

In the Life of the Other

Nicole Lapierre

There are many ways and different reasons to enter into the life of the other. I would like first to evoke the case of some people who have changed their identity and their look, in order to experience dramatic life conditions and testify to denounce them. For example, John Howard Griffin who, in 1959 in the United States, had his skin darkened deliberately, with the help of a physician, in order to live in the skin of a black man (Griffin, 1962). Or the German journalist Günter Wallraff who, in the 1990, pretended to be a Turkish immigrant in Germany (Wallraff, 1985), or his French colleague Marc Boulet who became an untouchable in India (Boulet, 1994). Or again the French writer Anne Tristan who pretended to be an unemployed woman from Marseille, supporting the national Front (an extreme rightist party), which she joined, and where she was a kind of « submarine » (Tristan, 1987). Anne Tristan who, after that, took on a new identity of political asylum seeker, coming from Columbia to France (Tristan, 1993).

This jump into life, identity or skin of the other reveal the violence of certain conditions or social situations. It also transgress the usual rules of sociological research or

journalistic inquiry. In order to launch into such an adventure, one has to be audacious and have strong ethical reasons. And also something which put you at risk : a peculiar background, a peculiar sensitivity and a peculiar personality.

Let's take, for example, John Howard Griffin. His background shows choices and curiosity of a very original spirit who is looking passionately for truth. Griffin was born in Dallas (Texas) in 1920, in a musician's family (his father was a tenor and his mother a pianist). He left the United States for France when he was fifteen. He was attracted to literature, medicine and music. He studied literature in Poitiers university, medicine in Tour university and music in Fontainebleau's conservatoire (with well known musicians as Nadia Boulanger, Robert Casadessus and Jean Batalla). And he tried to combine his interest when he was working in a psychiatric hospital in Tours by testing a music therapy on mentally ill criminals. The war stopped his projects. He was only nineteen when he participated in evacuation of Austrian Jews in the French port of Saint Nazaire. After that, he fought in the US army, was wounded and remained blind during twelve years. During this time, he wrote several novels and he converted to Catholicism. Novelist, journalist, musicologist (specialist of Gregorian chants which he studied in Solemnes Abbay), he became a photographer when he regained his sight, in 1957, after an operation.

It is, of course, an amazing life experience via blindness and lucidity, via internal vision and religious conversion, followed by his last transformation in order to denounce racial prejudice. The book he wrote about this experience, entitled *Black like me*, and published in 1961, made him well known all over the world. First published in a series of articles in the magazine *Sepia*, it has suddenly revealed, like on a photographic plate, the reality of racial segregation which remained invisible for the majority of the American population at that time. The book has also provoked a wave of protest and attacks against the author. He was hung in effigy in his home town, threatened with death and was forced to go into exile with his family in Mexico for one year.

These jumps into the life of someone else are risky and upsetting for those whom make these choices. Nevertheless, they are limited in time. You know, when you begin, that there will be an end. You will come back to your own life and you will write about this experience. Even if it is not always easy to come back and if no one comes back exactly as he was when he started. Griffin was a black man transient through southern segregationist states during six weeks, Günter Wallraff was a Turkish immigrant in Germany, Marc Boulet an untouchable beggar in Benares and Anne Tristan an undocumented Colombian begging in the Paris subway for several months. All of them tell how they felt they were reduced to nothing. But

all of them were able to retrieve themselves through their writings.

So it is quite different from another experience of breaking through identities which is, on the contrary, a one way trip, with no return. It is the case of these western people looking for rebirth far away. During the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, some men, pushed by an appetite of metamorphosis, looking for primitivism, innocence, island paradise or wild desert and seeking for all kinds of oriental wisdom, decided to abandon their life to become others. And this, in spite of difficulties and trials of rites of passages. They were attracted by the other, the real one, or an image, or a dream sometimes. Some of them converted to Buddhism or Islam, some married foreign spouses, they change their language, customs, habits, they change their name, their look, sometimes they changed even their sexual orientation. Doing so, they cut ties with their previous society. They wanted to become an other in order to escape to remain themselves. But, in fact, it is impossible to erase a cultural imprinting and they did not completely succeed in being rooted in their new environment. Even if they were quite assimilated, they knew that they came from elsewhere. It was not possible for them to be just « comme un poisson dans l'eau » (a fish in the water).

The jump into the life of the other can also be experienced by crossing social boundaries. It was the case of the French philosopher Simone Weil when she became a worker in a factory in 1934. It was also the case of some young militants, in France and in Italy, at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, who left their studies and went to work in factories (Linhart, 1978). They were engaged in small activist groups claiming to follow Mao policy. For Simone Weil, it was mainly a philosophical and moral task, for the young militants, it was a political one. As it was, for millions of young Chinese boys and girls who were sent to the countryside during the cultural revolution. For all of them, it was a disturbing trial, they were not used and not prepared for such a work and such a life. Some of them (very few) stood in the factories in France and Italy, most of them came back to their previous life. This coming back was not easy, but sometimes, later, they wrote testimonies.

As Simone Weill underlined, the testimony of an intellectual who became a worker may look like the description of a psychologist or a sociologist about the working condition. But, it is quite different, because the reader knows that the author is not only an observer, he is an insider : he has not only seen the daily life in the factory, he had experienced it (Weil, 1951, 1999). Like Griffin had experienced the daily life of a black man in a southern state of America. And such a

testimony, made by somebody who does not belong to the oppressed, exploited or segregated people, appears to be more impressive and more efficient than a testimony written by a genuine worker or by a genuine black men for example. As if one have to be a kind of translator, speaking for the other.

