By JOHN L. GWALTNEY

On Going Home Again— Some Reflections of a Native Anthropologist*

AS A NATIVE ANTHROPOLOGIST but recently returned from conducting research in selected Northeastern Afro-American urban enclaves, among them my own community, I should like to comment on some of the issues concerning the nature of anthropology with which the discipline has been lately seized. Although the fact that some minority groups are now in a position to exploit some anthropologists may be the occasion of some pyrrhic innocent merriment, it will not be my major concern in this paper.[1] I should like to address myself to the nature and merits of what Jones has called "Native Anthropology"[2] and what Maruyama has termed "polyocular anthropology." [3]

In Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,*[4] the use of the terms *native* and *settler* implies that racial distinction which is also reflected in the current inequitable distribution of the strategic resources of the world. *Natives* tend to be poor, powerless and nonwhite while *settlers* tend to be characterized by the arrogance of power and wealth.

The exercise of power and the relative relegation of drudgery and other unpleasant realities to the less powerful have conspired to endow the settler world view with a concept of reality which is several degrees removed from that of the native. These cultures, which I term *romantic,* are those which have the power to invent a version of reality which causes them a minimum of discomfort. This is a cultural manifestation of a psychological process which Simmel has called "teleological nonknowledge."[5] Those who are actually saddled with the drudgery and unpleasant realities have a much more restricted concept of reality and the realm of the possible — what I call the *classical* view — and are obliged by the circumstances of their lives to see it "like it is."

Although not without some native input, anthropology, of course, is and has been primarily a settler endeavor. The native field population has been a strategic resource to the settler ethnologist. Now, however, access to that resource is being qualified and the question of an indigenous

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[1] Many anthropologists, finding themselves unable to pursue traditional enthnology because of the increasing unpopularity of their discipline, are beginning to resort to such roles as legal advisor, secretary, cook and general housekeeper in order to gain access to the field population they wish to study.

[2] Delmos J. Jones, "Towards a Native Anthropology," *Human Organization,* XXIX (Winter, 1970), 251-59.

[3] Magoroh Maruyama, "Endogenous Research vs. Delusions of Relevance and Expertise Among Exogenous Academics," *Human Organization,* XXX (Fall, 1974), 318-22.

[4] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1968).

[5] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* Kurt H. Wolff, translator and editor. (Glencoe, 1950), p. 312.

alternate ethnology is being seriously debated. The issue is not one of a mere increase in the number of settler trained native anthropologists, but rather one of the development of a new body of ethics and theory and alternate methodological strategies.

Several years ago I suggested the establishment of an international institution devoted to the training of what would be essentially third-party anthropologists with the view of creating a corps of anthropologists possessed of the requisite objectivity to act as honest brokers and evaluators of proposed changes in their native cultures.[6] In 1970 Delmos Jones called for not only more native anthropologists, but a new anthropology grounded in native theoretical systems. In 1974 Maruyama suggested that the traditional occidental logical models which dominated settler anthropology be complemented by the inclusion of equally valid, non-Western systems of logic.

In 1973 I embarked on a field project designed to elicit a maximum of indigenous input in the definition of Northeastern urban black cultures and anthropological relevance. I chose to work in my native culture for a number of reasons. To begin with, I share the commonly held opinion of natives of my community that we have been traditionally misrepresented by standard settler social science. I did not anticipate any massive problems of rapport, and I am inordinately fond of that congeries of cultures. So I responded to that native injunction so characteristic of the current climate of highly qualified access which exhorts the anthropologist to go home.

The research project was formulated with a view to employing the life history as a means of elucidating salient aspects of Northeastern urban black communal character. I chose the life history method because I felt it offered the maximum opportunity for the people to speak for themselves. The life history affords people a means of social and personal expression. In the aggregate they can produce a representative cultural vector.

Not wishing to risk being identified as just another one of that ubiquitous tribe of homecoming "educated fools," I did not build the use of such traditional research techniques as questionnaires, psychological tests, or mathematical constructs into the research plan. "Talking like a man with a paper in his hand" is a local expression for talking nonsense — a characterization I wished to avoid.

In order to augment data being collected through the medium of the life history, I relied heavily upon the folk seminar as a research technique. Very roughly analogous to Hessler and New's "research commune,"[7] except that we were all insiders and met strictly to take care of anthropological business, these folk seminars were generative and evaluative forums which dealt with two large questions. Our primary consideration

[6] John L. Gwaltney, "The Realm of the Possible as Conceived by Chinantec Indians and North American Urban Negroes." Paper presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology, Mexico City, 1969.

[7] Richard M. Hessler and Peter Kong-Ming New, "Toward a Research Commune," *Human Organization*, XXXI (Winter, 1972), 449-50.

was the nature of our own communal character. We also evaluated some main premises of social science generally and ethnology particularly. Folk seminars were convened in such places as private homes, hospital rooms, barbershops, restaurants, churches, the courts of housing projects, vacant lots and bars. As few as three and as many as twenty of us gathered to address ourselves specifically to the definition and explication of black culture and the critical assessment of social science. The discussions were informal, the complement of the groups constantly shifting, reflecting life circumstances and level of interest of the people concerned. In a very real sense many informants chose me. People who had heard about the research and who wished to help me joined the discussions and recruited other interested persons.

