

Nathaniel Tarn / Gary Snyder

**FROM ANTHROPOLOGIST TO INFORMANT:
A FIELD RECORD OF GARY SNYDER**

Poet Nathaniel Tarn, who interviews Gary Snyder, was himself an anthropologist with training at British, French & American schools; he was later the editor (1967 - 1969) of the influential Cape Editions series of literary, political & anthropological texts. Tarn's most recently published volume of poetry is A Nowhere for Vallejo (Random House), while Snyder continues to work on further sections of Mountains and Rivers, among other poetic/religious/ecological projects. (Acknowledgement for research aid on the interview to The Rutgers University Research Council). — N.T.)

Project: Compatibility & Mutual Relevance, Anthropology/Literature.

Co-ordinated project: Amerindian Poetry.

Previous Ref.: 4/12-13/1970, Notre Dame Literary Festival:
File UK101GS

Loc.: 30 Jefferson Road, Princeton, N.J. 4/12/1971, 19h.-24. 30 h.

(From discussion on "Young America" & its greening, or not,
(File UK101GS), into:)

GS: Don't let's call it an interview, make it a conversation.

(Intention to write an article; providential visit of Informant: "Well, it is an interview...in a sense it's anthropology...." Pause, Kherdian on his concern with Amerindians in early teens. Did he ever meet any?)

GS: Yes, on this farm about 20 miles north of Seattle, when I was about 12. An old Indian came around in a truck selling smoked salmon. We also saw many Indians at the Farmers' Market in Seattle. No, I don't remember talking to them. But I do remember clearly realizing at the age of 5 or 6 that these were prior people. My parents said the old salmon-seller was here before them. I saw few other children and spent most of my time in the woods. When I asked questions about the landscape, plants, birds, etc. my parents couldn't answer. I thought perhaps they hadn't been there long enough. Then there were the Indian villages along Puget Sound. I became very conscious of the history of the American Continent, the shortness of occupation-time: the State of Washington was wild before 1860 or so. My sense of the Indian became very intense with this reading and the sense of what the White man had done to the land and to the Indians both came together very soon and aroused a sense of outrage.

(Realization that I sd. have had a tape-recorder. "You realize, I've got to reconstitute this conversation, er, interview, I've got to write Snyder." Feverish note-taking: hand no longer used to it. "What did your parents contribute to this orientation?")

GS: My father was a N.W. man, working on ships before he met my mother: as a coal-passer, then a purser. My mother had come up with her mother from Texas. She was working her way through College writing classes. She wrote a lot, got into journalism. She was the literary one, but they both provided a background of political radicalism and non-conformism, sharpened by the Depression. A sense of detachment and a critical eye for your own culture may help you towards Anthropology.

("There's going to be mile on mile of interpretation by and by. I think it's best to add the facts. Who taught you Anthropology? What excited you most about the courses and why?")

GS: I was onto this wilderness and Anthropology thing very early. As a teenager, I subscribed to the journal of the Wilderness Society: "the Living Wilderness". I'd write Congressmen about danger from timber companies on public lands; danger from bounties on coyotes. I saw the treatment of Indians and this land exploitation as the same old rip-off. My parents made the identification with Capitalism. My parents broke up when I was about 12, 13 and somehow I was left alone in the City. Yes, Portland. I made a bunch of city-urchin adaptations to a wildlife. I kept my freedom by looking after myself, paying my own rent and so on. Worked as a copy boy on a newspaper from 4 to midnight: my mother had helped me. The newspaper men liked me and showed me the insides of the City: the courts, the jails, the city government: a nitty-gritty kind of education. Yes, a kind of sociology already. I'd gotten into High School and I knew I wanted to stay with it whatever else happened. Out of this tumultuous career, there were poems - a teacher showed them to a College friend; I got into Reed on my poetry alone. My first I was a bad student. After that it was o.k.

(Anthropology at Reed?)

GS: A one-man Department: David French. He's still at Reed. He eventually became an ethnobotanist mainly and editor of the American Journal of Ethnobotany. His interest was in the Wasco and Wishram Indians on the Warm Springs reservation east of Mt. Hood. Took several courses over 4 years: Intro. to Ethnological Theory; Culture & Personality; Introduction to Linguistics; Physical Anthropology; Far Eastern Ethnology; Amerindian Ethnology. I enjoyed them.

(Remembering my own plethora of teachers and places, but had gone into it for religion, myth, weltanschauung: systems/what made them tick: from Griaule, Levy and Levi-Strauss in Paris to Redfield in Chicago. "What was your main interest?")

