



An Interview with Rob Nixon

by Mark L. Lilleleht

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The first thing one notices is that Rob Nixon is a natty dresser. The next thing one notices, once the conversation has started, is how comfortable Rob Nixon is with himself. He almost anticipates the questions posed - as if they've been asked, and answered, many times: each response preceded by a clipped "yes" before plunging into an explanation. But there is no hint of weariness in his answers. At times he is thoughtful and deliberate, at other times his words race ahead, as if the ideas pull Nixon, eager to keep up, along with them.

Nixon, the Rachel Carson Professor of English and a member of the Border and Transcultural Studies Research Circle, came to Madison from Columbia University in the Fall of 1999. "One of the things [that attracted him to the UW] was having creative writing folded into the English department." The success of his eclectic memoir/history, *Dreambirds: The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food, and Fortune* (Picador 1999), has been a pleasant surprise. He

publishes widely in the mainstream press ("Since I was a graduate student I've always done a lot of journalism, public writing, non-fiction. I feel that more and more that's an integral, maybe even a foregrounded side to my intellectual/creative identity"), influenced in part by working with Edward Said, from whom he took "an example of a certain readiness to be a public intellectual and not to feel that you were intellectually compromising yourself if you wrote in a different language."

In addition to his writing, teaching, and service ("the bureaucracy around being in the University is far more enveloping and in some ways dispersing than the actual teaching itself. You do have to make choices and sometimes in order to get any writing done you have to be inefficient on other fronts. It's a juggling act but still one I find satisfying"), Professor Nixon is currently at work on two major projects: looking at concepts of manliness and masculinity ("one of the things I felt I hadn't really talked about much [in *Dreambirds*]"); and the literary interplay of environmentalism and postcolonialism ("getting beyond some of the clichés about green imperialism, or 'this is a first world discourse' and something to do with privilege. I just don't buy that at all.").

His sense of the current literary culture of South Africa is one of "qualified optimism". He lets out a gentle whistle and sigh: "It's difficult for writers starting out; for young writers, black and white writers starting out, it's hard. I wish there was more energy, literary energy, at the moment.... On the whole I don't think it's a particularly rich time for African writing; there's so much stacked up against African writers, even in terms of the initial choice of saying this is what I want to become. There's very little around you saying 'this is a viable profession'." And yet, "I go back there and I just see all these stories, little notes in newspapers, or

an anecdote that someone tells you in a bar or something, and I think 'what amazing material', it's just so different."

"If I had - which I'll never have - a whole lot of money," skipping lightly over the academic's lament with a smile, "the thing I would love most would be to set up an artist's colony in South Africa. I just see so many people living extraordinary lives in South Africa and other parts of Africa and just being absolutely battered and exhausted ... really, really creative people [citing the South African authors Njabulo Ndebele and Mbulelo Mzamane as two examples]. There's a silence there which I miss. I miss the testimony and the great writing that they were producing."

Of course, the great testimony of recent years in South Africa has been that given before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "One of the strongest defenses of the project [of the TRC] has been in relation to the attempt to generate a density of evidence such that nobody could say this didn't happen; despite all the shredding, despite all the disappearances and so forth, to say here are hundreds and hundreds of voices saying this is what happened to me, this is what happened to my family, this is what I did. And I think to a large extent that side of it has been successful. I think what is difficult always in this process is people who have suffered are given a window in which to testify or not and that window may not correspond to a point in their own emotional life where they're ready to. I think the support structures have been very weak; so that somebody could go through this immensely traumatic experience of testifying and then what? There's just not the infrastructure or support to really help walk people through the aftermath." And, he continues, "it's impossible not to seethe sometimes at the lingering sense of injustice. Just practically speaking it's hard to know

how else that information could have been gained without something like this being set up. But it has cost a lot of people."

The conversation bounces around numerous other topics: his sense of identity ("I suppose because I've moved around so much, I'm very interested in these stories that take one across borders. I don't really see

myself as an Africanist; maybe I'm a displacementist"); a more complete turn toward non-fiction ("I've sort of reached the point in my life where the middling non-fiction book gives me more than a middling novel"); literary theory ("It's often harder to theorize lightly than theorize heavily. If the sentence has six 'of's in it then usually the thought is bad as well"); and his recent reviews of two

Australian works ("I think I was seen as somebody who dealt with non-American spaces, so I got the rest of the globe, or at least the anglophone globe").

"Maybe I'm just sort of a restless thinker or something," he suggests, almost, but not quite, apologetically. But it's that "something" his readers and students most appreciate. ■

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