THROUGH THE LENS









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Featuring Prof. S. N. K. Varela

Interviewer: Welcome, Professor. Thanks for joining us today.

Prof. Varela: Thank you for having me.

Interviewer: Let's jump straight in. In literature and the arts, everyone talks about representation right now. But I'm not sure what people mean. Is it just about "including" different kinds of people?

Prof. Varela: That's part of it, but it's not the whole story. Representation is about how groups, identities, cultures, and experiences are portrayed—who is visible, who is absent, and who gets reduced to a shortcut. It's not just "Are they there?" It's also: What is their treatment? Are they complex? Are they respected? Are they mocked? Are they framed as human or as a symbol?

Interviewer: Okay, so it's not just presence. It's portrayal.

Prof. Varela: Exactly. And once you start thinking that way, you naturally arrive at a bigger question: Who gets to tell a story? That's where issues like authority, credibility, and gatekeeping come in.

Interviewer: When you say "who gets to tell a story," do you mean who is allowed to create art about certain experiences?

Prof. Varela: Sometimes "allowed," yes, but more often "positioned." Some creators are assumed to have authority: they're trusted, funded, promoted, and reviewed generously. Others face constant suspicion and must "prove" their credibility.For example, two writers might pitch novels about the same community: the first is a famous outsider whose manuscript is described as "brave" and "universal," while the second is a debut writer from that community who is asked to add footnotes, justify every detail as "authentic," and explain why their story will appeal to a "mainstream" audience.

Interviewer: So it's not only a moral question. It's also an industry question.

Prof. Varela: Precisely. A publishing house, film studio, gallery, streaming platform—these aren't neutral. They decide what gets financed, marketed, awarded, and made visible. That's gatekeeping: the power to open or close doors, often while claiming the doors are open to "anyone talented enough."

Interviewer: So the "who" shapes what the world sees as valuable are the gatekeepers?.

Prof. Varela: Yes. And it shapes what audiences come to accept as "normal," "universal," or "relatable."

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Interviewer: I keep hearing the word tokenism. What does it mean in plain terms?

Prof. Varela: Tokenism is when a text includes a marginalised identity in a shallow way to appear inclusive without changing the story's deeper priorities. The "token" character is often underwritten, sidelined, or used as decoration.

Interviewer: So it's representation that looks progressive but doesn't really "do the work."

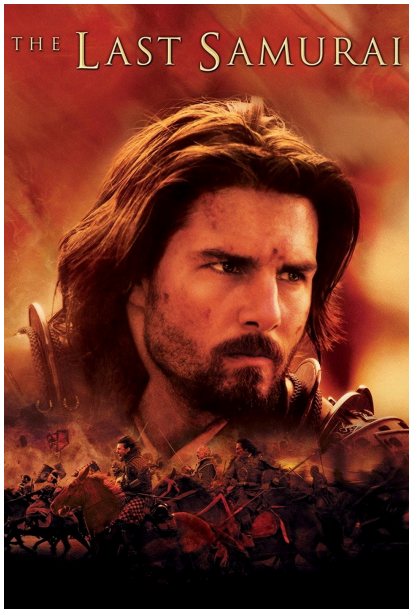
Prof. Varela: That's right. And an important companion concept is centering. This is who the narrative treats as the emotional default: Whose feelings are the engine of the plot? Whose pain is explored with care? Whose inner life is considered "the main story," and whose is just background?

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

Prof. Varela: Let's imagine a film marketed as a story about an Indigenous community. But the plot mostly follows an outsider who arrives, learns a lesson, and leaves transformed while the community functions as scenery for the outsider's growth. Even if Indigenous characters are present, the film may still be centering the outsider.

Interviewer: So the community is present but not centered—almost like a stage-set.

Prof. Varela: Exactly.



The Last Samurai (Warner Bros., 2003) tells the story of a military commander that travels to Japan to help train imperial troops, becomes immersed in samurai culture.

Interviewer: That's interesting. I also hear terms like whitewashing and erasure. Are those the same thing?

