie, I've said so, but it's not for me to go kind of setting people straight or wagging my finger at them. I just want to show what it is, what the tensions and ambiguities of those situations were.

Leonard Benardo: And with respect to those ambiguities, help us understand Jeremy, because you also write on Kamel Daoud, whose brilliant book now from 10, 12 years ago, *The Meursault Investigation*, kind of inverts Camus' *The Stranger*, but Daoud became, and you play this out, especially in Exxon Provenance, very reactionary in his politics.

Can you give a sense of his transition. . . how Kamal Daoud became so right wing. . . how did you understand it?

Jeremy Harding: Yeah. Kamel Daoud's book, his novel, *The Meursault Investigation*, is a completely brilliant inversion of Camus' great modernist novel, *The Stranger*, *L'Étranger.* It's devastating and it is ferociously anticolonial in everything that it does, and it's also beautifully judged. You can't kind of fault the book, I think, for the way it answers Camus back and says, okay, you write a novel about a nameless Arab who gets shot by a white man. I'm writing a novel about that nameless Arab who has a name, and my narrator will be his brother.

It's a masterpiece of answering back. The trouble with Daoud, who was a young Islamist actually for a few years in Algeria. . .

Leonard Benardo: During the nineties he was an Islamist?

Jeremy Harding: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, very briefly. That's right. During that very dark period. When he'd kind of sorted out his feelings about Islam, he became a commentator and started to write very incendiary pieces about the *Ancien Régime*, the FLN, which had been in power for years. He was getting attacked by the regime, Le Pouvoir, as it's called on the one hand, and also threatened by radical Islamists on the other.

And somehow I think his patient snapped. That's my best conjecture because I feel that what happened to Daoud was that rather than repositioning himself very carefully, he just tumbled into a new position, an extreme position, almost as if to say my own extremism will be tantamount to the extreme pressures I'm feeling from the regime and the extreme things, including death threats, that come my way from radical Islamists in Algeria.

In some sense, he flipped and as you say, Lenny, his commentaries have been really on occasion over the top, and he's taken a pro-Marine Le Pen position, if not officially by insinuation, in some of the pieces that he's written. So he's in a strange place and I fear for his sensibility, really.

Leonard Benardo: Yeah. Moving back for a second, Jeremy, to the first part of your book, the exceptional second chapter that looks at the kind of relationships forged between the Musée Du Quai Branly and the British Museum and the AfricaMuseum outside of Brussels.

It's an extraordinary chapter I learned so much from, and I just wonder because the debate on restitution is still raging, perhaps slightly less so than several years back but it's still very much on the agenda, you assert yourself in terms of your own position modestly.

But it struck me that you're unsure, precisely, what's the right thing to do. And, am I reading you right, in terms of restitution after grappling with the ugly and repugnant history of Leopold and all that that represented for the AfricaMuseum in Brussels and what Sarkozy wanted out of the Musée Du Quai Branly.

Do you feel that you have properly grappled with how you think yourself about what restitution means from a policy standpoint? Or do you feel you're just not equipped to be able to arrive at a point of view that you're comfortable with?

Jeremy Harding: Okay. Yeah. Another very good probing question. Incidentally, these three little essays about museums are in the book, because I regard museums as now being the kind of center and focus of the continuous global anti-colonial imagination. That's why they're there. That's why it seems to me they fit as part of this set of essays, because the debate about restitution has kept the anti-colonial imagination alive.

In fact, it's given it a new lease of life in some sense. I feel clear on the policy position in my own mind. I think that restitution is a good idea. And I think that it's possible in practice, and I think that the museum that's done the most kind of practical work about what can constitute restitution is, oddly enough, the most reactionary one, the most colonial, the most racist one, which of course is the Royal Africa Museum in Brussels, which has gone through a fantastic, impressive turnover and a makeover, I should say, and really tried to rethink the museum and all its holdings and how the colonial era is presented. And I think it's done a very good job. It is not a sufficient job to many Congolese historians, musicologists and scholars. They don't feel that it's gone far enough. But the practical work on restitution is really very thorough in Brussels. And it

involves: On what grounds is there fair restitution? What practical manner of restitution should there be? And under what circumstances?

