**NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS**

**Deep Hanging Out**

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October 22, 1998 Issue

**[Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0942299779?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0942299779" \t "_blank)**

by Pierre Clastres, translated by Paul Auster

Zone Books, 349 pp., $25.50

**[Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674779614?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0674779614" \t "_blank)**

by Clifford. James

Harvard University Press, 394 pp., $18.95 (paper)

**1.**

All the human sciences are promiscuous, inconstant, and ill defined; but cultural anthropology abuses the privilege. Consider:

First, Pierre Clastres. A thirty-year-old graduate student in the *berceau* of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *laboratoire anthropologique*, he sets off from Paris in the early Sixties for a remote corner of Paraguay. There, in a hardly inhabited region of strange forests and stranger animals—jaguars, coatis, vultures, peccaries, tree snakes, howler monkeys—he lives for a year with a hundred or so “savage” Indians (as, approvingly, indeed somewhat in awe, he calls them), who abandon their elderly people, paint their bodies in bowed stripes and bent rectangles, practice polyandry, eat their dead, and beat menarcheal girls with tapir penises so as to make them, like the long-nosed tapir, insanely ardent.

The book he publishes upon his return he calls, with deliberate, almost anachronistic, pre-modern flatness, as though it were a recently discovered missionary diary from an eighteenth-century Jesuit, *Chronique des indiens Guayaki*. Worshipfully translated by the American novelist Paul Auster (“It is, I believe, nearly impossible not to love this book”)—and belatedly published a quarter-century later—the work is, in form at least, old-style ethnographical to a fault. It gives a life-cycle description of “the Guayaki,” beginning with birth, and proceeding through ritual initiation, marriage, hunting, and warfare, to illness, death, funerals, and, after the funerals, cannibalism. There are the classic sort of carefully posed, aesthetical photographs: near-naked natives staring blankly into cameras. There are the pen and pencil museum sketches—hand axes, baskets, fire drills, mosquito fans, feather holders—that one hardly sees in monographs anymore. And despite occasional *Tristes Tropiques* lyricisms about the sounds of the forest or the colors of the afternoon, the prose style is straightforward and concrete. This happened, and that. They believe this, they do that. Only the musing, threnodic first-person voice, breaking every now and again into moral rage, suggests that there may be more going on than mere reporting of distant oddities.

Second, James Clifford. Trained as an intellectual historian at Harvard in the early Seventies, but self-converted, first to anthropology and then to cultural studies (he now teaches in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz), he is, at fifty-two, rather more along toward the Middle of the Journey than Clastres was when he took off for Paraguay; but they are of the same academic generation—the one the counterculture made. Clifford wanders about in the Nineties, diffident and inquisitive, not among castaway “natives,” or indeed any “peoples” at all, but among what he calls “contact zones”—ethnological exhibitions, tourist sites, art-show seminars, museum consultancies, cultural studies conferences, travelers’ hotels. He visits Freud’s archaeologically enhanced London house. He passes through the hyped and hybridized Honolulu of professional conventions, Pro-Bowl football fans, and sunken battleships on Chinese New Year, just as Desert Storm erupts in the Persian Gulf. He reminisces about his youth as a “white ethnic,” son of a Columbia academic, ridin’ the subways through folk-song New York. He meditates upon history, domination, and “global dynamics” before a Russian stockade from the 1820s, reconstructed as a multicultural heritage park in “‘post-modern’ California.”

The book assembling these excursions and stop-ins into a fable for our times he calls *Routes*, with the pun on “roots” heavily intended, to which he adds the carefully contemporizing subtitle *Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Here, though the first-person voice again appears throughout, rather more assertive and far more self-referring, there is no continuous, building narrative, ethnographic or any other. There is, instead, an unordered series of “personal explorations,” designed to depict neither “natives, in villages” nor “pure traditions and discrete cultural differences,” but rather “people going places,” “hybrid environments,” “travelling cultures.”

The prose is various and indirect. Sometimes it is “academic,” that is, abstract and argumentative, sometimes it is “experimental,” that is, inward and impressionistic; always, it is discursive, backing and filling, giving with one hand and taking away with the other, turning aside to pursue a notion, retracing steps to get back to the subject. The pieces run from three or four pages to forty or fifty. The photographs are either reproduced catalog illustrations—illustrations of illustrations—or amateur, unfocused snapshots, taken on the fly by Clifford as he goes.