Prof. Varela: Related, but not identical. Whitewashing usually refers to replacing non-white characters, histories, or aesthetics with whiteness—often through casting, rewriting, or visual design. Erasure is broader: it's when a group's presence, contribution, or complexity is reduced, ignored, or removed.

Interviewer: So erasure could happen even if nobody is "replaced"—just… quietly omitted.

Prof. Varela: Exactly. Imagine an adaptation of a historical event where certain groups were central, but the story removes them to "simplify" the narrative. That "simplification" is often political. The result is erasure.

Interviewer: What's the damage?

Prof. Varela: Art doesn't only entertain. It becomes memory. If a culture repeatedly sees itself omitted, distorted, or treated as an accessory, that shapes what feels believable and what feels "unimportant."

Interviewer: People also argue about authenticity. Is authenticity basically "only people from a group can tell that group's stories"?

Prof. Varela: Authenticity is trickier than that. On one hand, communities have the right to challenge misrepresentation, especially when those misrepresentations cause harm. On the other hand, art also involves imagination, transformation, and yes, creative licence.

Interviewer: So where's the line?

Prof. Varela: It helps to break it into questions:

1. **Authority**: Who is speaking, and what gives them legitimacy in the eyes of the audience or industry?
2. **Credibility**: Have they done the work—research, consultation, humility—or are they trading on stereotypes?
3. **Intent vs. Impact**: What did they mean to do, and what did the work actually do in the world?

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Interviewer: So it's not just "what did you intend?" It's "what happened because of it."

Prof. Varela: Precisely. Distinguishing between intent and. impact matters because harm can occur without malicious intent, especially when the harm repeats long-standing patterns.

Interviewer: How do stereotypes fit into all this?

Prof. Varela: Stereotypes are narrative shortcuts that flatten people into a limited set of traits. They often appear "efficient" for storytelling, but they reduce human complexity—and they can justify unequal treatment.In other words, if a group is repeatedly shown as "dangerous," "lazy," "irrational," or "less intelligent," then audiences may start to accept suspicion, exclusion, ridicule, or harsher punishment toward that group as reasonable—even when it isn't.

Interviewer: I can see how that can cause harm. What about exoticism?

Prof. Varela: Exoticism is when a culture or identity is portrayed as strange, alluring, mysterious, or "other," primarily to entertain an audience positioned as normal. The exoticised group becomes aesthetic material—something to consume—rather than a set of real lives. For example, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984) has frequently been criticised for portraying India through a sensationalised "mystical and grotesque" lens—cult rituals, shocking food scenes, and an atmosphere of danger—so that the culture functions as an exotic spectacle for outsiders, rather than as a lived, ordinary reality for real people.

Interviewer: That seems connected to ideas of empathy.

Prof. Varela: Very much. Empathy in art is not just "feeling sorry for someone." It's the willingness to imagine their interiority without turning them into an object, a lesson, or a spectacle.

Interviewer: I agree. Okay, I want to discuss another topic related to this issue, and I'm going to start by asking directly: what is cultural appropriation?

Prof. Varela: In simplest terms, cultural appropriation is when elements of a marginalised culture are taken—often by a more powerful group—without respect, context, or meaningful connection, especially when that taking benefits the taker more than the community of origin.

Interviewer: So it's not just "influence." It's influence plus inequality?

Prof. Varela: Exactly. Influence is a normal part of art: creators encounter other cultures, learn from them, and this often changes their work through collaboration, credit, and genuine understanding. It looks like researching carefully, acknowledging sources and working with people from that culture. It's respectful to the community and the aspects of the culture they are including in their work. For example, Marvel's Black Panther (2018) drew on multiple African cultures for costume, language, and design, and the production involved extensive research and collaboration with cultural consultants and specialists, so the influences were approached with visible care rather than treated as random "exotic" decoration.

Appropriation is different. This is when someone extracts an element of someone's culture because it looks "cool" or "exotic," strips it of context, and profits from it while the original community is ignored, misrepresented, or even criticised for the same thing. So the key difference isn't simply "borrowing," but how and under what power conditions the borrowing happens: who benefits, who gets credit, and who gets harmed. An example of this is Kim Kardashian's 2019 "Kimono" shapewear branding was criticised for commodifying and misusing the term "kimono" (a culturally significant Japanese garment) to sell a product unrelated to its meaning, illustrating how cultural elements can be repackaged for profit without appropriate context or respect.

