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The Ethnographic Vision of John L. Gwaltney: The Thrice Shy, A Forgotten Gem

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By Lesley A. Sharp

Gwaltney, John L. 1967. *The Thrice Shy: Cultural Accommodation to Blindness and Other Disasters in a Mexican Community*. New York and London: Columbia University Press. 219 pp., including four appendices, references, and index.

I once had a housemate who, each year for a decade running, would set aside a week to take a break from the hyperkinetic pace of her life so she could read back through her personal journals and devote time to introspection. Unlike her, I have not made a habit of engaging in a systematic rereading of personal notes and favorite texts beyond the needs of teaching and scholarship, relying instead on memories as a means to enjoy past experiences. Revisiting *The Thrice Shy: Cultural Accommodation to Blindness and Other Disasters in a Mexican Community* by John Langston Gwaltney has proved an intriguing exercise in both memory work and self-reflection.

I first encountered—or, better put, discovered—*The Thrice Shy* in response to an assignment in a graduate course in the 1980s. Known simply as “Anthro 206,” the class was taught by Frederick Dunn as a first-year core requirement of the UC Berkeley/San Francisco joint program in medical anthropology, where I began my studies in 1983. Fred, who was a fabulous teacher, mentor, and, later, dear friend, was an MD/PhD with a passion for tropical diseases, and from the very start he sought to instill in us the importance of an integrative approach without regard for demands imposed on us elsewhere that we proclaim our allegiance to sociocultural versus biocultural studies of health, illness, and suffering. Indeed, perhaps my most memorable assignment throughout my full graduate career came from Fred in “206.” Our charge seemed straightforward enough: choose a medical problem, master all the literature you could find on your topic, and then write about it from clinical, biological, and social perspectives. I was game: Fred was passionate about parasitology and his enthusiasm was, well, infectious, and I believed in his dictum, which can best be summed up as “know your disease.” Nevertheless, I was nervous about my efforts to master the relevant

clinical literature, but I liked the idea of working on something exotic, tropical, and obscure, and so I forged ahead. I choose what I considered to be among the strangest diseases I could find, onchocerciasis, whose name many people find so impossible to pronounce that they instead refer to it as River Blindness.

As I soon discovered, it is one hell of a nasty disease. Onchocerciasis is caused by the parasitic worm *Onchocera volvulus*, whose vector is a *Simulium* black fly that breeds in shady, rushing streams and rivers where humans bathe, wash clothes, retrieve drinking water, and farm. Black flies harbor immature larvae that pass to human hosts through repeated bites. Onchocerciasis has long been endemic in tropical regions of Asia, Africa, and the Americas (and today it is classified as a NTD or “neglected tropical disease” (see the [World Health Organization](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)). Associated symptoms take years to develop: among the most noticeable signs of human infection consists of encapsulated, subcutaneous nodules within which adult worms nest and reproduce.

The location of these nodules corresponds to where the body has been exposed to repeated fly bites, and, thus, symptoms can differ by gender, age, and economic activity. For instance, in the highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico where John Gwaltney worked, black flies—and, thus, onchocerciasis—proliferated in small, shady coffee groves, coffee being an important cash crop villagers grew so they could afford to buy maize, a staple upon which they depended for survival yet, because they were too land-poor to grow enough for the year, they needed ways to purchase more during periods of scarcity. As such, disease, diet, and agriculture were inextricably intertwined in Gwaltney’s field site.

As Gwaltney reported, coffee fields were worked primarily by men, who often removed their shirts when they labored and, thus, men’s longterm exposure was marked by nodules clustered on the torso; women, on the other hand, were most likely to be become infected when they visited streams to retrieve water, do laundry, and bathe, and they were most frequently bitten on the neck and face. Children, in turn, were infected in various ways according to the economic and other activities in which they engaged alongside older children and adults.

The adult female parasite is magnificently prolific, producing thousands of microfilariae daily, which make their way into the bloodstream, lymphatic system, and other tissues. As they circulate throughout the body of a human host, some lodge in ocular tissue where they cause lesions that lead to progressive and irreversible blindness. The parasite completes its lifecycle when flies bite infected human hosts and the microfilariae enter the gut and thoracic tissue of the fly, where they then grow into larvae.