There are no descriptions here of anyone marrying, fighting, worshiping, declaiming, dying, or mourning; no accounts of how children are raised or demons placated. And where, save for a passage from Montaigne, Clastres has but a single citation in his whole book, and that a paraphrase summary of some pages in a clerical history of the conquest of Paraguay, Clifford has literally hundreds, sometimes a dozen a page, running from Mikhail Bakhtin, Stuart Hall, Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci, and Frederic Jameson to Malinowski, Mead, Rushdie, Gauguin, Amitav Ghosh, Michel de Certeau, and Adrienne Rich—most of them more atmospheric than substantive. He calls all this—“written under the sign of ambivalence…*in media res*…manifestly unfinished”—a collage. Like Joseph Cornell’s magical boxes, “enclosed beauty of chance encounters—a feather, ball bearings, Lauren Bacall”—or like those *déclassé* Parisian hotels, “places of collection, juxtaposition, passionate encounter” from which the Surrealists launched their “strange and wonderful urban voyages,” *Routes* “asserts a relationship among heterogeneous elements in a meaningful ensemble,… struggle[s] to sustain a certain hope, and a lucid uncertainty.”

In sum we have: (1) A romantical pilgrim on a self-testing Quest, confronting the Ultimate Other down deep in the jungle. (“I had really arrived among Savages,” Clastres writes. “The enormous gap…between us…made it seem impossible for us ever to understand one another.”) (2) A reserved, middle-distance spectator moving uneasily through a postmodern hall of mirrors. (“Night in the crowded streets: smoke from food stands, running young men and women from a martial-arts club, a dragon, University of Hawaii jazz ensemble, all-Asian saxophone section…. In slow motion [an Iraqi] building implodes.”) They hardly seem to belong to the same universe, much less to the same profession.

And yet these two world-describers, world-imaginers, world-comparers, differently trained, differently committed, and hardly, if at all, aware of one another (Clastres died, at forty-three, in a 1977 car crash, two years before Clifford began publishing; Clifford, for all his interest in French anthropology, never so much as alludes to Clastres), manage, between them, to frame, in its starkest terms, the most critical issue facing cultural anthropology in these postcolonial, postpositivist, post-everything times. This is the value, the feasibility, the legitimacy, and thus the future of localized, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research—what Clifford at one point lightly calls “deep hanging out,” and Clastres exalts on almost every page (“I had only to look around me at the daily life: even with a minimum of attention I could always discover something new”).

Without a master theory, without a set-apart subject matter, and, now that all the natives are citizens and the primitives minorities, without even a settled and undisputed professional niche, cultural anthropology is more dependent for its identity, its authority, and its claim to attention on a particular research practice than is virtually any other science, social or natural. If fieldwork goes, or anyway so it is feared on the one hand and hoped on the other, the discipline goes with it.

**2.**

Clastres’s remote, unreadable “savages,” enclosed in a world of hunting, violence, ordeal, and demoniacal animals—“the forest’s fatal metaphors”—are, as a matter of fact, a good deal less pristine than might at first appear. They are actually refugees, displaced by the Paraguay government two and a half years earlier to a state-run trading post at the edge of the forest—dispirited, deculturated, “pacified.” Thrown together there with former enemies (with whom they conclude an almost parodic “peace-pact”), still wandering now and again into the forest to hunt, and casually overseen by a Paraguayan “protector,” who is rather more sympathetic to them than are most of his compatriots, who regard them as cattle, they are, by the time Clastres arrives, clearly and precipitously dying out.

By the time he leaves, they are down from their original hundred-plus to at best seventy-five. Five years later, though he never goes back to visit them during a visit to Paraguay (“I have not had the heart to. What could I possibly find there?”), they are fewer than thirty. By the time of his own death they are gone altogether—“eaten away by illness and tuberculosis, killed by lack of proper care, by lack of everything.” They were, he says, in a haunting image, like unclaimed objects, left luggage. “Hopelessly forced to leave their prehistory, they had been thrown into a history that had nothing to do with them except to destroy them.”

The whole [colonial] enterprise that began in the fifteenth century is now coming to an end; an entire continent will soon be rid of its first inhabitants, and this part of the globe will truly be able to proclaim itself a “New World.” “So many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many peoples cut down by the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world overthrown for the sake of pearls and pepper! Mechanical victories.” So Montaigne hailed the conquest of America by Western civilization.

