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## COMMENTARY

# A Historic Addendum on the Relationship of Anthropologists and Indian Communities

J.V. (JAY) POWELL

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While working on a dictionary of the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka or Aht) language in 1992, I spent some time in Port Alberni, B.C., consulting with an old man named Charlie Watts. He told me that he was born in 1917 and added, "My father, Sayaachapas, worked with Dr. Sapir. I was here in the 1940s when Morris Swadesh came out with his two little girls and his wife Frances. They lived in that cabin right over there. Besides working with the Old People, he used to have sessions at the community hall in the evening when he would teach us how to write our language. Lots of people came. Swadesh was a good teacher." Then he said, "Oh, I have something you'd be interested in!" Rummaging under his bed, he pulled out a faded envelope that contained two typed pages, foxed with age. It was a letter protesting the nonrenewal of Morris Swadesh's contract by the City College of New York in 1949, an outcome apparently related to Swadesh's indictment by the McCarthy Commission earlier that year. This letter was signed by

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Captain Jack, a now long-dead chieftain of the Mowachat band, with a shaky X. The letter reads as follows:

*hilth t'suum'as* 22 August, 1949

chuu yaq-aaqtlisuu n'an'aan'ich:

*iih-atlitiin yaa-ak'at thlim'aqsti kwam'aawin t'aqsap-ath qwiqiqin  
hashiichtitl ani ah-aa hawii-ap'atqa Professor Morris Swadesh uh-  
at City College of New York yaathlwee-in uupimt aayachithl  
kamat'ap yaathlwee-in uupimt tluthl huhtaksap. . . .*

This long and traditionally formed Nootka text was then translated into English as follows:

All of us Aht people were very distressed to hear that Professor Morris Swadesh was dropped from City College of New York even though he is an excellent scientist and teacher. We have good reason to be concerned about this. In fact we also are harmed by what happened to him, as we shall now explain.

As everyone knows, we Indians owned all this land and all the many things that abounded in it—fish, animals and birds, fruit and all the great tree-filled tracts. Most of it was taken away from us and only small bits of land were left for us to live on. Much of the game has disappeared, having been killed off and is now scarce. Long ago there was never a shortage of food, and it was easy to obtain food year after year. But nowadays, after seven years of plentiful work, it has again become difficult to obtain work. For the Indian it is always hard to get a good job because some of the so-called “white” people pretend we are lazy, inept and stupid as a pretext for denying us decent jobs.

We used to be governed only by our own chiefs, who would assemble and take counsel with all the people. The chief was a relative and neighbour living on the spot, and took good care of his people against a time of shortage. He gave feasts to entertain and to instruct his neighbors about past history so they would thereby be guided rightly. Nowadays, the Indian Service decides what it wants the Indians to do. We Indians were brought under a document called the Indian Act, which in all things treats us like children. Long ago women as well as men had a voice in the councils, but nowadays, according to the Indian Act, only men have the right.

If an Indian drinks even a little bit they immediately give him a bad time and put him in jail, even though some White

people get drunk every day without being bothered or locked up.

We are not allowed to carry out our old customs, even though other nations practice their own religion and celebrate all kinds of holidays.

White people brought all sorts of new diseases—smallpox, mumps, itch, tuberculosis and other bad diseases. We had no medicines for these diseases, and before we got medicines most of our people died off.

It is true that the police succeeded in stopping the old warfare, but the present wars are much worse.

They tried to destroy our traditions and our language but they did not succeed. We still treasure the knowledge of our ancestors. We do not want to lose our history. It is our right to do as all the nations do. The traditions of our ancestors guide and teach us to do right, and enable us to hold up our heads when people try to degrade us.

Both Sapir and Swadesh have treated us with respect, just as they have respected our traditions. People who have mistreated us and mocked us have been given greater prestige and wealth. Why then has Morris Swadesh been made to suffer?

We have been harmed by the dismissal of our true friend. We also know that he has been made to suffer for the same reason as we Indians. It must be because he is a Jew. It must also be because he respected the Negroes and other peoples in New York just as he respected us.

We therefore protest the action against Morris Swadesh, and we call upon all those who believe in justice to join us in demanding that he be restored to his former position.

Recently, when I discussed this letter with Dr. Bea Medicine, she suggested that it should be available in the literature of the relations between social scientists and First Nations peoples. Written in 1949, it predates the sometimes-humorous, often-outraged, and deservedly indignant discussions that sprang up in the 1960s about the role of anthropologists in native communities. This letter of support from a group of hereditary chiefs on behalf of the friend who had studied their language and their culture suggests a different picture from the television stereotype of the anthropologist who studies "people" to answer rather selfish questions. Indeed, Swadesh was remarkable in being what may be the first example of an anthropologist who taught a native community how to write their language ("informant"-training and missionary efforts excluded). Swadesh also conducted writ-

ing classes among the Menominee in 1939, a visionary enterprise that he undertook long before it became the popular thing to do in the 1970s. Certainly, there are lots of bad examples in the history of American anthropological fieldwork; but the record should include the good examples, too—the cases where anthropologists made efforts to give understandings back to the communities they worked with.