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Marginal to Whom? Reflections on Gow's "Purús Song"

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Many years ago, I wrote what I thought was a great essay about the marginalization of remote people. I was a first-year PhD student in anthropology at the London School of Economics at the time. I gave it proudly to my supervisor Peter Gow to read, and at our next meeting he said, "Well, it's very interesting, but actually nobody is marginalized, and nowhere is remote." I didn't know what to say, but eventually mumbled something along the lines of: "Surely understanding why and how people come to be marginalized and remote is essential to our goal as anthropologists?" "But marginal to whom? Remote from what? Only to the social and geographical position of the centers of power. They're relative terms which already have a value judgment, a hierarchy of relevance, built into them. No people are marginal to themselves," was Pete's response. To be honest, it probably took me several years to fully understand what Pete was saying and why it mattered, but I've eventually come to realize that his insight is not only relevant to Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. I've also found it shaping my thought in ethnographic work I've done subsequently in other parts of the world: the Gaelic-speaking communities of Scotland's Outer Hebrides, while marginal and remote to the centers of power in Edinburgh and London, do not view themselves in such a light; and, more recently, I've come to understand that even in the bustling chaos of urban Naples the way people come to be viewed and categorized as "marginalized" is always a relative judgment, one not free of assumptions about what citizenship and belonging do or should mean.

Pete's provocation regarding marginalization and remoteness was characteristic of his participation in a process which his compadre Eduardo Viveiros de Castro would later describe as "a decolonization of thought" (Viveiros de Castro, 2014. See also Overing, 2006). This was nothing more and nothing less than stepping back from deeply-rooted assumptions about the nature of the world, and trying to see them afresh through the experiences of others. This process, this rejection of culturally-specific truisms, is important both ethically and politically, but also intellectually — it changes the hierarchy of our understanding of social, historical, and cultural processes, reversing the logics by which such processes are understood in the academic mainstream. Such arguments can be found in many of Pete's essays — that ayahuasca shamanism emerges through Christianity in "River People: shamanism and history in Western Amazonia" (Gow, 1996); that transformations of identity are already intrinsic to Indigenous identities in "Ex-Cocama: transforming identities in Peruvian Amazonia" (Gow, 2007); that kinship emerges from, not in spite of, inter-ethnic relations in *Of Mixed Blood* (Gow, 1991), and so on — but in this short piece, I want to reflect on Pete's 2006 essay "Purús Song: nationalization and tribalization in Southwestern Amazonia," published in *Tipití* in 2006 (Gow, 2006a), and then translated by Clarice Cohn as "Canção Purús" and published in *Revista de Antropologia* that same year (Gow, 2006b).

"Purús Song," like Pete's other works mentioned above, is an essay about different ways of reckoning with the past and, more importantly, the consequences those differences bring

to the fore in the construction of a present. At its heart, the essay explores the definition of the frontier between Peru and Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century, an emergence we might assume consisted of “nation-states” being imposed upon Indigenous peoples. This assumption, as Pete subsequently demonstrates, is quite wrong. Through the juxtaposition of various different sources, such as a song still sung by Urubamba Yine people at the time of his fieldwork and the famous Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha’s short essay “Sucedeu em Curanjá,” (2021 [1906]) Pete relates how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people highlighted divergent aspects of tensions surrounding the town of Curanjá in the first decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, da Cunha’s presence in the region was as a member of the *Comissão Mista Brasileiro-Peruana de Reconhecimento do Alto Purús*, which sought to delineate the frontier once and for all and put an end to various feuds, conflicts, and insurrections. What Pete shows is that, ultimately, which places the *Comissão* identified as “Peruvian” or “Brazilian” were determined by the identities and linguistic preferences of the Indigenous peoples who lived there, which were in turn determined by Indigenous kinship and exchange networks. I quote him here at length:

Arguably, by using the Portuguese and Spanish languages as symbols of their already existing differences from each other, the Piro and Manitinieri people were already “nationalizing” the Purús, by simply orienting themselves to two different sets of trade partners. They were not doing this for the nation-states of Peru and Brazil, and certainly not as Peruvian or Brazilian citizens, but rather by virtue of their own ongoing internal differentiations from each other. What I suggest is that phenomena that we tend to interpret as “modern” — the products of “hot societies” such as the modern nation-states of Peru and Brazil — are actually something very different. They are, in fact, “tribal” phenomena — the products of “cold societies” such as the Piro and the Manitinieri people. An event sequence initiated by indigenous Amazonian people expands outwards and becomes transformed into effects linked to nation-states, which are then viewed as their causes. This is what I mean by nationalization — the ongoing eclipsing of the actions of nonnational social relations and their representation as effects of national social relations. (Gow, 2006a: 288)

This reversal of cause and effect is a classic trope of what one might be tempted to call “Gowian anthropology,” not so much a particular theoretical paradigm but rather a sensibility, one centered around a productive aporia of what “history” might or might not be. He would, of course, have hated to have his name attached to any particular approach in anthropology because for Pete — both politically and intellectually — Indigenous perspectives had to lead the way. And it’s important to note that in his “Purús Song” essay, this sensibility toward the past emerges from simply listening to Indigenous voices without a priori reducing them to nothing more than “effects” of nation-states, as is the wont of the dominant academic paradigm. This is critical thinking of the highest order, but critical thinking that doesn’t self-consciously frame itself as such (hence my introduction and instant disavowal of the adjective “Gowian!”).

Of course, in our roles as teachers, many of us strive to teach our students this skill of “critical thinking,” and we often assume that we engage it in ourselves. However, I suspect that the mainstream of anthropology is actually far more conservative than we imagine it to be, happy to remain in deeply-worn grooves of scholarly thought, citing the same authors, hovering around the edges of established paradigms rather than stepping back and allowing them to be challenged by our aberrant data and giving them a rethink. Yet it’s important to note that Pete’s insistence on challenging and rethinking dominant anthropological paradigms wasn’t simply about being contrary or reversing assumptions for the sake of it; it was always about reaching toward a better understanding of the people about whom he was writing. Despite being a very clever man, Pete detested cleverness. It took me a while to figure this out. Still somewhat humbled and humiliated by his response to my essay on marginalization and

remoteness, I was delighted that his feedback on my next student essay at the LSE was that it was “very clever” — it took me years to realize that this was by no means a compliment! I gradually came to understand that the adjective “clever,” when used by Pete, was a pejorative term. It referred, I think, to instances in which the ego of the anthropologist led him or her to use their own intelligence to co-opt and encompass the knowledge of the people with whom they worked. For Pete, anthropologists didn’t need to be clever, they simply had to learn to listen. The ideas and lived worlds of Indigenous South Americans were already complex, insightful, profound, and possessed of a beauty which an extra layer of anthropological “cleverness” could do nothing but defile. The conclusions that came from simply listening (whether to living people through ethnographic fieldwork or through a very particular way of engaging with lost voices in the archives) might be dazzlingly spectacular — the rewriting of history in “River People,” the reversal of geo-politics in “Purús Song” — but they might also be profoundly simple: that the point of Yine life is simply to be together with nothing much happening other than people caring for one another (“Helpless,” Gow, 2000).