On the basis of some offhand, and extremely dubious, as well as extremely old-fashioned, physical anthropology, Clastres regards the Guayaki as, in all probability, remnants of the earliest human inhabitants of the area, perhaps of the entire continent. Though their skin color ranges from “the Indian’s classical copper, though less pronounced, to white—not the European’s pinkish white, but a dull, grayish white, like the gray skin of a sick person,” he calls them, as the Paraguayans do, and the Spaniards did before them, “white Indians.” And so they see themselves: when an unusually dark, thus cursed, child is born, its grandmother is obliged to strangle it.

Whatever their color, most of these “original” Guayaki were either killed off or assimilated in the course of a war of conquest by the later-arriving, intensely militaristic, “mongoloid” Tupi-Guarani, still the main Indian group in the region. The few who escaped simple annihilation abandoned the cultivation they long had practiced, and fled into the forests to become nomadic hunters—driven into impoverishment, exile, and cultural regression, not, as elsewhere on the continent, by Europeans, who only began to have at them in the seventeenth century, but by other Indians. Thus, the Guayaki, the first of the first inhabitants, are not just “savages.” They are the savages’ savages—fading traces of the socially elemental:

[The Guarani] cannot accept differences; unable to suppress these differences, they try to include them in a familiar code, in a reassuring set of symbols. For [the Guarani], the Guayaki do not belong to a different culture, *because there can be no such thing as differences between cultures*: they are outside the rules, beyond common sense and above the law—they are Savages. Even the gods are against them. Every civilization… has its pagans.

It is, thus, “Savagery”—that is, *la civilisation sauvage*—and its fate that most concern Clastres, and in this he is a quite orthodox structuralist, though he never uses the term or applies its contrived vocabulary. Like his mentor, whose heir he was supposed to have been, he contrasts those societies (Lévi-Strauss calls them “hot”) caught up in a relentless, unending process of historical change and those (Lévi-Strauss calls them “cold”) which have refused, adamantly and entirely, to become part of that process, resisted it, and sought, with at best the most temporary of successes, to keep their cultures static, free, communal, and undeformed.

“There are no grown-ups,” someone [actually, it was that paladin of *la civilisation civilisée*, André Malraux, as Clastres knows and assumes his readers will know] wrote recently. This is a strange remark to make in our civilization, which prides itself on being the epitome of adulthood. But for this very reason, it might well be true, at least for our world. For once we step outside our own boundaries, whatever is true for us in Europe no longer applies. We ourselves may never become adults, but that does not mean there are no grown-ups elsewhere. The question is: Where is the visible frontier of our culture, at what stage along the road do we reach the limit of our domain, where do different things exist and new meanings begin? This is not a rhetorical question, for we are able to situate the answer in a definite time and place…. The answer came at the end of the fifteenth century, when Christopher Columbus discovered the people from beyond—the savages of America.

In the islands, in Montezuma’s Mexico, and on the shores of Brazil, the white men crossed the absolute limit of their world for the first time, a limit they immediately identified as the dividing line between civilization and barbarity…. The Indians represented all that was alien to the West. They were the Other, and the West did not hesitate to annihilate them…. They were all inhabitants of a world that was no longer meant for them: the Eskimos, the Bushmen, the Australians. It is probably too early to gauge the most important consequences of this meeting. It was fatal for the Indians; but by some strange twist of fate, it might also turn out to be the cause of the unexpected death of our own history, the history of the world in its present form.

It is to record, in as fine and circumstantial a detail as possible (though it is sometimes unclear whether he is describing something he has seen, something he has only heard about, or something he thinks must be the case), the beliefs and practices that were Guayaki life—the jaguar myths and the life-stage ordeals, the inconclusive, undirected wars and the powerless, ephemeral nature of leadership—that Clastres writes his book. More exactly, he writes it to expose to us, who can never ourselves encounter these savage grown-ups as he has, the logic of that life and—cannibalism, infanticide, tapir penises, and all—its moral beauty:

For myself, I most of all want to remember the [Guayaki’s] piety, the gravity of their presence in the world of things and the world of beings. To underscore their exemplary faithfulness to a very ancient knowledge that our own savage violence has squandered in a single instant…. Is it absurd to shoot arrows over the new moon when it slides among the trees? Not for the [Guayaki]: they knew that the moon was alive and that its appearance in the sky would make the [women] bleed menstrual blood, which was…bad luck for the hunters. They took revenge, for the world is not inert, and you must defend yourself…. For many centuries [they] tenaciously maintained their furtive and timid life as nomads in the secret life of the forest. But this shelter was violated, and it was like a sacrilege.