So if I have reservations, they're to do with practicality. I mean a very, very good example, unfortunately, is the Museum of West African Art, which is scheduled to open in November and receive fabulous bronzes, which are ransacked and stolen from Benin City by the British in the 1890s, and yet an argument, a dispute has, has broken out about who these bronzes belong to. And actually, the Museum of West African Art is in a state of suspended animation, really until some kind of provisional settlement emerges and this kind of episode is enough to worry anybody, including the people in Africa who know that they want their sacred objects restituted and those in Europe and America who are actually very, very keen to put the restitution process in order. So on policy grounds, I'm with those anti-colonial voices who say, look, we need this stuff back.

You know, also, you have to remember that many of these objects - they're powerful objects, they embody the past, they embody the ancestors - and the fact that they're not there, where they belong, is, I think profoundly injuring. The policy is absolutely a good one in my view.

There are many, many people who've thrown their weight behind it, even Macron and the German government. It's a question of how this stuff is going to fall into place and be carefully looked after by it it's proper owners. Although there is a discussion that goes, look, it's no longer your business you people in Western museums who've hung onto this stuff. What happens to it? Just give it back and that makes a certain amount of sense to me too. But it's complicated. The practicalities are very complicated

Leonard Benardo: I don't imagine if the National Front, or whatever they've been renamed, come to power in '27 that's going to be on their agenda.

Jeremy Harding: I don't think they'll break their hearts about stuff going back to it's original owners. They'll bellyache about woke and take various positions like that. But no, you are right. It's just not something that they prioritize.

Leonard Benardo: You distinguish in one chapter between ethnography and social anthropology. I found it very curious. And you take that contrast to some of the museum holdings too, and the sort of ideology of different museums. Can you just share a little bit about how you contrast those two conceptions? The ethnographer and the anthropologist?

Jeremy Harding: Yeah. I mean, I'm neither, but when I was a student studying literature, I was hugely drawn to anthropology. And occasionally, the English faculty lectures at the anthropology department. But it seems to me that ethnography . . . let's start with ethnography. What does it mean? Why don't we call it ethnology? We should really, strictly speaking, call it ethnology, you know, the study of ethnicities or others.

The reason I think the term ethnography has come to be so common is that the real endpoint of ethnographic work is the paper. It's the book, it's the monograph, that tells you everything about one particular culture, whether it be large or small. So ethnography is a subdivision of anthropology, but it's also got a kind of autonomy from it, as I understand it, as a lay person. I'm sure that practitioners would disagree with me. That's the first point.

But the second point, which I find very interesting, is that anthropology took a very interesting and sinister turn under colonial rule. And let me just go back a moment, Lenny, and say that ethnography is the colonial discipline par excellence. It goes out to look at the people under conquest and bring back lots and lots of fascinating information about them, to go into brilliant monographs and so forth. But Anthropology as a wider discipline also took this strange colonial turn, it became fascinated with the size of people's heads, with bogus notions about whether if we measured the cranial measurements, we could prove that the lesser races deserve to be conquered. And I think this may have been called at some point or other tautologically human anthropology, but it was about digging up remains and kind of sending heads and body parts and hair and all kinds of stuff back to Europe to be examined in order to produce a theory of races, a hierarchy of races. And this is a problem to this day in our museums, whether we're talking about the British Museum or we're talking about the museum in Brussels and others in Germany, there are lots of these remains that are still around.

And they were got for racist purposes in the name of racist ideologies and they proved very little, but they are sitting there and people are worrying about how to get them back on both sides of the transaction actually, people in former colonies want them back, museum keepers are pretty eager to let them go. It's complicated on a practical basis is all.

I'd say really to wrap that discussion up, that this kind of anthropology of race, or an anthropology, as it were instrumentalized, for race theories, ground to a halt in 1945 with the defeat of Nazi Germany.

I mean, after all, Hitler had been a particular expert on peoples, a particular expert on lesser races, and that was over. And a line was drawn under that kind of anthropology, and a good thing too.

Leonard Benardo: Throughout the book, you seem to engage with what you yourself talked about as discovering a world of parallel information, and that was a very resonant term from you.

I'm just wondering, when you speak of parallel information, what exactly do you think you were implying there?

Jeremy Harding: I think I'm drawing on my own experience as a journalist in parts of Africa. Very often what you had to do in a military situation or a situation of instability, and a very smart thing to do, was to hook up with a local journalist and then you pay the local journalist and you did your stories together. He or she would file for their organization, you file for whoever you were filing for. But it struck me very soon, very quickly, in that process that the journalism in Africa was incredibly smart. It was very much more *across* what was going on than let's say someone like me who was parachuted in and then kind of made their way out after a month, week, two months, whatever.

