

John Langston Gwaltney

Nominated by J.C. Niala, M.Sc. Social Anthropology student



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John Langston Gwaltney (1928-1998) was a quintessential ethnographer. A proponent of 'native anthropology', he turned his remarkable skills to studying African Americans (the community of his birth), developing ground-breaking methodology such as 'folk seminars' which became an integral part of his 'indigenous analysis'. Gwaltney asserted that there were (at the time he was working) limited works in the social sciences that gave an accurate and fair representation of African American peoples, and he set about to remedy it in a way that was not only respectful of the people he was studying, but also became a rich addition to the anthropological canon.

One of the results was his first critically acclaimed book *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* that Gwaltney opened with an insight (that he also acknowledged) from one of the people that he interviewed 'I think this anthropology is just another way to call me n****r.' With his 'native anthropology', Gwaltney engaged in and collected 'good and profound dialogue' that resulted in a study hailed by the *New York Times* as 'The most expansive and realistic exposition of contemporary mainstream black attitudes yet published'. An astute observer, Gwaltney's skills were particularly attuned to drawing out that which was worthy of note from the ordinary and everyday. Indeed *Drylongso* was an African American term for ordinary.

Gwaltney's own life, however, was extraordinary. He was born in 1928, blind nearly from birth and went on to achieve academic excellence at a time when Jim Crow laws were still in effect in the United States. His dissertation won the prestigious Ansley Award at Columbia University and his supervisor Margaret Mead commented that his doctoral defence was 'one of the most brilliant PhD oral examinations in [her] long experience.' Influenced by Mead's interest in social issues, Gwaltney carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico that formed the basis of his book *Thrice Shy: Cultural Accommodation to Blindness and Other Disasters in a Mexican Community*.

He worked with the challenges that he had faced in the world as a black man living with a disability to bring a sensitivity and perceptiveness to the communities that he studied. Committed to mentoring fledgling African American anthropologists, Gwaltney was a key member of the Association of Black Anthropologists, which awarded him the Distinguished Achievement award for extraordinary scholarship and artistry in 1989.

*Diversifying Portraiture
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