I chose to work primarily with chronically ill informants because I know that chronic illness is very likely to oblige people to make profound assessments of the quality of life in its individual and group manifestations. Chronically ill people frequently have large blocks of time to devote to the taking and giving of life histories and participation in field folk seminars. Chronically ill people have extensive ties with indigenous theology and fraternal organizations and deal frequently with settler mediators of health and social services. Chronically ill people often are less able to supplement their incomes than other people so the compensation I could afford them might help meet the most pressing needs.

Maruyama's belief in the capacity of the native to build theory in his own right is a recent formal statement of a premise held by every black scholar of consequence that I have ever known. In the course of our field seminars there was an all but universal tendency to interpret the premises of anthropology we evaluated in terms of our perceptions of settler manipulation. Ethnology was not viewed as a disinterested discipline. There was an automatic unanimous assumption that settlers will keep the best of everything, anthropology included, for themselves. Anthropology was seen as a job; a means to privileged status and many people made their contribution to my field project with the specific end of assisting the advancement of a native career. There was a belief that settler field populations were essentially closed to natives and a strong feeling that since the principle of reciprocity did not prevail, assisting the native researcher was an act of racial solidarity and civic responsibility.

There was surprisingly little of the ad hominem in this reaction, but interested motives were skillfully and rapidly detected and interpreted. For example, when we were preoccupied with the current climate of access, I solicited reactions to a letter from a settler anthropologist published in the *Newsletter* of the American Anthropological Association which put forth the proposition that settler access remains essentially

unimpeded because natives have a need to perform for settlers.[8] Once the possibility of satire or irony had been disposed of, the romantic, non-knowledge imperatives of settler culture which produced this response were readily apparent to everyone.

Francis Hsu has expressed the opinion that "the psychocultural bondage under which White American anthropologists have been operating has seriously constrained their theory making capabilities."[9] Hsu's psychocultural bondage is very analagous to what Simmel calls teleological non-knowledge and to what I have called in this paper non-knowledge, or the romantic view. Thus it is that "the failure of White American anthropologists to consider views other than those to which their cultural conditioning has led them"[10] has generated a profound dichotomy between settler and native conceptions of reality.

If one accepts the premise that anthropology is often an expression of the arrogance and institutionalized parochialism of the settler, it seems to me that a prime end of native anthropology is to move the standard discipline to that universality which can only be achieved by qualifying these negative aspects. One must presuppose a settler intellectual monopoly and fly directly in the face of the concept of relativity to oppose the notion that a number of views are better than one.

In the course of my years as a native practitioner and teacher of anthropology it has not escaped my notice that settler academic institutions have very largely failed to produce settler ethnologists capable of assessing my own culture in any but romantic terms. The lay people with whom I worked to obtain data for the purpose of projecting an indigenous view of our culture displayed a great deal more objectivity than the presumed experts working under the auspices of prestigious foundations and with the benefit of years of highly specialized training. Indeed, it may be as William S. Willis has speculated that "ethnographic monographs are simply novels and that theoretical concepts are but daydreams."[11] Stan Steiner in his critical commentary of Charles A. Valentine's approach to the study of black communities seems to be saying that the insistence on the necessity for immersion in black American culture in order to accurately understand it may have made Valentine "less of an anthropologist and more of a man."[12] Those members of my field population with whom I discussed this premise were at a loss to understand how better people could fail to produce better anthropologists.

The classical concept of the "nitty gritty" is incompatible with the belief that one can know a community without living in it. My failure

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[8] "Correspondence," *American Anthropological Association Newsletter*, XV (January, 1974), p. 2.
[9] Francis L. K. Hsu, "Prejudice and Its Intellectual Effect in American Anthropology: An Ethnographic Report," *American Anthropologist*, LXXV (February, 1973), 6.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[11] William S. Willis, Jr., "Skeletons in the Anthropological Closet," in Morton H. Fried, ed., *Explorations in Anthropology* (New York, 1973), p. 462.
[12] Stan Steiner, "Commentary," *Human Organization*, XXXI (Spring, 1972), 102.

to reside in any Scandinavian ward whose cultural character I purported to describe would and should be set down as a grievous fault in my methodology at the very least. I read that the Chinantla, the locus of my first foreign field work, was a dry region, and so it was if you were not there in the rainy season. To report accurately upon a region and its population you must, of course, live through at least one annual cycle. To report on a North American black community without extensive investigation and analysis of its only autonomous institution, the theology, is to do ethnography by decree.