GS: Mythology-folklore-linguistics. I did a tutorial reading course with French on this; he didn't teach it formally. Went through the Scaninavian classical material thoroughly, the Stith Thompson stuff on folklore classification, some Jessup North Pacific Expedition material, Boas on Tsmishian Mythology, Swanton....No, not much Mesoamerican: I had a strong sense of the North West.

(Any conflict at this stage between Anthropological and Literary studies? cf.: easy to talk poetry and anthro. at Chicago in the same breath but back among the British Socio. Anths.: wow!)

GS: No: mythology and literature get along well. No conflict.

(Thesis? Is it available; has any one seen it?)

GS: Reed requires a B.A. thesis. Mine's called "Dimensions of a Myth". I like it: it's indicative of much of what happens in my poetry later whatever it's worth or not as anthropology. One Ph.D. candidate is looking at it. I have to give you a permit.

(Writes out permit on spot. "Did you ever do any field work?")

GS: No, never formally. But I hung out a lot on the Warm Springs reservation collecting folktales pretty formally: noting, taping, typing. In the summers of 51 and 54. I also did some winter seasons as a student but didn't use the material in the thesis. Then I worked as a logger (in 54) and got more information - it went in the "Berry Feast" piece. I hitched around and hung around and got onto very intimate terms with Indians.

(Powerful reminiscences of a great time. Smile. We agree to cool some of the talk. O.K. self-censorship. "Why did you put some of those Reviews into Earth House Hold? They strike me as Juvenilia, perhaps not worth reprinting?")

GS: Well, Juvenilia yes, but they're not as superficial as they might appear. They were done while I was studying Chinese: no credits involved. For "Midwest Folklore". The Clark piece is a put-down of course. I've never seen any bad reviews of it and yet it's a bad book. I really wanted to suggest that unexpurgated texts are needed rather than bowdlerized ones. But the Jaime de Angulo: well no one in Anthropology wrote a serious piece about A. But Jaime de Angulo you must realize was a great culture hero on the West Coast. He was a Spaniard with a Paris M.D., came to the South West, quit the army to live with Indians, moved to California. Self-taught linguist, a good one. He never had a regular appointment, he was just too wild. Burned a house down one night when drunk, rode about naked on a horse at Big Sur, member of the Native American Church, great friend of Jeffers - the only man Jeffers ever allowed to visit him day or night. No: I never met him or Jeffers. So: at the end of World War II, Jaime de Angulo was one of the few people alive to jazz up California. These reviews have more meaning than you think in terms of literary culture.

(Have to cool a wee bit more about J. de A's exploits. Ah the secret within the secret within the secret! "Well, this is bringing us to Indiana...")

GS: I wanted to go to Indiana to develop the study of oral literature, to study oral literature as style, as raconteur technique - yes, o.k., narrative technique. In summer 51 I'd been on the reservation. Then in the fall of 51 I had this fellowship. I only stayed one semester.

(Where was everybody at certain times? NT at Chicago working up to the Maya. When was Charles Olson at Yucatan? And Black Mountain...I think Black Mountain starting just about when NT leaving for the Maya. Why was I never told? "Who did you work with at Indiana?")

GS: Well, Charles Vogelien, Thomas Sebeok, Fred Householder and a fine ethnomusicologist George Herzog. And Dell Hymes...

(Strong reaction. Ha! Saw DH at Sussex ASA about 2-3 years ago. Conference on Linguistics: I'd already quit. Asked DH about whom to contact to get material on the secret history of the anthropoets and he was full of suggestions. GS pleased about conference.)

GS: Dell was at Reed, one year ahead of me and, of course, at Indiana one year ahead. He helped to get me to Indiana. He was my roommate for that semester. This putting of people in touch with each other: About 4 or 5 years ago, I put Stanley Diamond in touch with Jerry Rothenberg (I'd been corresponding with Jerry for about 10 years) and it was Dell who had put Stanley in touch with me. And now we're altogether on the editorial board of *Alcheringa*...

("This reminds me that in 51 there was this great Wenner Gren thing in N.Y. Levi-Strauss was so surprised to see me in the corridors - I'd worked with him three years but we'd hardly exchanged as many words - that he took me for a drink along with Roman Jakobson. Do you remember about this?)

GS: No, but come to think of it I remember Sebeok talking to us about the great AnthroLinguists conference at Indiana. That must have come before it?

