When Our Words Return

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On Shaky Ground
Folklore, Collaboration, and Problematic Outcomes
Phyllis Morrow

In Yup’ik society, hunters and fishers who are lucky enough to catch anything are individuals who pay attention to what they have learned. It is they to whom game returns. Storytellers, too, are people who are said to be “lucky enough to have caught a tale.” Implicitly, people have this luck, too, when they pay attention to a store of ever-changing experiences, both individual ones and those shared as members of a common culture. Such experiences contextualize a story’s meaning for any given person at a particular time and place. Removed from this cultural context, any of us may catch a Yup’ik story, but we may not know what to do with it once we have it.

As long-term friends and collaborators in the activity of passing Yup’ik stories on to be caught by readers, Phyllis Morrow and Elsie Mather have wrestled with the most effective and conscientious ways to convey tales. In the process, they have encountered some intractable problems in bridging the expectations and understanding of a culturally diverse, anonymous audience of readers. Should stories be presented with little or no commentary, so that any individual’s right to make meaning is respected? Or should some of the context of the tales be explicated, at the risk of limiting personal interpretation? As writers, our voices become authoritative, implicitly contributing a more fixed sense of meaning than the one caught by a Yup’ik listener. Can we retell these stories without losing the subtleties of the storytellers’ words? And who will be lucky enough to catch those subtleties?

In this essay, Morrow frames a discussion about meaning, authorship, ownership, and authenticity in terms of the ongoing dialogue between herself and Mather. The issues seem fundamentally unresolvable, yet they do not seem to warrant giving up the work.

The Yupiit know and feel that the world is experienced in different levels. There is much to wonder about. To learn to live comfortably
in this is being Yup'ik. The world speaks to us, for one, in and by our feelings. It does not articulate clearly, but we make inferences and leave it at that. I feel strongly that interpretations should be very limited, leaving the information in the stories open. We are on shaky ground when we presume to know what the message is for the Native hearers.

—Elsie P. Mather

Much of our knowledge about other cultures must now be seen as contingent, the problematic outcome of intersubjective dialogue, translation and projection.

—James Clifford (1986: 109)

Since the early 1980s, Elsie Mather and I have collaborated on the transcription, translation, and representation of Central Alaskan Yup'ik stories. She was born and raised in the Kuskokwim delta, where her education started—and continues—with Yup'ik oral tradition. She spends much of her time in subsistence pursuits; she has also been a nurse, a teacher, a lecturer, and an author of high-school and college textbooks. Her grounding in the oral tradition puts her book learning in a certain perspective. I, on the other hand, was born on the East Coast of the United States, and my education was always pointed toward the written word. As a graduate student in cultural anthropology, I came to southwestern Alaska in the mid-1970s, expecting to stay for a year but remaining for over a decade. I was willingly snared by berry picking, fish cutting, friendships, and stories. This immersion put my book learning in a new perspective, and in retrospect I began to realize how important oral narrative had been in my life, too. Coming from different directions, then, Elsie and I found our interests converging on the problematics of shifting oral performance to paper and the question of whether such a move is wise, not to mention even possible.

Our conversations as friends and colleagues continue unabated, even though I now work at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, several hundred miles away. The most recent exchange is a coauthored paper that begins with a story told by Phillip Charlie (to which I will refer later), offers a few explanatory notes, and then becomes a collaboratively written dialogue, reconstructed from our letters and telephone conversations, about the whole issue of collaboration and its implications for dialogue between cultural traditions.

This essay draws heavily from that conversation and represents some of my subsequent reflections on our personal struggle to decide what and what not to say about Yup'ik stories. The struggle
relates, I think, to a theoretical and methodological discussion among anthropologists and folklorists that, like my relationship with Elsie, has developed since the 1970s. In this sense, I am offering a dialogue between and about dialogues.