In any case, sacrilege, conquest, or the modern mania for change and progress, they had no choice. “There was nothing to be done…. There was death in their souls…. Everything was over.”

**3.**

Although Clifford shares Clastres’s fierce hostility to (in Clifford’s more fashionable, if less eloquent, phrasings) “globalism,” “empires,” “Western hegemony,” “rampant neoliberalism,” “commodification,” “the ongoing power imbalances of contact relations,” “caste and class hierarchies,” and, of course, “racism,” and shares, as well, his sympathy for the “dominated,” the “exoticized,” the “exploited,” and the “marginalized,” he most definitely does not share Clastres’s belief in total immersion in the simple and the distant as the royal road to recovering *les formes élémentaires de la vie sociale*. Instead, he sees his mission to be one of “deliver[ing] a sharp critique of [the] classic quest—exoticist, anthropological, orientalist—“ for revelatory “cultural types, villagers, or natives,”…”condensed epitome[s] of social wholes.” Which is, of course, precisely what Clastres was trying with such passion to do: to get to the bottom of things by examining a handful of battered and powerless left-luggage Indians up close and personal.

Clifford, who is not much interested in the bottom of things, says he wants only to displace what he calls “the fieldwork habitus”—“an ungendered, unraced, sexually inactive subject [interacting] intensively (on hermeneutic/ scientific levels at the very least) with its interlocutors”—from its position as the defining characteristic of “real anthropology” and “real anthropologists.” He wants to undercut the “licensing function” of going into jungles, to deconstruct the “normative power” of living among people who shoot arrows at the moon. But he has, clearly, a rather larger, more radical aim in mind than this familiar, tiresome sloganizing suggests. He’s out to set anthropology free of its first-world parochialism, its compromised past, and its epistemological illusions—to propel it, and forcefully, “in postexoticist and postcolonial directions.”

Intensive fieldwork does not produce privileged or complete understandings. Nor does the cultural knowledge of indigenous authorities, of “insiders.” We are differently situated as dwellers and travelers in our cleared “fields” of knowledge. Is this multiplicity of locations merely another symptom of postmodern fragmentation? Can it be collectively fashioned into something more substantial? Can anthropology be reinvented as a forum for variously routed fieldworks—a site where different contextual knowledges engage in critical dialogue and respectful polemic? Can anthropology foster a critique of cultural dominance which extends to its own protocols of research? The answer is unclear: powerful, newly flexible, centralizing forces remain.

Clifford’s wanderings through museums, exhibitions, tourist traps, heritage parks, and the like are less casual, and less innocent, than they look. They are designed to accelerate a rerouting, and “rerooting,” of anthropological research: to turn it away from static, high-resolution, Clastres-like descriptions of this or that people, in this or that place, living in this or that way. Their aim is to turn research toward loose-limbed, “decentered” accounts of peoples, ways of life, and cultural products in motion—traveling, mixing, improvising, colliding, struggling for expression and domination. Such spaces, events, sites, or settings are what he means, borrowing a term from Mary Louise Pratt’s study of colonial travel writing, *Imperial Eyes*, by “contact zones.”[1](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fn-1)

A contact zone is, in Pratt’s words (which Clifford quotes),

the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.

It emphasizes, she says, “how subjects are constituted in their relations to each other”; it stresses “copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices…within radically asymmetrical relations of power.”[2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fn-2) To view the sort of institutions with which Clifford is concerned, places of cultural display and commemoration, from this perspective is to regard them as political arenas—“power-charged set[s] of exchanges, of push and pull.” In such arenas, consequential collages, real-life magic boxes, Clifford’s drifting, freestyle anthropology finds its “field.”

Among the pieces assembled in *Routes*, most of which seem thoroughly ephemeral, this is perhaps best demonstrated in the one called “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” a comparison not just of the museums as such, two national and majoritarian, two tribal and oppositional, but of their contrasting approaches to the collection and display of Indian artifacts, and, even more effectively, in the essay called “Fort Ross Meditation,” a highly original, powerful, if somewhat serpentine, portrayal of the North Pacific—Siberia, Alaska, and the Pacific Coast—as “a regional contact zone.” “Russian America was an extension of Siberia.” “At Fort Ross…’Western’ history arrives from the wrong direction.”