Interviewer: Like when something sacred becomes a fashion accessory.

Prof. Varela: Right. And the painful irony is that the people from the original culture may be mocked or excluded for the same practices that become "cool" when repackaged by someone more socially protected.



Victoria Secret was heavily criticised for using Native American clothing in one of their catwalks.

Interviewer: Where does Plagiarism fit? That feels more straightforward. It's just copying, right?

Prof. Varela: Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work—ideas, phrases, structure, creative labour—as your own without acknowledgement. But in representation debates, it can overlap with power. Sometimes the problem isn't only copying; it's who gets believed and credited.

Interviewer: You mean, the bigger name gets the prize.

Prof. Varela: Or the bigger name gets the platform, and the originator is treated as a footnote. That's not always plagiarism in a strict technical sense, but it can still be unethical extraction, especially if the originator is already marginalised.

Interviewer: We need to talk about cancel culture. Students bring it up constantly.

Some say it's accountability; others say it's mob justice.

Prof. Varela: Both perspectives exist because people are describing different realities. Sometimes public criticism is an overdue correction. People are finally listening to those who've been dismissed. However, sometimes it becomes performative punishment, where the focus shifts from repair to spectacle.

Interviewer: So how do we separate criticism from censorship?

Prof. Varela: Important distinction: censorship is usually about restricting access—removing, banning, suppressing, or punishing speech through institutional power. Public critique is not automatically censorship. But there are grey areas when powerful institutions respond to public pressure by suppressing work rather than contextualising it.

Interviewer: Could you give a hypothetical?

Prof. Varela: Sure. Let's imagine a museum exhibits an artwork that relies on racist stereotypes. Viewers protest, explaining the harm and asking for action. The museum has choices:

1. It can remove the work silently, pretending nothing happened (often the worst educational outcome).
2. It can keep it up but add context, commission responses, and facilitate discussion.
3. It can remove it with an explanation and a commitment to change.

Whether that becomes "cancel culture" depends on what people mean: accountability, boycott, consequence, or silencing. You can also ask: who has the power? If a marginalised community is asking not to be harmed in public space, that's not the same as a powerful group shutting down dissent.

Interviewer: So the question is: Who is being protected, and who is being silenced?

Prof. Varela: Exactly. And again, intent vs. impact matters. A creator may intend provocation or satire, but if the impact is that a community becomes a punchline, people will respond.



A Rex Whistler mural that is criticised as being racist, and displayed at the Tate museum. The museum commissioned a response to this mural from another author.

Interviewer: Let me see if I can sum up. Questions of representation aren't just about politeness. They're about power: who has the platform, who has the authority, who gets treated as credible, and who gets to be centered.

Prof. Varela: Yes. And they're also about craft. A writer can ask: Am I relying on stereotypes? Am I participating in exoticism? Is my portrayal respectful in its treatment? Am I erasing people, even unintentionally? Have I confused "creative freedom" with "freedom from consequences"?

Interviewer: And cancel culture debates are partly about whether critique is accountability or censorship—and whether gatekeepers are responding responsibly.

Prof. Varela: Exactly. If students learn anything from this interview, I hope it's this: stories don't float above society. They're made inside systems—economic, cultural, institutional—and they shape what a society believes is normal, admirable, laughable, or disposable.

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Interviewer: Final question: what should a student actually do with these concepts when analysing a film, novel, album, or artwork?

Prof. Varela: Start with three practical lenses:

1. Representation & Centering: Who is visible, and who is central?
2. Power & Gatekeeping: Who made it, who funded it, who marketed it, and whose credibility was assumed?
3. Ethics & Impact: Where do intent vs. impact tensions show up: through stereotypes, appropriation, erasure, or commodification?

If students can do that, they'll move beyond shallow "good/bad" judgments and into real analysis.

Interviewer: That's a perfect place to end. Thank you for your time. This has been extremely helpful.

Prof. Varela: My pleasure.