On one level, the collaborative “dialogue,” as we began to conceive of it, is not strictly between us—it is with you, in some sense the most problematic partners in this process. “You” include everyone who has made comments on our work in the past or whose comments on related topics we have heard or read. In our imaginations, you include perceptive critics with a deep level of understanding and a ready store of relevant personal experiences, as well as our own worst stereotypes of those who misconstrue, misappropriate, overromanticize, and/or overanalyze Native Americans and their folklore. You include Yup’ik people, to whom we feel responsible and about whom we(113,265),(995,377)(113,304),(995,407)(113,352),(995,455)(113,443),(995,546)(113,532),(995,635)(113,622),(995,725)(113,712),(995,815) remain constantly conscious, whether or not you eventually read this article. To complicate this process even more, what we imagine you to be is also what we sometimes project onto each other. We collaborate as both our most eager and appreciative audiences and as the alternately frustrated, misguided, and reluctant representatives of our respective cultures.

As reluctant cultural representatives, Elsie Mather and I have found that collaboration underscores certain basic contrasts between our traditions, contrasts which have a profound effect on “the work of interpretation” (see Tedlock 1983). A Yup’ik generally grows up encouraged to reflect on the personal meaning of stories but discouraged from detailed analysis and public explication. From this perspective, a preoccupation with hidden meanings and symbolism can lead to confusion, while the purpose of oral tradition is not to confuse or mislead the listener. Much of Western schooling and socialization, on the other hand, encourages probing, contending that addressing conflicting interpretations openly can illuminate subtle meanings and generally enrich an audience’s understanding. Elsie and I acknowledge these as cultural differences that can be difficult to negotiate and that, to some extent, are reflected in our own intellectual styles.

As individuals, however, we also often delight in and partake of other traditions; it is no simple dichotomy. We both indulge in curious speculation; we both stop to wonder without trying to draw conclusions. Each drawing from diverse experiences, we try to construct a middle ground where we can collaborate, and we have found that it is shaky ground. The problematics of “intersubjective dialogue,
translation and projection" are nowhere more complex and subtle than in the collaborative process of transferring a performance event to a static medium aimed at an hypothesized audience.

The first level of concern, then, is how to move beyond some naive concept of "bridging two cultures" to develop an awareness of ourselves and our audiences so that we may interact. The second level has to do with more general issues of representation. The interplay of these two levels is at the heart of this essay. When a storyteller speaks, he or she does so in a cultural context. It is a different task to write about that context from a position both/neither within it and/nor outside of it. In academic circles, postmodernist criticism has led to a theoretical, methodological, and political consideration of writing about "the other," as well as portraying in subtle ways "the self," that is, the author. In this academic movement, critics of anthropology have led us to see ethnographic writing as (having always been) a literary enterprise. One problem is that the authors of ethnographies have almost never been raised in the cultural tradition they are describing, and their objectively authoritative voice and selective presentation of their role in the "participant-observation" process often subsume and distance the voices of the people they depict. Although it is the basis of the work, little of the dialogue between anthropologist and informant, or folklorist and storyteller, ever appears in the resultant books and articles (Tedlock 1983). Since depiction and representation are filtering—and therefore distorting—processes, what we then read are artful constructions, produced under particular historical, political, and personal conditions. In short, the authorial tone offers a disguise of certainty that prevents readers from noticing the contingent nature of "our knowledge about other cultures."

The relatively newfound concern with a lack of Native voices in print has stimulated the production of alternative ethnographies that use a variety of devices in an attempt to rectify the omission. Dennis Tedlock, for example, has championed dialogic representations, arguing that they permit reinterpretation by readers. That is, it is better to read what the people say than only to read the author's conclusions about what they say. Clifford Geertz (1988: 144-47) aptly points out that no matter what devices are used to bring out Native viewpoints, an "un-get-roundable problem" persists: all ethnographic descriptions are those of the describer, not the described. The real authorship problem, as Geertz conceives it, remains: how can one get a description down on paper in a comprehensible and evocative fashion so
that the reader may come to glimpse another life? The same question applies to conveying a moment of oral performance.²

Logically, one thinks of Native authorship and Native/non-Native collaboration as the next, better step toward balanced representation, but there are authorship problems here, too, and they are even more fundamental than the challenge of writing effectively. These problems stem from the fact that authoring itself is, and exists in, a peculiarly Western cultural milieu. Is it then possible for a Native author, or a collaborative team, to create—or represent—a discourse that departs from the conventions and cultural implications of authoring? This may be an unanswerable question, but even to approach it, we must not only consider our individual actions as authors (what and how we write) but also all that is entailed in Authoring, writ large, at least to uncover some of the implications of cultural difference in the process of cointerpretation.