Let' turn now to the anthropologist. Him, as well, share the ordinary life of the other when he is staying among a distant society, far away from home. Like Griffin or the others, he knows that he is staying there for a limited time. Like Simone Weill or others, he may consider that his duty is to defend the cause of the people he has lived with. This means, in his case, to protect their culture from modernization and globalization which can destroy it. And even if he is living in the same village, sleeping in the same house, eating the same food, and even if he shows solidarity for their cause, he is still perceived as an other by these others he is studying. But, sometimes, in a specific situation or event, he can be suddenly very close to them, involved and reacting as they do. And he can find then, the opportunity to get a deeper comprehension of their world vision. I'll take two examples of such involvements. The first is the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (who died last October), the second the French anthropologist Robert Jaulin (who died in 1996).

In his famous text on Cockfights in Bali, Geertz has related with talent how him, "a professional intruder" ignored by the

villagers, was caught running when the police made an unexpected raid to repress an unlawful activity. The next morning, Geertz was no longer invisible in the village, this sudden irruption by the security forces brought him closer to the villagers, he had then understood the real meaning of cockfights for a Balinese and the stated of mind of the society. This particular attention to the ways of life and situations, but also about a shared experience, the ways in which others see themselves, think about their actions, their designs and notion of the world, guided also his practice and field ethics in Morocco. Inspired by the hermeneutic tradition, Clifford Geertz defends, we all know, the anthropological interpretation (Geertz, 1973). In other terms, to understand the meanings of a culture from the point of view of the indigenous. For him, the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts which the anthropologist strains “to read over the shoulders” of those to whom they properly belong. But to read over one’s shoulder does not mean to “enter into one’s head”, which was the will of Malinowski, or to enter into one’s life. A distance is kept, and this distance is widened, on this return, when the anthropologist begins to write about his field work and for his peers.

Geertz is also well known among others as somebody who has given more thought to the nature of anthropological text and this split between the company of others where they are

and the projection when they are not. Against this peaceful certainty of the scientific objectivity and its assumed terms rigorously in accordance with the reality, he stressed the inherent dimension of anthropological writing. To embark the reader far way and to convince him that one lives well as we are being told, in Africa and Polynesia, agile discursive strategies are vital. The anthropologist is also an author. Geertz gives this demonstration by analyzing the major texts of this discipline, by a few anthropologists for instance : Claude Levy Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Edward Evans Pritchard (Geertz, 1988). We find something similar in the effectiveness of those who have wanted to tell the story of others after they have led the same life, even if the aim is evidently different.

Geertz has often been criticized for reducing anthropology solely to discourse. This criticism is unfair. Considering anthropological writings as literary texts do not discredit knowledge, but allows us to apprehend how it is produced. It is true, on the other hand, as Geertz acknowledged, that one can no longer, today, writes like the great masters of anthropology. Because in a world where differences are melted, here and elsewhere are less differentiated. And the other no longer needs the cultural intermediary, the anthropologist to interpret his own culture.

Jaulin conceived anthropology as a commitment, a way of life, an initiation. He refused to see the world through the mirror of the western society, he preferred to take the risk of going on the other side. In Chad, with the Sara, he encountered some difficulties, to go through the Yondo, the initiation which transcends the disorder of death (Jaulin, 1971). Some time later, with the Indians of California, he took part until dizziness in the ritual of the sun's dance. Jaulin subscribed to the cause of the people he studied and defended with passion the vitality of their culture against the standardization and the western culture, occasionally excessively exciting their difference and their truth. He made well known the misdeeds which he called the "white peace", the genocide of the Bari Indians from Columbia (Jaulin, 1970). Jaulin wanted to be closer to the human groups who greeted him, through the initiation, in principle forbidden to his state of being a stranger; as in the effective solidarity which he expressed. But he did not become, as far as we know, a Sara and he never backed down to the illusion or to the fantasy of becoming the other : " I wanted to be close and I believe I was, which is not the same thing as to pretend that I identified myself or was identifiable. Independently to the fact that the serious involvement to a cultural system in which one has not grown up in never immediate, the way one may behave is not enough to isolate

him from the group he originates and to which he will – by others and by himself - always tied up. ”

This impossibility to walk into the life of the other is not a restriction, but a chance, as stressed by Victor Segalen : the quality of the other is not be the same (Segalen, 1986). Similar but not same, such is the pleasure of the diverse and the wealth of the world.

Bibliography :

BOULET Marc, 1994, *Dans la peau d'un intouchable*, Paris, Seuil.

GEERTZ Clifford, 1973, *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York, Basic Books.

GEERTZ Clifford, 1988, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford University Press.

GRIFFIN John Howard, 1961, *Black like me*, Houghton Mifflin.

JAULIN Robert, 1970, *La Paix blanche, introduction à l'ethnocide*, Paris, Seuil.

JAULIN Robert, 1971, *La Mort Sara*, Paris, 10/18.

LINHART Robert, 1978, *L'Etabli*, Paris, Minuit.

SEGALEN Victor, 1986, *Essai sur l'exotisme. Une esthétique du divers*, Paris, Livre de poche/Biblio Essais.

TRISTAN Anne, 1987, *Au front*, Paris, Gallimard.

TRISTAN Anne, 1993, *Clandestine*, Paris, Stock.

WALLRAFF Günter, 1985, *Ganz unten*, Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

WEIL Simone, 1951, *La Condition ouvrière*, reprint 1999 : “Expérience de la vie d'usine” in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, “Quarto”.