(Up and down the East Coast after Yale and before Chicago: Kardiner in N.Y., Stirling at the Smithsonian, Stewart and Kroeber at Columbia (Kroeber: "Young man, if you're going to Chicago, you'll need a thick scarf ")...back in Yale: Murdock and Linton who could not help me get on out from under Jefferson and American Democracy: Orientation! "O.K., we're getting to the crunch: why did you quit?" We already both know this part by heart, I guess...)

GS: I decided to quit because it became evident that the things I wanted to do would be better done in poetry than in scholarship. The economic reasons for a scholarly career weren't incentive enough. At the magicsuperstitious level, let's say the Muse is jealous. She won't tolerate you having several mistresses. A commitment is required. On the practical level - Dell and I talked about this a lot, Dell was going through the same kind of thing - well if you're going to do a good job it's got to be whole time. I believe in scholarship if that's what you want but it has to be well done. A Ph.D. in Anthropology is demanding. I did think about getting the Ph.D. and then quitting, but it seemed to me that the kind of effort one put into getting a Ph.D. was essentially repetitive...like proving some sort of point, almost like showing off. It wasn't an easy decision. And I'm not sure I've found anyone to do what it was I wanted to do...

(When pressed on this a little - take Barthes' highly sophisticated S/Z for instance I'm teaching right now - admits graciously that maybe he has not quite kept up with increasing sophistication of narrative technique studies. NT disagrees a little with feelings about Ph.D. Things start getting repetitive after the Ph.D. These blank sheets in Rangoon the second time round and a big howl of "No" inside..."Did you ever feel also that the mental orientations were ultimately in conflict: you know, a certain kind of allegiance to 'objective' fact on the one hand going against the alchemist in you on the other?")

GS: Oh yes, very much that! And then the sense that in the world of folklore and mythology there's a...wisdom tradition if you like, half buried but that poets can dig it out and anthropologists can't and aren't allowed to... Three years out of the field, I think I realized that I didn't want to be the anthropologist but the informant. That's it: wanting to be a subject by which I mean being authentically what you are. I made it a rule in Japan not to elicit information that didn't come out naturally in my relationships with people. By really living with people you can enter into certain things... but then there's the difficulty of keeping quiet, of not betraying trust. I was, yes, conscious of the "danger" of being an anthropologist; at the beginning, yes, I collected information, but in the world of Zen now, I'm an informant.

(NT: "Well like not being obliged to ask a certain type of question any more, just being allowed to be with people and not swamped by the culture coming at you 24 hours a day.")

"On the other hand, it leaves one with a certain attitude to fact, right?": cf. Note to The Beautiful Contradictions: "For him - the anthropologist - scientific records serve as a formal constraint, as well as a point of departure, for the imagination and faithful topography may be very near to the concept of justice")

GS: Yes, I continue to respect facts. To have your facts right is to allow yourself the latitude to be far out in other ways.

("Surrealism?")

GS: I admire it but I could never do it myself. Philip Lamantia, an old friend, is the leading Surrealist poet in America. I read him with great pleasure.

("How were other writers reacting to Anthropology?")

GS: Whalen was a great reader. He was a veteran of World War II and had a better library than Reed College in certain subjects. He had a big collection on Indian Philosophy. He read a lot of anthropology. Very remarkable man. Dell, Dell of course was more of a poet than an anthropologist, he was very romantic, revolutionary poet, a good poet. Now he's gone the other way. Yes, Kerouac and Ginsberg were interested, but they weren't respecters of the fact, you know, like people who've been through this are respecters of the fact ...

("And after Indiana?")

GS: I began to move towards Oriental studies. I had the sudden realization that Anthropology was concerned with understanding human nature - but then why go to other people, why not study one's own nature? So...Zen. When I'd firmly decided that all this was to be done as a poet, then I went to Berkeley: 1953-55. I told the Head of Oriental Studies, Ed Schafer, with whom I still correspond, that I would never take a higher degree. At that time Oriental Studies had precious few people, they were glad to get students. I still tell young people, I make a pedagogical point of getting kids to learn about as many cultures as possible: Anthropology replaces History in this respect.

(Ask about any kinship felt with Olson's Sumeria, May etc. I've noticed Olson never really comes up in Snyder's work...)

GS: I never came to Olson. I was rather put off by the Mayan Letters, the Romanticism and the lack of scholarly seriousness. Around 1953. I never trusted Olson as a scholar. Maybe its an East Coast thing against a West Coast thing. Non-Americans think we're all the same, but West Coast is West Coast.

