When Our Words Return
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When Our Words Return: Writing, Hearing, and Remembering Oral Traditions from Alasak and the Yukon.

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Introduction

The title of this book, *When Our Words Return*, was inspired by an analogy between language and the animals people hunt. In what was originally a keynote speech presented to bilingual-bicultural educators, Elsie Mather described the importance of preserving indigenous languages. Her own Yup’ik Eskimo language, she said, is as precious a gift as the seals, fish, and other game on which people depend. She reminded her listeners that when animals are treated with care and respect, they willingly return to those who have hunted them. Later she alluded to the ancient Bladder Festival, during which the spirits of seals were returned to the water to tell others of their kind if they had been well treated by those who had caught and consumed them. Reclothed in flesh, the same animals were believed to come back to their hunters. A person who is right living and right thinking may catch the same seals over and over again.

Like the gift of food, she continued, the gift of language is perpetuated through sharing and use. Only if oral traditions are told faithfully and respectfully will they be preserved for future generations.

As an icon for Mather’s analogy, we have chosen a photograph taken by James H. Barker in a Yup’ik home. In the foreground, Martina Phillip carefully flenses a seal her husband has caught. Her concentration is matched by the men in the background, intensely absorbed in talk. Together they evoke the everyday richness of lives in which the spoken and the heard, the hunted and the consumed, are linked by a cycle of respect and return.

As the editors of this volume, we face an awesome responsibility: the certain knowledge that our words will return. This is the burden of the essays we have included. In each one, the tellers and recorders of oral traditions implicitly or explicitly struggle to listen, record, and write in ways that invite the words back fully fleshed, not partially clad. In assuming this responsibility, we accept a commitment to work together at a particular moment in time, a historical moment that simultaneously bears the gifts and the travesties of our linked histories. As scholars and tradition bearers, we engage in intellectual dialogues that demand the most of us. How can we share and use words with
respect? How can we negotiate the linguistic and cultural biases that separate us from each other and from our audiences? How can we appreciate and convey some of the intellectual sophistication inherent in these oral traditions?

The obstacles in our way have become increasingly apparent. As researchers, we have only recently begun to understand in what ways our notes, tapes, and transcripts are mere artifacts of the telling. While they are important clues to meaning, the settings, speakers, audience, and reasons for telling the stories need to be known and described. We must go beyond the themes ("this is a story about...") and learn how the stories speak to people ("this story, told at this time, demonstrates... ").

We are beginning to realize the obvious: a story does not exist as something to be captured but as something to be passed on. As we come to understand this in the role of storytellers, it shifts our sense of ourselves as writers. We, too, are prompted to take responsibility for our retelling of stories, not simply to analyze texts in a scholarly vacuum.

Then, if the stories are really going to be recognized as cross-culturally important, we must contemplate them in relation to our own lives and values. Without this perspective, they remain in the realm of the exotic and esoteric, important to a relatively small number of participants and students of culture.

The authors of this volume share these recognitions because they are either writing from a Native cultural tradition or from longtime associations with Native cultures. Fortunately, in Alaska and the Yukon, as these essays point out, there are many settings where we can experience a rich oral tradition and explore the integration of themes with particular settings; where we can see tellers and listeners make meaning through story. This is a place where ancient stories are rekindled in new settings and retellings bring meaning to the present.

We work at the place where folklore studies intersect with sociolinguistics and contemporary interpretive anthropology. In this interdisciplinary area, we can integrate previously disparate approaches to oral narrative in action. The contributors to this volume view oral narratives as a reflection of complex processes of communication which are continually renegotiated between tellers and listeners.

Julie Cruikshank's essay illustrates this point. She tells us how Mrs. Angela Sidney chose to tell the Kaax'achgôok story over the years to mark important events such as the return of her son from war and
the dedication of the new Yukon College. We learn from Mrs. Sidney that this time-honored story was a powerful guidepost in her life, a gift that she knew she could share with others and a way to bring meaning to very diverse events. The story's meanings are inseparable from the reasons Mrs. Sidney chose to tell it.

All the essays in this volume focus on these questions of interpretation and representation: how oral narrative is produced and understood in a given time, place, and cultural context; who it is addressed to; and how its meaning is intricately linked to both speakers and listeners. These processes, in essence, involve a series of dialogues between tradition bearers and their audiences, between writers and those they write about, and between interpreters of the oral tradition. The dialogues are interlinked in complex ways, and it is the purpose of this volume to explore some of their complexities in the context of a very exciting and challenging setting: the contemporary North. Each essay is preceded by an editorial note.

In the first section of this book, "Writing," we begin with Elsie Mather's 1986 address to the Alaska Bilingual Multicultural Education Conference. Mather, a Yup'ik Eskimo culture and language specialist and author, introduces us to her work documenting her own culture and language. She explores the ways that writing about culture differs from traditional cultural ways of learning and experiencing. Where the oral tradition responds to variation in personal meaning, Mather finds that books create a distanced dependency. Literacy, she says, is a "necessary monster" with which people "have to come to terms." Mather writes from her lived experience, negotiating that oral/written continuum which Tannen (1982) has drawn to our attention elsewhere.

This theme is also pursued by Phyllis Morrow, who discusses collaboration with Mather. She highlights the tension inherent in collaboration. Using Foucault as one point of departure to consider the implications of written and oral forms, she suggests that the question of who is entitled to speak and about what is cross-culturally variable. This perspective is significant because it shifts our understanding of what is involved in writing about cultural tradition, brokering differences between writers from Native and non-Native backgrounds, and deciding what to present and how far to interpret for the public. For collaborators, this can indeed be "shaky ground."