So that is part of what I'm thinking about by parallel information. The other part I'm thinking about is the artists and cultural producers who are in this book, *Analog Africa*. They are also producing a kind of parallel information, which wasn't generally available to the West, who were the main consumers of whatever it was I might write or my colleagues in America or Europe would write.

There was a whole world in there of extremely good information relayed on the one hand by marvelous artists and on the other, by brilliant journalists. I mean real class acts. I came to discover, very quickly, that journalism in Africa was a class act, and of course, long after I left off reporting and once we hit the digital era, it became obvious to the rest of the world that journalism in Africa was of a very, very high quality.

The problem was at the time in the Cold War, it was hard for them to get that stuff out to audiences beyond their own countries, let alone for the continent as a whole.

Leonard Benardo: It's one reason my friend, Howard French, throws up his hands repeatedly at the parlous nature of Western writing, Western journalism on Africa, because he knows there are so many fine journalists to be mined and

yet, you know, the *New York Times* and others have often failed dramatically in telling the stories on the continent.

Jeremy, in the book, you don't put yourself in there very often, if at all, but there's one point in the essay on Binyavanga Wainaina, the Kenyan writer who died tragically a few years ago and made famous, of course, for his *Granta* essay “How to Write About Africa.” You implicate yourself somewhere in that piece. Can you remind us about that and why you do?

Jeremy Harding: I do, Lenny. It's partly because Binyavanga published this wonderful piece, this scurrilous satire about the way - I'm sure Howard French would've loved it - the way that journalists like me, aid workers, travel writers, or let's say elegant literary travelers like V. S. Naipaul. The way they chose to describe Africa was, in Binyavanga Wainaina Elena's terms, unforgivable.

And although it was a polemical piece and very, very short - if you haven't read it, anybody who's listening, I strongly advise you to do so - it's extremely funny. The piece was published in *Granta* and it led me to think: Yeah, I had been published in *Granta* in a previous incarnation under a different editor back in the eighties.

And something I noticed and felt I should take myself to task for, you know, without wringing my hands over it, was something that Binyavanga had put his finger on. And it was a piece I'd written for Bill Buford, who became the editor of *Granta* in the eighties and turned it into the most exciting magazine on the block, as far as I was concerned. I thought it was just mesmerizingly good. And to be published there was, you know, quite something. Nonetheless, the style of the editing meant that there was less exposition, at least in my case as a junior writer where I had just come on board. Less exposition and more graphic, kind of mise-en-scène, you know, set the scene, just show don’t tell.

I felt that this was, in my case, doing a disservice to stuff I wrote about in South Africa as it happened. The point being that I was writing about a very, very disruptive and violent series of events in Soweto, in the townships. I had all the detail. I'd been an eyewitness to it, but I also wanted to put some kind of exposition in to say this is not just, you know, beautiful chaos. Like you’d want to show if you were a clever movie maker, it has a meaning. There is a reason for it and I want to talk about that, but this was not something that was encouraged.

And I take myself to task, and possibly Bill but not really, for having published pieces that were too much show and not enough tell. I mean, showing is great if

you are telling someone how to sharpen a chainsaw or ride a bike, but in writing, I think you have to have more exposition, especially if you're writing about something violent, which I was.

Leonard Benardo: In writing about the photographer, photojournalist I guess, Ernest Cole, whom you say is "a virtuoso in the art of anger management in an era when tempers ran high." Vivid, vivid description. That the photographer Cole convinced authorities he was colored as a way in which to actually give him more physical access to do his work.

I wonder if you could speak to that and also you talked about the relationship, Jeremy, with the Hasselblad Foundation that continues to hold onto some 500 of his prints. I'm just wondering why they're doing so, by what means?

Jeremy Harding: Yeah. Let me take those two points in reverse, Lenny. The row between the Ernest Cole Foundation, which is basically his family, Hasselblad [Foundation] is not something I have my head across anymore. When I wrote the piece, that was the situation as it stood at the time. It may have evolved. I happen not to know; I happen not to have looked back on that. But it's a standoff between the family, the descendants of Ernest Cole who want this stuff back and wish to be empowered by it, I imagine as well, and the Foundation, which has a lot to work out about where it stands on its ownership. And why – the thing I don't understand – why it was so insistent on holding onto it at the time that I wrote the piece. That's the first part.