Michel Foucault sees authoring (“the author function”) as a particular epistemological stance of Western civilization. In “What Is an Author?” (1984), he points out that certain questions which have typically preoccupied “our civilization” since the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries center around the need to attribute works (and also theories, traditions, disciplines, and in the grandest sense “possibilities and ... rules for the formation of other texts,” (114) that is, entire potential discourses)³ to “authors.” The author function, then, is a cultural tradition, a way of conceiving of and ultimately regulating expression, and not at all a simple process of merely attributing ideas to individuals.⁴ Although we think of authors as proliferating meaning, Foucault claims, we actually fear the idea of living in a state in which the fictive, by which he seems to mean a certain freedom of expression, “would be at the disposal of everyone” (119). The (ideological existence of the) author, then, is a way to “reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world” (118). I paraphrase this to say that the author function limits or constrains the unbridled production of meaning by positing the author (by implication, over and above the rest of us, the readers) as meaning maker.

Stating that “the modes of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each,” Foucault imagines a future culture in which there is less fear of fiction and all the dangers inherent in its “proliferation of meaning.” In such a culture, the author function will disappear, and meaning will be less constrained, although necessarily still limited in some as yet unexperienced fashion:
We would no longer hear the questions [about authorship] that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (119–20)

If the author function is a culture-specific pattern, then to contemplate collaboration, we must consider two things. First, what questions already shape discourse production and attribution of meaning? Here we are considering the cultural contexts of folklore transmission for the people whose lore we are representing. And second, how do differences in the conception of discourse shape its production between collaborators? In the case at hand, how can we, coming from different discourse traditions, construct the representation of one group’s folklore for members of both traditions?

With respect to the first question, my understanding is that the Yup’ik stance on meaning comes closer to that represented by Foucault’s imaginary culture than to the ideological position occupied by the author function. To begin with, the narrative function (to coin a phrase) is preoccupied with things other than individual authority or originality. Elsie Mather comments: “The most respected conveyors of Yup’ik knowledge are those who express things that listeners already know in artful or different ways, offering new expressions of the same.” Whatever elements of individual expressiveness a teller brings to the narration are thoroughly enjoyed, but they are not the stuff of the story.

A common way for a storyteller to begin a Yup’ik narrative is to set himself, the recorder, the story, and those from whom he heard it in a web of relationships, a network of people, places, and events. In this way, he makes it clear that this is a situated performance of a repeated tale, authentic and faithful to the way he heard it. One effect of this kind of opening is to invoke the collective authority of many storytellers. Part of what makes a tale traditional is the way it reflects a timeless past and many retellings, rather than any individual’s
The teller may assert that he did not make it up: “it is truly a tale” and one of the “first of the tales.” Responsiveness to listeners and dramatic effects like voice quality and pauses add variety and affect to every telling, but the stated goal is consistency with what one has heard.

For Yup’ik listeners, then, the search for authenticity does not involve looking for an author but an appreciation of the fact that discourse circulates from teller to teller. Ideally, changes in the telling result from differences in the hearing. When telling stories or describing traditions, it is common for narrators to invite variation: “This is the way I heard it. Perhaps others have heard it a little differently.”

Second, in the Yup’ik oral tradition, meaning is not assumed to be fixed, to center in the storyteller, or to be deeply questioned. When we discussed the explication of stories, Elsie Mather wrote to me:

Why do people want to reduce traditional stories to information, to some function? Isn’t it enough that we hear and read them? They cause us to wonder about things, and sometimes they touch us briefly along the way, or we connect the information or idea into something we are doing at the moment. This is what the older people say a lot. They tell us to listen even when we don’t understand, that later on we will make some meaning or that something that we had listened to before will touch us in some way. Understanding and knowing occur over one’s lifetime. I am born into a culture which values certain things and ideas, but most of these I absorb during everyday experiences.