Julie Cruikshank describes her collaboration with Mrs. Angela Sidney, a Tagish and Tlingit woman from the Yukon Territories. In their long relationship (seventeen years), Mrs. Sidney taught Cruikshank
how oral tradition gave meaning to her life and provided a context and way for her to understand contemporary issues. At one level, Cruikshank's essay is about the story of Kaax'achgóok and its importance to Mrs. Angela Sidney. At another level, the essay describes Cruikshank's education into the oral tradition and how she came to understand and learn to write about it in ways that reflect sensitivity to the culture and people who tell the stories. Finally, in the largest sense, it documents how a story may become appropriate in different ways.

All three authors focus on the challenges of writing about knowledge that is meant to be learned over many years of listening and experiencing and meant to be learned personally, not shared with an anonymous public.

"Hearing," the second section, features articles which struggle with issues in cross-cultural interpretation. Whether we consider people who are members of the narrator's cultural group or those who come from a different one, listeners bring their own orientations and experiences to bear on their interpretations of stories. In cross-cultural contexts, this is exaggerated by major cultural differences. Robin Barker pursues the educational implications of these differences. She uses the story "How Crane Got His Blue Eyes," as told by Maggie Lind, to demonstrate that Yupiit often understand the story to be about vision and observation while the tendency of Euro-Americans is to see it as a lesson in the importance of telling the truth. Confusion in the classroom often results.

Barker's essay is followed by Robert Drozda's. He describes cross-cultural interpretation within the context of a major government project to document Native historical places and cemetery sites. He emphasizes the learning process that occurred as government workers progressively came to realize that the people's conception of the landscape was very different from their own. These cultural differences posed serious challenges to the researchers in the course of gathering histories and determining land boundaries.

James Ruppert's work with Athabaskan elder Belle Deacon explores the fact that storytelling can vary depending on who the audience is and what language is used to tell the story. Ruppert compares variations in stories that Deacon told in Deg Hit' an that were then translated into English with the same stories told strictly in English. He makes a strong case for accepting the English telling as a telling, valid and instructive in itself. Although he is unable, at this point, to determine why the stories differ when told strictly in English,
Ruppert makes the very important point that traditional stories are shaped by "ongoing cultural conversations." That is, tellings in different languages and with new audiences provide opportunities to emphasize disparate aspects of a story. Various themes may be chosen for emphasis without the teller feeling that he or she has changed or distorted the meaning.

The essays in the third section, "Remembering," address issues of the way stories are remembered and interpreted by listeners over time. Following Sandra Stahl (1989), we recognize that listeners are, in the end, the ones who interpret, find meaning, and retell the stories to the next generation. This means that, in most cases, the "natural" condition for stories is to change over time as they are influenced by tellers and listeners and the events that shape their lives.

This point is dramatically illustrated by Patricia Partnow, who observes that classification of oral tradition from the Alaska Peninsula has undergone a marked change since the major Katmai volcanic eruption of 1912, which forced the villagers to relocate. The event became the prominent time marker in Alaska Peninsula Aleut oral tradition. Partnow reports that after the eruption, the preexisting genres of stories merged into two categories, stories about events before and events after the disaster. The implication is that today's elders grew up with the eruption as a key event so powerful that it changed the way they remember and talk about their past. Her observation makes an exciting contribution to folklore studies, because she has captured a moment when a community is defining its history meaningfully through folklore.

William Schneider's essay illustrates how and why oral traditions are remembered. In contrast, oral recordings are often devoid of sufficient information to allow an adequate interpretation and represent an attempt to capture tradition at one point in time and preserve it in a sort of freeze-dried state. This is antithetical to all that we know about the way oral narratives are passed along, interpreted, understood, and ultimately changed over time. He concludes with some suggestions about preserving a fuller oral record, recognizing that this medium, with all its limitations, may in some cases be all that remains for future generations.

In the final essay, Mary Odden continues the theme of how oral tradition affects an individual's understanding. Her piece bears witness to the way personal experiences with recorded and unrecorded oral tradition are sifted and sorted in our minds and become the basis of what we understand, value, and choose to share with others. At
When Our Words Return

the same time, she writes in a style true to her desire to encourage dialogue. The essay is written in the first person, inviting the reader to see how its author is personally shaped by the oral traditions that she hears and reads.

The maturation of our work owes much to our national colleagues, particularly Alan Dundes, Dennis Tedlock, Richard Bauman, Charles Briggs, Edward "Sandy" Ives, and Barre Toelken. The impact of their work is evident in all these essays. In our emphasis throughout this collection on collaboration and dialogue, we take our lead from Dennis Tedlock (1979) and Stephen Tyler (1986), who argue that anthropologists should see narrators and their audiences as partners in a dialogue, commentators whose critiques are an integral part of the record to be preserved and reported. In this volume, Mary Odden's essay lays out this argument with particular attention to collaborative reportage. She sums up "the creative ambiguity at the heart of our disciplines" that each contributor to When Our Words Return has explored in his or her own way—the difficult necessity to examine our frames of representation, to recognize and acknowledge our biases and the role our presence has on the tellings we hear, and to take responsibility for the power relations that develop in any process of re-creation. It is our hope that the essays in this volume illustrate not only the ambiguity but also the creativity inherent in writing, listening, and remembering oral traditions.

Notes

1. Oral narrative refers to personal stories generated from the experiences of the teller as well as accounts that have been passed on from generation to generation, often referred to as myth, folktale, and legend.

References