The earlier part of your question about Cole. You know, the thing about trying to be a South African photographer who wasn't white in the 1960s and 70s, although Cole was out by then, it was nearly impossible. And to be a black photographer was incredibly tricky. And Cole was a junior guy at this marvelous magazine called *Drum Magazine*. Which stood out against apartheid and was very kind of reckless, although the fact that it was edited by white people gave it a certain kind of security. And Ernest Cole was a junior guy who started in the dark room and branched out on his own. He started looking at opportunities to take photos and found that he'd run into a brick wall by being black, which he was, he was classified as black and by hook or by crook, and we don't know exactly how this happened, he managed to convince the authorities to up his status away from black to the next degrading status up, but marginally less degrading, which was colored. And once he got status as the colored person, he began to operate much more freely, even though under severe restraints.

Cole's photographs are magnificent, in my view.

Leonard Benardo: Well there's that one at the end of your book. I should point out to those listening that the images that are in your book, Jeremy, are just fantastic. And the one you have with Cole of that boy who's on his tippy toes playing a double bass. You call it a three-string bass as if it's a bass made for three strings, when really it's just a string missing.

Jeremy Harding: Well, I'm not sure. I checked that out actually. But anyway, you may be right. I thought, oh, this is just a beaten-up bass. But then looking into it, I thought, well, maybe not. But anyway, who cares? A beautiful photo.

Leonard Benardo: Incredible. An incredible photo.

Jeremy Harding: Yeah, that was in the run-up, I think, to Cole's departure. He had to flee South Africa. He was in trouble. He was in trouble with the authorities, with the apartheid authorities.

And I think the trouble was, well I've conjectured about this without knowing the truth, but I think the trouble was that the apartheid authorities wanted to turn Cole. They wanted to make him an informer. And he knew then that his time was up and that he was damned if he was going to do that, and he had to get out of South Africa.

Leonard Benardo: And you note that his friend, the *New York Times* journalist who became managing editor, Joseph Lelyveld, also thought that could be the case and obviously put a strain on their relationship.

Jeremy Harding: Absolutely. He thought that Cole was an informant although he says somewhere that he came to regret that view about Cole later. I think it's safe to assume that Joseph Lelyveld felt the authorities are always onto him, so he must have something to give them and he must from time to time be giving it. But in fact I think they were onto him and he was playing a very clever game until he'd simply run out of road and would have to portray somebody or give up some names, that's when he was out of there.

But what a great legacy as a photographer.

Leonard Benardo: Yeah. Exceptional stuff. Jeremy just two last things. One on Victor Serge, because you knew his son and interviewed his son. And by the way, you write on Victor Serge and I'd like to quote you again because it's so lovely: “The holes in the soles of his shoes are the stigmata of the exemplary, defeated revolutionary.” Just lovely.

Jeremy Harding: His body was found and taken to a police station in Mexico City and the son found him at the back of the police station and the first thing you saw were the shoes and the holes in the soles. Very, very touching really. I didn't actually know the son, but the son is amazing.

One of the people I write about, a filmmaker called Sarah Maldoror, who is French. She was a great anti-colonial figure and made at least two stunning films; one a short and one a full length feature about the struggle in Angola in the 1960s as it was just getting underway. They're marvelous films.

She was very interested in left-wing politics. She had taken up with a senior member of the Angolan Liberation Movement, the most credible one in my opinion. And spent quite a lot of time, not only in Algeria, but in Guinea-Bissau, another Portuguese colony before it was liberated. But she was also fascinated by a huge spectrum of thinking and politics. And she wasn't even only involved in politics, but she made the most marvelous film, comparable in quality to *Sambizanga*, which was a feature length film based on a short story by Victor Serge, the left oppositionist who'd run foul of Stalin, about a hospital in Leningrad in the thirties, which is basically a place for detainees. You know, it's a forerunner of a certain kind of gulag, actually it's contemporaneous with the gulags, but where you put dissenters and call them mentally disturbed. And the film is marvelous. I think it's a tribute first to Maldoror's versatility and the breadth of her intelligence. She insisted on being called a Black filmmaker on some occasions and on others saying, no, don't call me a Black filmmaker if you're going to reduce me to that. I am black and everything else. And *The Leningrad Hospital* proves that point, I think, beyond doubt.