Although treatments have improved since then, in the early 1980s and, indeed, in the 1960s when Gwaltney was in the field, surgical lancing of nodules was the standard yet cumbersome and painful treatment, paired with chemotherapy that was known to kill some patients. Treatments ranged from being uncomfortable to grueling, where among the most noxious effects arise when microfilariae die under the skin and caused unbearable itching. Furthermore, recovered patients often returned home only to be reinfected. In some regions of the world, such as the Volta River Delta area of Ghana, onchocerciasis factored as a cause of (in)voluntary migration, where entire communities sometimes abandoned their fields and settlements because the disease was so noxious and debilitating. As this detailed passage demonstrates, I had been “bitten” by the *O. volvulus* bug, and thrilled when, finally, I discovered Gwaltney’s ethnographic account.

In the 1980s there was, of course, no such thing as the web, or Google, and, thus, any online library catalogue where a keyword or two could generate a surfeit of sources. Instead, one rooted out sources by sorting through card catalogues, perusing bookshelves in the stacks, combing through published bibliographies, and by word of mouth. Pushed on by Fred, my tenacious research efforts in UC’s libraries uncovered a smattering of texts specializing in tropical disease, parasitology, and water-borne scourges, and within a month I definitely knew my parasite. No one, however, seemed to be writing on the *social* dimensions of onchocerciasis. Among Fred’s favorite authors was Helmut Kloos, whose work on schistosomiasis (aka bilharzia) offered invaluable insights on how to think comparatively about water-borne diseases, but I was frustrated by the lack of such material specifically on “my” disease. And then, tucked away in the Lowie Library stacks at Berkeley, snuggled amongst other ethnographies on Mexico, I accidentally discovered *The Thrice Shy*, a thin little hardback book whose printed ochre jacket included a drawing of a young girl leading an elderly woman down a path, the woman holding a walking stick and the little girl leading her on with yet another.

As Gwaltney explains in his Preface, this book was based on a dissertation study entitled “Role of expectation of blindness in a Oaxaca village,” funded by NIMH in support of ethnographic data collected between May 1963 and March 1964. As the book’s jacket flap explains, “Onchocerciasis is only the most bizarre of a host of catastrophies [sic.] which assail the pueblo...[including] blindness, malaria, floods, droughts, fires, poisonous snakes, and other calamities.” Gwaltney’s research focused on the lives of Chinotec speakers of Yolox Pueblo, a small peasant settlement nestled precariously in the harsh, highland terrain of Oaxaca, Mexico. As he explained, Yolox reported the region’s highest infection rates for onchocerciasis (sometimes reaching as high as 90%). Gwaltney was a PhD student of Margaret Mead’s at Columbia, which

certainly accounts in large part for his decision to target a social problem. One can sense Mead's presence throughout, his prose reading much like hers: the writing is often crisp, informative, jargon-free, and organized, chapter by chapter, in a style not unusual for village studies of this era, with such headings as "Locale," "Village Subsistence," "Political Organization," and "The Life Cycle." The tone shifts significantly, though, in the four appendices (focused on field methodology, field note excerpts, the disease epidemiology, and relevant literature), where Gwaltney's approach shifts to being more formal, dense, and, frankly, informative. Many contemporary readers—especially if they limit their attention to the ethnographic chapters—will find *The Thrice Shy* outdated, the style dull and stilted, the purpose somewhat elusive. Indeed, it is an odd little book, because although blindness was Gwaltney's stated focus of inquiry, this concern is concentrated for the most part in a sixteen page chapter near the end entitled "Blindness in Yolox" and, then, in his third appendix. As a result, one must remain alert to detect references either to blindness or onchocerciasis, save for fleeting descriptions of a blind informant, the precariousness of local terrain, the words of a child who describes assisting a blind adult, or passing comments on how blindness affects economic survival.

To judge the book on these characteristics alone, however, is to miss what makes this a forgotten gem. Gwaltney's work is noteworthy—and unusual—because of who he was, how he was trained, and what caught his attention as an ethnographer. An African-American man who was mentored not only by Mead but by Eric Wolf and Conrad Arenberg, among others, Gwaltney was always alert to the mundane hardships that characterized social, economic, geographic, and historical "marginality," as he called it, both at home *and* abroad. (Indeed, among the most moving passages are when Yoleños speak about the terrible news "from [Selma] Alabama," p. 3). Throughout this book Gwaltney draws a careful portrait of the entwined nature of socioeconomic inequalities in contemporary life, the historic origins of daily hardships, and how gender, age, and community structure "trauma" or local "disasters" and affect daily survival in a small scale, and cohesive, peasant community plagued by regional land disputes, seasonal hunger, and endemic disease. In these aspects alone Gwaltney's work anticipates studies that would soon follow on the people "without history," of structural violence, and on the gendered nature of socioeconomic inequalities. It is important to note that Gwaltney was careful never to portray Yoleños as victims; instead, as the book's title implies, this is a study of "accommodation" in a wide range of ways, where blindness plays only one part in the larger drama of daily life.