(Express surprise; instance Olson's useful work on Maya fisheries for a start - (meeting CO for the first time at Bled in 64 or so, taking him the first Cape contract, saying, on meeting, just finished the Letters/him: well? well? as a Mayanist? - But Charles, you spend the whole book telling Mayanists to go to hell! - Ah!...Well, never mind, what do you think of it, what do you think of it? Very excited...) and Dorn among the Shoshone?)

GS: I always felt that Olson was an apologist for Western Culture; the trip from Sumeria to Gloucester a sort of justification for White-America. I do dig Olson poetically. Well, not since the beginning have people gone dryshod from Europe to the U.S. and people have gone dry shod from Asia to America. That makes a difference, Ships? Well, it's not as old as walking. And animals walked before men. As for Dorn: he came late to the Shoshone and under Olson's aegis. He didn't really like living in Idaho. Now Duncan is possibly my favorite poet, of now. Duncan is Gnostic whereas Olson was esoteric. You know: Duncan, Spicer and Blaser were all students of the great Medievalist Kantarovich at Berkeley. Spicer....Spicer as a matter of fact was part Indian; he looked like a Sioux. I don't know what he was: I think Sioux or Cherokee. He didn't go into Indian things specifically but if you look at the Grail poems and Billy the Kid, you'll see it was there...And Rexroth now: one of the first poets to clearly invoke Amerindian songs.

(Can we go back into the past a bit? What about Fiedler's The Return of the Vanishing America?)

GS: Fiedler: yes, but cranky. Looking for faggots under every bush. I start from someone like Lawrence who said "when you think the Indians are gone look out". And there's that kickoff I'll use for the final version of Mountains and Rivers: "Where there aint no Indians that's where you find them thickest". Jim Bridges said that, great mountain men in the 1820s and 30s.

("What I meant was" (this unerring sense of his for scholarly transmission) "do you have any sense of lineage?")

GS: Well, Jeffers is very important to me as the man who claimed for the values of nature against those of technology. And Whitman: a sort of 19th century positive Jeffers. Lawrence I've mentioned. Pound: an American trying to construct a myth out of the lore of Europe and Asia with varying degrees of success. Rexroth a neo-classicist with his base in Greek, American Indians, etc. A great reclamer. Further back? I find it difficult to relate to past America because it's Christian. I find it easier to go back to the Greek Anthology, the Romans, the medieval Chinese.

(No mention of the great Mesoamerican phenomenon: Maya/Mexican/Inca?)

GS: No, too abstract for me. You see, it was closer for me to get to China because it LOOKS so much more like the North West Pacific Coast!

(Can't help expatiating on the glories of "my" Americas. Hold that only in a few places up here can one see the grandeur of the Center: the great Kiva at Chaco Canyon, e.g., greater than the one at Aztec that he has seen. Summer of 70: goodbye to Rothenberg at Aztec, after beginning Alcheringa I in Santa Fe...)

GS: It's the next order of business and my wife is as keen on it as I am. I want to learn Spanish and then, off to Mexico. Since India, I've felt I'd be o.k. in a place like Mexico.

("A few last shots...What about your syncretism?" (GS blank) "well, in Earth House Hold, e.g., p. 57: "involuntary gassho and bow to the virgin" note how you capitalize Buddhist icons but not others usually. I'm referring to my notion that syncretism is mankind's lot: only the very privileged can afford purism")

GS: Syncretism: yes in theory; no in practice. Both Buddhists and Gnostics agree on this. My practice is now syncretistic but on after years of orthodox practice in Rinzai Zen. My teacher now agrees to this search here for ways of living Zen in America. Padmasambhava is my model here: the great Buddhist acculturater who took Buddhism to Tibet. Making contact with local spirits, getting onto terms with them.

t ("Levi-Strauss? You mention him in Earth House Hold. I wasn't quite sure here how you were seeing him?")

GS: Fascinating, a genius, but a rationalist. The insights are circumscribed by the commitment to rationalism. The dimension provided in Anthropology by someone like Casteneda is not open to Levi-Strauss. What's useful in him is the stress on the intellectual power of the primitives. This is his major insight: yes, I agree it came late in his thinking...I have read everything that Levi-Strauss has done in English.

(Notice signs of tiredness. Suggest we are drawing to a close...)

GS: Yes, that was good. It helped me put some order into my thoughts. Now you must reconstitute this conversation.

("I'll send it to you. You should check it out.")

GS: Yes, and now what do you think of all this?

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