The moral and intellectual imperative to step away from established scholarly paradigms which I learned from Pete is one which I have always tried to make central to my own work as an ethnographer and anthropologist. Just two quick, and very different, examples might cast some light on this. The first is an essay I published in 2013 on the relation between Mapuche ritual clowns and Mapuche people’s fears of “becoming white” (Course, 2013). At that time, the notion that Indigenous peoples were inexorably destined to become acculturated and assimilated, to lose their own cultural identities and be absorbed into the mainstream, was central both to the public imagination and to state policy. Many anthropologists contested this view, pointing out that certain forms of engagement with alterity were already absolutely central to Indigenous social philosophies. So, for example, an Indigenous Amazonian person wearing a Brazilian football shirt was just as much the reflection of an Indigenous logic as it was of any inevitable “acculturation.” Pete Gow also intervened on this topic across several writings, perhaps most explicitly in “Ex-Cocama” (Gow, 2007), but, indirectly, it is also an idea central to his great book *Of Mixed Blood* (Gow, 1991). In the anthropology of lowland South America, this critical observation soon became itself the dominant, largely unquestioned paradigm. Processes of social transformation were understood to always occur within Indigenous logics of engagement with alterity. Or, as I put it more bluntly, “acculturation had become a dirty word” (2013: 19). It seemed to me that under this new counter-paradigm there was now no room left for Indigenous peoples’ own reflections on and anxieties about cultural loss and failure, which I knew from years of living with Mapuche people were an ever-present theme of worry and concern. For Mapuche people, the constant haemorrhaging of young people to the cities and the transformation of those youth into “white people” were precisely issues that escaped the reach of their control of their engagement with alterity. They described this process not only in terms very similar to the much-maligned “acculturation”, but also as a deep and irreversible tragedy. The ritual clowns with faces of white people, I suggested, represented not so much white people themselves as they did Mapuche people’s capacity to themselves “become white,” or *awinkado*, as they put it.

Pete Gow, despite often appearing as one of the major critics of the “social transformation as acculturation” paradigm, was acutely aware of how very real a possibility acculturation actually was for literally millions of Indigenous people throughout the Americas. In a relatively little-known interview with Marta Amoroso and Leandro Mahalem de Lima, Pete argued convincingly that, to quote the title of the interview, “acculturation is a legitimate object

of anthropological study” (Amaroso & Mahalem de Lima, 2011. See also Gow, 2015; Gow, n.d.). I mention this here as Pete’s ability to step back, return to ethnographic realities, and reassess dominant paradigms was always present, even when he himself had had a major role in constructing them. The bitter reality of acculturation, of course, wasn’t a message anybody particularly wanted to hear, but it represented the daily reality, struggle, and tragedy of hundreds of thousands of people, and thus, I think Pete would agree, had to be told.

A more recent essay I wrote on the importance of ruined houses in the Scottish Outer Hebrides doesn’t have anything to do with Indigenous South Americans, but I still had Pete in the back of my mind as I wrote it (Course, 2019). I was interested in the ways people in South Uist cared deeply about the many ruined houses that dotted the landscape, yet at the same time wouldn’t think twice about demolishing them to make way for a new house or as aggregate for laying foundations of a new road. I didn’t understand how the importance of houses as material anchors for collective memory (a dominant paradigm in much anthropology of memory and materiality) could be reconciled with people’s lack of hesitation in knocking them down. I came to understand that houses were important because they signified human dwelling in a place where — given its history of the Clearances, of years of state neglect, and the imposition of ever-increasing environmental controls on people’s fishing and crofting livelihoods — human dwelling could never be taken for granted. The importance of houses as memory was eclipsed by the importance of houses as markers of human dwelling. I don’t know if Pete ever got round to reading this essay; I can imagine that if he did, he would have grumbled about an Englishman writing about Scotland, but I can say that it is an essay that I’d never have written without his influence, whether he agreed with its argument or not.

My writing over the past few years has moved away from the mainstream of anthropology, looking for new audiences outside of narrow academic circles. In this long and bewildering process of learning how to try and write what is sometimes called “creative non-fiction,” I’ve attended various courses and workshops. Without fail, one is asked the question: “But who is it you are really writing for? Who is your true audience?” My imagined reader always was, and still is, Pete Gow. It’s not that his feedback was necessarily the most useful or constructive, but rather that his genius embodied what I thought, and still think, anthropology is and could be.

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