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Living with Stories

William Schneider

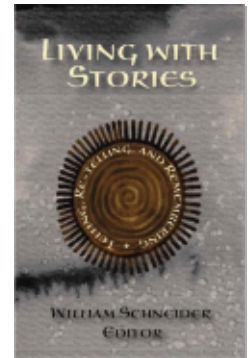
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The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic, 1878–80

*A Conversation with Aron L. Crowell and
James Clifford*

In the following discussion, James Clifford helps us to understand Estelle Oozevaseuk's story in a broader framework. He sees it as part of a movement of indigenous peoples all over the world who are seeking ways to express their own stories, to contribute to history making, and to challenge the narrowness of the "official record." Crowell and Clifford explore how Estelle Oozevaseuk's narration imparts a message for the present. Similarly, they recognize the Yupik parka at the Smithsonian as more than a material vestige of the past; instead, it is a vehicle of expression, pregnant with story.

CLIFFORD: I see Aron's text falling into two distinct but interconnected moments. The first is an exercise in critical historical work that would be appreciated by any historian influenced by ethnohistory in the style of Jan Vansina. Here the idea is that by using both written and oral sources, according them equal weight and critical analysis, you try to make the best interpretation, the most balanced guess about what really happened. You draw on every kind of source to produce judgments of an historical realist sort.

But then, there is the other part of Aron's essay. He shows us that Estelle's narrative refers not only to things widely recognizable as historically real but also to what we might call ultimate meanings—truths of ethics and spirituality. This is not about how historians

James Clifford is professor of history of consciousness at the University of California Santa Cruz. Among his interests are how local and indigenous groups respond to national and international forces and the role of museums and festivals as settings for cultural expression. Some of his best-known publications include *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), edited with George E. Marcus; the *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988); and *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

typically ask “why” something happened. Rather, it concerns the allegorical dimensions that every story produces in its listeners in the present context of its telling. Stories are never limited to just telling the facts, what really happened, once, in historical time. People will always add levels of significance, and Estelle is expressing quite specific meanings that, as Aron shows, combine Christian elements with traditional knowledge of various sorts. What interests me is the way Estelle’s story adds an overlapping, not an opposed, ontology to the historical record. Her listeners recognize the full history she is retelling, both a traumatic series of real events in the past and an ethical vision, an allegory that resonates in very direct and important ways in their ongoing lives.

SCHNEIDER: Is that because stories are told in the present, and the present has its own particular considerations and questions that the story can address?

CLIFFORD: Yes. Where I begin in Aron’s piece is the final words. He talks about Estelle reclaiming Yupik heritage in the context of a museum, with repatriation in the air, since the islanders are at the Smithsonian to reconnect with their cultural objects. Aron says Estelle is reclaiming “Yupik heritage and historical voice,” and it is *historical voice* that I would underline. Heritage is more than just recollection, reclaiming a lost or silenced collective reality. It’s creative, changing. Heritage as *historical voice* is performative: there’s always an “I” and a “you,” a specific relation. The message and its reception exist essentially in the present moment: Estelle and her fellow villagers at the Smithsonian, and us trying to understand what they were saying—to each other, and to us. Who is being addressed, and what do they hear and what don’t they hear? There’s something coming across in every story, but something missed. So *voice* to me suggests performance, articulation, and translation. These are the terms—all stressing partial, contingent connection—that I keep coming back to in thinking about cultural process and transformation. And *historical* suggests something more than just folklore or a local belief system. The historically real, here, is an open-ended, relational process.

CROWELL: It also seems to me that historical voice—the way history is told—is an expression and a foundation of cultural identity. For example, Jonathan Friedman in his essay “The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity” emphasizes that history and identity are constructed in relation to each other. I especially

appreciate Anders Apassingok's introduction to the collected oral traditions of St. Lawrence Island, in which he says that "the words on these pages are more than facts and history. Behind the words is the heartbeat of the people." In this sense, the Kukulek narrative is a mirror of collective Yupik identity, a reflection on "who we are" and what happens when fundamental values of the culture are transgressed. Estelle Oozevaseuk is carrying the message of this generations-old story into the present.

At the same time, it is important to remember that this particular version evolved within a specific family and clan context. Yupik linguist Vera Kaneshiro, who translated the narrative for publication, said that the famine and events at Kukulek are recounted somewhat differently by people of other clans. The story thus has a specificity to the narrator and her family, and we should keep in mind that other contemporary perspectives may exist regarding the meaning of this watershed event in St. Lawrence Island history. This variation is not something that I have had the opportunity to explore.

We can also see, as Jim mentioned, how new meanings are added over time. The Bogoras version of the Kukulek story, recorded in 1901, is more closely aligned with traditional Yupik cosmology, without any overlay of Christian belief. The Presbyterian mission had been established on the island only a few years earlier, in 1894, and the way that Ale'qat told the story to Bogoras is probably close to the way that people originally "constructed" the events of 1878–80. The redemptive Christian narrative was later melded with the original story, adding a new layer of meaning without erasing the old. Today, the significance of Estelle's narrative may lie especially in its implications for Yupik identity, self sufficiency, and self regard. In part this is no doubt a reaction to pejorative accounts of the disaster that have been given by Western writers.