Native anthropology and its practioners are almost certain to be subject to charges of over-idealization and lack of objectivity because their findings will very often be at variance with those ingrained stereotypes which characterize much of settler reporting about us. I may be prone to idealization of my community but settlers are often prone to denigration of it. A settler anthropologist who derives her subsistence and reputation from my community who has given it as her private opinion that "Black men are groovy but Black women are hard bitches" is, I submit, displaying a subjectivity at least as rampant as anything any native is likely to generate.

The fear has been expressed that the insider may know too much. It seems to me that too much may often at least have the merit of being better than too little. As a black person, my knowledge that the race of the interviewer anywhere, anytime is important, not only to me, but to every native I have ever known, qualifies the validity of any research which does not take that factor into account. The fact that social scientists can still divide on this obvious axiom is a demonstration of the difficulty the settler mind has in assimilating unpleasant realities.[13]

There is a quality of existence in at least the black American variant of native culture which minimizes romantic excess in reportage and informs and assists in the resolution of the ethical dilemma. We have had such lengthy transgenerational practice in "telling some and keeping some" that discretion may be less of a problem than it is in more romantic cultures. The debt which anthropologists owe their field populations is only partially repaid by the insistence that the security and integrity of that community cannot be undermined by anything they might do with the data with which they have been entrusted. The native is very likely to start with a clearer notion of what that security and integrity consists of for his or her particular community.

Sometimes, because of minority status, the native anthropologist is less of an outsider even in a totally foreign native enclave. The first official greeting I received from the Secretary of the very remote Oaxacan Highland Chinantec municipio in which I was to conduct field work

[13] Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 254, 258.

was a lengthy public assurance that I would not have to contend with the "barbarism" currently suffered by my people in Alabama and Mississippi.[14]

The classical rather than the romantic orientation of native researchers means that they are likely to have a clearer appreciation of the fact that the field population is doing them a favor and that the student is not superior to the studied in the field research context because the student is attempting to acquire knowledge already possessed by that population. My own field population was amused by the reversal of roles described in the aforementioned letter to the American Anthropological Association *Newsletter*. In their view, the wishful thinking of the observer stood reality on its head. Native populations do not "perform" for the anthropologist, but in this community at any rate, the anthropologist is the source of diversion.

The current impeding of general access to anthropologists, not to mention the ethical imperatives, obliges all anthropologists to rethink the traditional role of ethnology in the world. Matthiasson's suggestion that anthropology begin repaying its long overdue debt to its traditional clients, minority and oppressed people, by making information available to them about the traditional elites of society, the multi-national corporations, government bureaucracies, etc. is very well taken.[15] However, what assurance is there that anthropology as currently constituted can produce investigators who will not bring the same lack of objectivity to bear upon these groups that has been traditionally lavished upon us?

The concept of native anthropology is not only relevant to the native anthropologist working in native settings, but is especially germane to the non-native investigating non-native institutions. If the discipline is going to generate a new body of knowledge about new, previously under-investigated groups, it is imperative that these accounts proceed from veracity rather than wishful thinking.

If the concept that settlers have a responsibility to investigate their own institutional and ethnic hierarchies is accepted, it is plain that much of traditional anthropology was a foreign adventure ploy and equally apparent that succeeding generations of settler anthropologists will be obliged to study their fathers, sisters, cousins and aunts. If we are to be spared a dreary and perhaps fatal repetition of the excesses which occasioned the unfortunate dichotomy between standard settler ethnology and the polyocular view, it is imperative that we do not repeat those failings of parochial chauvinism.

One of the most useful contributions of native anthropology could be the "decontamination" of settler youth by building the analysis of the formidable role of non-knowledge in settler culture into their training

[14] John L. Gwaltney, *The Thrice Shy: Cultural Accommodation to Blindness and other Disasters in a Mexican Community* (New York, 1970).
[15] John S. Matthiasson, "Commentary," *Human Organization*, XXX (Fall, 1974), 324.

for the profession. Black street dealers in narcotics are plainly aware that they are not rendering a civic service — an awareness which is by no means manifest in the perceptions of methadone dealers or counter-insurgent ethnologists.

Decontamination is admittedly a difficult process, but there is an excellent point of departure in that we often know what we ought *not* to do. Counter-insurgency not only corrupts its agents, but knowledge obtained in this manner comes at too high a cost for all concerned. Decontamination hinges on diminishing non-knowledge by increasing classical native input in the training of anthropologists. Native input can have a mitigating effect on the cultural proclivity of settlers to romantic optimism.

Settler youth stands in far more present need of cultural analysis than it does of psychoanalysis if it is to face the formidable gap between its cultural ideals and the reality of the settler exercise of power. A true knowledge of the real mechanics of one's own culture and one's place in that society must be thoroughly understood.

If would-be anthropologists cannot ask themselves embarrassing questions and face the unpleasant reality of honest answers, it is unreasonable to expect them to be able to sympathize, empathize, or, above all, dispassionately analyze the "foreigner" whose realities, pleasant and unpleasant, they wish to probe and proclaim.