More importantly, this is a ground-breaking work because Gwaltney embedded physical disability within a larger study of socioeconomic inequality, an approach that enabled him to wrestle with his own

subjectivity. Gwaltney was blind almost from birth, and in every chapter one can detect his efforts to balance his determination to write a village study, focus on a set of interrelated social, economic, and health problems, while also reflecting on his own daily challenges of navigating local terrain. Gwaltney went to the field “equipped with only a tape recorder and braille typewriter” (see book jacket and Appendix I), and he trained his field assistants to transcribe notes in braille for him. Among my favorite sections of the book are those moments when Gwaltney places himself in the text, a radical move for this time period, certainly. He opens the book with a passage from Robert Redfield, who emphasized the importance of beginning fieldwork “with things visible” (p. 1). Gwaltney, in contrast, began with things audible, and he describes how mapping the community through sound was for him a key component of participant-observation. In turn, we learn of his own need to adapt as he quickly realizes the uselessness of the walking sticks he has brought with him from the States and, in turn, of the dangers of going virtually anywhere—blind or not—in or outside a settlement where one encounters steep pathways and uneven ground at every turn. In these ways, he begins to embody the experiences of local inhabitants infected with onchocerciasis. Especially important is his discovery of how invaluable children are to assisting the blind, how much these same children enjoy such tasks, and how important they are as key informants for his research, and as assistants in daily life. Gwaltney’s descriptions of economic survival are equally important: older peasant men can not aspire to “retiring” gracefully, as do their peers, if they are plagued by blindness, and elderly blind inhabitants—both male and female—may need to go on what Gwaltney describes as “begging expeditions” (sometimes to distant cities), inevitably accompanied by young children, to acquire enough cash to buy food and stay alive. These sorts of examples inform what Gwaltney references as “economic blindness,” which he considers a key to understanding village life.

As Gwaltney’s work underscores, however, onchocerciasis and associated blindness are just one of many assaults on this community. *The Thrice Shy*, then, is best understood as an unusual and provocative work for its time, perhaps even as an early experimental ethnography that anticipates both disability studies and the self-reflexive turn by several decades. Indeed, his committee seems to have recognized its ground-breaking effect: the study was awarded the Ansley Dissertation Award at Columbia, and after he completed his PhD, Gwaltney went on to lead an illustrious career as an anthropologist keenly sensitive to issues of social oppression. Gwaltney, who was Professor of Anthropology at the University of Syracuse in New York, was an advocate of “Native Ethnography,” an approach best represented by his better known work *Drylongso: A Self Portrait of Black American* [1980], where he pushed back against AngloAmerican theorizing about African Americans’ lives. [i]

Following his death in 1998—less than a month shy of his 78th birthday—the Association of Black Anthropologists established The John Langston Gwaltney Native Anthropology Scholarship, a prize that still exists today.

The Thrice Shy was for me a remarkable find in the 1980s. Although Gwaltney never paused to explain his title's significance, the thought that one would be "thrice" rather than merely "twice shy" of calamity was a compelling way to think of life in Yolo Pueblo. Perhaps, too, the phrase offered a poignant reminder of the risks of being "bitten" in the field (be one a local resident or visiting ethnographer). Sadly, I've never met anyone else who has read the book, and so I continue to grapple with this on my own. Assuming my memory is reliable, I recall how impossible it was to locate a copy from booksellers so that I could have one of my own, and so I continued to check it out of the Lowie Library long after my paper was due so I could hold onto it a bit longer. Thanks now to the web, I am pleased to say I own one that's inscribed with the name of Ivonne DeLaCruz. This same copy apparently shifted at some point to an "Anthro" collection, catalog #745142. In closing, I thank you, Ivonne, for relinquishing your copy. And I thank Fred Dunn for encouraging me to write that paper.

Notes

[i] For details see the obituary of John Langston Gwaltney (1928-1998) by Johnnetta B. Cole in *American Anthropologist*, September 1999, 101:3:614-616.

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[“Forgotten Gems”](#) are scholarly works published at least forty years ago (1975 or earlier) that have been largely forgotten or overlooked, but which deserve to be read by medical anthropologists and scholars in neighboring fields today. Each “Forgotten Gems” essay is envisioned as a loving, but not necessarily uncritical, profile of a specific article or book that fits this general description. This series is curated by [Janelle S. Taylor](#).

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