But throughout, even in the least substantial, throwaway pieces, and despite his genteel, *noli me tangere* persona, the moral seriousness of Clifford’s work, his personal concern for the human future and the place of the dispossessed within it, displays itself as intensely, as clearly, and as unremittingly as, in his more *mano a mano*, prophetical voice, Clastres’s does:

At Fort Ross, I hope to glimpse my own history in relation to others in a regional contact zone…. Located on the rim of the Pacific, my home of eighteen years, the fort’s nineteenth century stories, seen from an uncertain fin-de-siècle, may provide just enough “depth” to make sense of a future, some possible futures….

History is thought from different places within an unfinished global dynamic. Where are we in this process? Is it too late to recognize “our” diverse paths into and through modernity? Or too early?… All at once, the millennium feels like a beginning.

**4.**

So: drawing near versus hanging back, confident empiricism versus “lucid uncertainty,” the immediacies of the local versus the refractions of the uncentered, insular (and doomed) stability versus global (and encouraging) commotion. These may be a bit crude as binaries; and in such matters there are no pure types. But, for adepts of the special, the singular, the different, and the concrete—that is, among others, anthropologists—they do rather capture the question here: How are we now to practice our trade?

The ready way of dealing with all this would be to see Clastres as the nostalgic voice of a disappeared, exhausted past, professional no less than actual—like Lévi-Strauss’s famous characterization of the tropics, out of date—and to see Clifford as a man with the future in his bones, designing an anthropology for an oncoming age of global interconnection, movement, instability, hybridity, and dispersed, antihegemonical politics.

But that will hardly do. The choice is not between regretting the past and embracing the future. Nor is it between the anthropologist as hero and as the very model of a postmodern major general. It is between, on the one hand, sustaining a research tradition upon which a discipline, “soft” and half-formed perhaps but morally essential, has been built and, on the other, “displacing,” “reworking,” “renegotiating,” “reimagining,” or “reinventing” that tradition, in favor of a more “multiply centered,” “pluralistic,” “dialogical” approach, one which sees poking into the lives of people who are not in a position to poke into yours as something of a colonial relic.

There is very little in what the partisans of an anthropology in which fieldwork plays a much reduced or transformed role—an active and growing group of which Clifford is only one of the more prominent members—have so far done that would suggest they represent the wave of the future.[3](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fn-3) It is true that Clastres’s Rousseauian primitivism, the view that “savages” are radically different from us, more authentic than us, morally superior to us, and need only to be protected, presumably by us, from our greed and cruelty, is, some New Age enthusiasts aside, not much in favor these days. (Clastres wrote another book before his death, *Society Against the State*, in which he developed some of the ideas set forth in the *Chronicle* in more explicit, not to say polemical, terms, but which has not been much noticed.[4](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fn-4) ) Even those working desperately to protect peoples like the Guayaki against Western exploitation are not trying to freeze their cultures in time or preserve their societies in aspic; they are trying to give them a voice in their own, surely untraditional, future. But whether the sort of middle-distance, walk-through research Clifford practices and recommends is an advance on the close-in, dogged-does-it sort Clastres carried out with such devotion is far from clear.

*Routes*, which Clifford says is an extension of his earlier, much praised and much pilloried *The Predicament of Culture* (a stronger, less desultory, and better written book than *Routes*, as a matter of fact), seems to show a hesitant, stuttering quality (what can I say? how can I say it? with what right do I do so?) not wholly attributable to its exploratory, unfinished nature.[5](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fn-5) Clastres, whatever his orthodoxy and his straight-ahead temperament, knew where he was going, and he got there. Clifford, whatever his originality and his openness to experiment, seems stalled, unsteady, fumbling for direction. It is, perhaps, rather too early to exchange roots for routes.

1. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992). [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fnr-1)
2. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 6-7. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fnr-2)
3. For a general view of this school of thought, see James Clifford and George Marcus, editors, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986). The emerging field of cultural studies, with which Clifford has become increasingly involved, provides even clearer examples of this sort of non-immersive, hit-and-run ethnography. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fnr-3)
4. Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: The Leader as Servant and the Human Uses of Power Among the Indians of the Americas* (Urizen Books, 1977). [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fnr-4)
5. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1988.) [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/10/22/deep-hanging-out/#fnr-5)