But it is important to me because I think it shows us how much transaction there was between the African anti-colonialists and the left-wing modernists in Europe and America, above all in the forties, but then retroactively looking back on the thirties and what had happened to the Soviet project under Stalin. One of my minor ambitions in this book is to model up slightly the distinctions between an absolute separate Africa and an absolute separate West, because in most of the cases I'm writing about, there is a thorough interaction and the Africans in my book are borrowing very heavily and very cleverly from the European modernist repertory, and turning it. They're reinventing it for situations of their own to marvelous effect.

Meanwhile, a lot of African art is disappearing into calories in Paris, where it's been sold for a fortune. But also a lot of Europeans, like Picasso, have evolved a profound fascination, if not a proper understanding I dare to say, of African art, which they referred to at the time as primitive. On the contrary, it was grand art

that informed their own. So yeah, this mix-up is embodied in Maldoror's film, *The Leningrad Hospital*. It almost does the job that the book hopes to do, really.

Leonard Benardo: And the book does in fact, in spades, in terms of expressing this kind of syncretic imagination, which takes me to the last question and sort of what we began with though I didn't fully explore it.

I'll tell you a brief anecdote: I was at a retreat of a British university. I was invited by the rector to sit in, and he asked at the outset all his deans, all his heads of faculty, as they went around the table to explain how they were proceeding to decolonize their respective curricula.

I found it quite astonishing actually, the question and the whole sort of theatricality or performativity of it was quite lovely. But I do wonder, Jeremy, if you feel there is such a project around the decolonial imagination. That is to say whether a museum or university or library of whatever sort can be decolonized and what that means to you as someone who was so active and intellectually and politically engaged during this post-colonial moment, where the sort of cultural projects were so profound, as you've described throughout the essays. What does it mean to have a decolonial imagination as so many would like to have it today?

Jeremy Harding: I have only the most fragile, tenuous connections with universities. So it's difficult for me to understand what is fully unfolding in that notion of decoloniality. Of course, I have a grasp of it, but I don't have a working experience of it. But I do think, Lenny, that it's a good project.

That's to say, it begins around the time of *Orientalism* by Edward Said, the publication of that book. It's saying look, let's have a look at all these assumptions. I think this ties up with Binyavanga Wainaina's essay "How to Write About Africa." That's a pastiche but he's decolonizing, late in the day, the kind of complacent Western imagination about going in and telling everybody what to do and what it is you personally think. I think there is a lot to be done, and there is already a huge body of work, about how we read difficult novels.

Difficult would be Joseph Conrad. That would be the epitome for me of a very difficult novel that needs to be unpacked by modern readings, by modern forms of teaching. So I'm not at all against the idea of decolonizing literature or theory. The manner of its doing would matter to me very much. How that was done would determine and affirm the value of the project. So I'm basically in favor and to go back to the museums, I think that it's paid off. We've got a proper full on debate. As you say, it may be tailing off momentarily, but we've

got a full on debate about where stuff belongs, who it belongs to, what the rights and wrongs of pillage and pilfer are, and they're very clear to me.

So I don’t really have an issue about the idea of decolonizing discourse, decolonizing scholarship. But as I say, it's a question of how people go about it and that question to me is whether or not I find it useful. But it obviously serves an enormously important purpose even though there are some opponents who seem to have had it up to here for reasons I don't entirely understand, but I can guess.

Leonard Benardo: I read a review of your memoir, *Mother Country*, that came out 20 years ago in which the writer in the *Observer* described you as having an “unpushy intelligence.”

Listening, Jeremy, to our conversation over the last hour, I think that's quite apposite because your writing and your words here are very unpushy. They're critical, they're open-hearted, they're open-ended. They allow for ambivalences and they're thoroughly erudite. To be able to sort that all out is an achievement. And as a close friend of yours and mine said, “Jeremy is the gold standard.” And this book is the gold standard: *Analog Africa: Notes on the Anti-Colonial Imagination* is just out from Verso and I can't recommend it more highly.

And the person actually who I was referring to has a blurb on the back. So if you want to know who that is, get the book, read the blurb, and then read the essays. Jeremy, I can't thank you more for your time and your wisdom.

Jeremy Harding: Thank you so much. Wisdom, I'm not sure, Lenny, but thank you so much. It's great to see you.

Leonard Benardo: Okay. All the best, Jeremy.