There is an interesting illustration of how the history of the "famine" lives on in peoples' minds. In 2005, Gambell resident Douglas Henry found an old underground meat cache buried about eight feet down in the frozen soil of the Siqlugaghyaget archaeological site, adjacent to the modern village. Blubber from the cache was eventually radiocarbon dated to about 1,100 years before present, but before this result was known some residents of Gambell suggested that the meat remained from 1878, proof that people had not failed to provide themselves with meat and were not to blame for the disaster.

CLIFFORD: A Native counter-history or critical genealogy? I have been thinking recently about the range of historical idioms, the kinds of stories that various indigenous movements are telling these days. There often seems to be an element of “setting the record straight,” a way of putting the *colonial* moment—and that can be a very long and unfinished moment—in its place, recontextualizing it within a longer indigenous historical temporality. Sometimes that temporality takes a cyclical form. You know there’s a quote from an Alutiiq elder, Barbara Shangin, that has made me stop and think a lot about historical voice. She says, in effect: “Ever since the Russians came it has been one big spell of storms and bad weather. . . . But this too will pass.” Her metaphor suggests a kind of cyclicity but, of course, weather is both the same and never the same each time around. We never come full circle to a previous state. So this indigenous counter-discourse is always about more than correcting the colonial record. Like Estelle’s story, it’s a matter of producing some bigger, deeper, open-ended story about indigenous continuity, and enduring ethical purpose, through these terrible struggles and transformations. In indigenous historical narratives—which often avoid stark before/after ruptures and zero-sum transitions—religious conversion is not a loss but an addition, or rather a selective rearticulation and translation. We didn’t lose who we were when we became Christians; we added something important without letting go. Identity is a process. I see something of this building of narratives of continuity and overcoming in Estelle’s historical voice.

CROWELL: I believe that is true for St. Lawrence Island. And as part of that, there’s a great deal of pride and a strong commitment to independence and autonomy. During implementation of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the islanders let go of any cash settlement they might have received in exchange for full title to the whole island. They didn’t want any part of their land to go to outside interests. It is an example of their efforts to preserve the integrity of the culture.

CLIFFORD: Aron, I want to hear just a little bit more about the object, the parka, that provoked this retelling. I’m really curious about the power of clothing—and I don’t mean clothing in any kind of narrow Western way. How does something like this parka manifest the self through social (including interspecies) cosmological relations?

CROWELL: When Estelle saw the parka at the Smithsonian, she identified the design with her clan and it prompted her to tell the story. This type of garment was associated with sacred events, such as the arrival and welcome of a whale that had been killed. During the traditional hunting ceremonies, people would nearly always wear these decorated parkas, which were made from parts of seals, walrus, whales, and birds. Their beauty was an expression of respect toward these nonhuman beings, which give themselves to sustain the human community. Of all the things in museum collections, clothing is often the richest source of thought, recollection, and stories because it ties into so many social and spiritual dimensions.

CLIFFORD: The parka in this story is a beautiful example of that point. Museum objects are not what really matters, in a sense—what matters are the stories that are associated with the object. And the stories may be specific to particular clans or families who have rights to tell them. Provoked by the object, the stories are retold, always in a new context, to make us look both ways, to reach back to something and to go forward. Ann Fienup-Riordan's recent accounts of her visits with Yup'ik elders to the collections of various museums in Germany shows this in detail. And Julie Cruikshank's work has also been very important to me in thinking about the ongoing life of stories and the attitude of elders who see them, not primarily as something to preserve, but as a way of "making history" now. I think the whole repatriation process, whether it is about things actually coming back to live in tribal settings or whether it is about tribal people visiting and reclaiming links with objects held in urban museums, the whole process represents an enormous remaking and retelling that is going on around these objects and stories. And the word "object" just doesn't work anymore.

CROWELL: I've often had the experience of seeing these items in their drawers, bereft of any of this knowledge. And I realize that each one could be connected to a whole system of understandings and associations. The signs embodied by clothing and other types of material culture can't be understood until they are rejoined with the universe of understanding that elders can bring forth in their descriptions and accounts.

I also had the privilege of working with Estelle's late brother, Roger Silook, on a teaching project at the Anchorage Museum. He and his daughter, ivory artist Susie Silook, were invited as guest curators for a "one-day exhibit" exercise that we organized for a

tribal museum training course. The pieces for the show came from the museum's collection of St. Lawrence Island archaeological artifacts. In the morning, Roger stood before the group, held the pieces up one by one, and talked about them in just a brilliant way. He brought out stories about each one and how it might have been used. During lunch, Ann Fienup-Riordan and I condensed key parts of his narrative into exhibit labels. During the afternoon the class worked with the exhibits department to produce the labels and mount the objects in a display case. The opening was that evening, at a reception for the Governor's Council on the Arts. It was an amazing experience, but you know, when we asked Roger for a title for this exhibit, he thought for a moment and simply said *Saquat*—"Objects." It was clear that these pieces themselves were only starting points for stories and didn't matter that much individually—that was the way he approached it.

SCHNEIDER: I think it is neat the way objects, in this case the parka, create an opening, an opportunity for retelling and how that retelling goes beyond a recounting of events to larger questions of identity, to a cultural interpretation and message about the past and the present. The message directs us to a proper relationship and treatment of the animals and the place where we live. This message, it seems to me, is what gives this story continued life; it is the "ultimate meaning" question that Jim raised early in our discussion. It explains, in part, why the story is retold. More than an event, more than an object, we are left with a lesson about life.