Storytelling is part of the action of living. I do not question it much. The phrases, the themes or ideas expressed become a part of me, yet I do not understand half of what is said. But they are there. They are part of why I pick my berries or why I ask someone to have tea with me. Whenever my mother had the urge to pick on my head for lice or nits, she yanked me from whatever I was doing and proceeded. I rarely ever asked her to tell me stories. To quiet my protest at having my head picked on, my mother told me stories. The time was both pleasant and painful—a part of life.

Why would I want to spoil the repetition and telling of stories with questions? Why would I want to know what they mean? Is not the hearing and the comforting repetition enough? They brought comfort and added to my well-being even when (in my case) they added to my discomfort and annoyance. I really don’t suppose my
mother had grandiose ideas about instruction and knowledge as she told the stories. She just wanted me to be still so she could get rid of the little beasts while she had the pleasure of hunting for them.

In the view Elsie Mather expresses, meaning is not a question of the storyteller’s intent ("I really don’t suppose my mother had grandiose ideas about instruction and knowledge"), nor is it something to find out, once and for all ("Understanding and knowing occur over one’s lifetime."). Neither the storyteller nor any other individual fills an author function. Instead, personal meanings proliferate through tellers and listeners. Furthermore, in a general sense, explication has the perverse effect of trying to erase mystery in the world; it contradicts the sense of awe that derives from “the Yup’ik belief that things just happen with no explanation,” as Elsie Mather phrases it.

Implicit in this comfort with proliferation of meaning and non-explanation is a lack of concern with what Foucault assumes to be the “great dangers” of fiction, dangers that are held at bay, in the Western tradition, by the author function. To my concern with accuracy in explaining cultural contexts for our readers, Elsie Mather retorted: “What is accurate information? Accurate for who? Even if an explanation is not wrong, it is not complete.”

In the past, the author function has prevented folklore collectors from seeing such contrasts and grappling with their deep implications. An author’s explanations might be challenged, but no reader objected to the fact that explanations were offered. In the Yup’ik area, at least, this is no longer true. A brief review of the documentation of Yup’ik folklore shows that the dilemmas of collaboration are historically recent. As the review moves closer to the present, I will try to show when and how the author and narrative functions began to rub against each other.

Stories fascinated even the earliest non-Natives to travel through or settle in southwest Alaska. Like many other European world travelers, Russian and American explorers in Alaska wrote down indigenous tales, in addition to recording various customs they found intriguing. What they wrote and how they presented it depended largely upon their specific reasons for being there. For example, those with economic interests wanted information that would help them establish trade relations and guide them safely across regional boundaries. As a result, they were especially interested in stories detailing peoples’ origins and their relations with neighboring groups. Most
travelers also clearly enjoyed writing about exotica for the readers back home.

When Moravian and Catholic missionaries entered the region, they, too, began recording or mentioning tales in their diaries and letters, many of which subsequently appeared in mission publications, such as church magazines and missionary biographies. Their concern was with the spiritual life of the people they encountered, so they noted stories that said something about indigenous religious beliefs. They often set down Raven creation stories and other tales, accompanied by their own Christian-influenced interpretations. In general, missionary writings, even through the mid-twentieth century, conveyed the impression that Yup'ik stories and other cultural expressions revealed a people at once primitive and full of potential: “There is a rich store of human culture for the educator to work on in the native,” in the words of Paul O’Connor, S.J. (1947: 21). The sentiment had changed little since 1886, when Moravian missionary Edith Kilbuck wrote:

In looking over our experience with the natives thus far, we have no reason to feel disheartened, altho [sic], as is to be expected in an unenlightened people, we have met with men who have to all appearance, no true manly principles, still we have met with those, in whose hearts are to be found those gems, which when polished by the grace of God will shine out brilliantly, and add new lustre to the crown of our Eternal King. There is something about these people that makes one long so for them, feel for them, to love them. We see a rich harvest, a great one, and one that requires earnest, hard, prayerful work. (Henkelman and Vitt 1985: 95)

Since one intent of these early collectors was to justify and facilitate their own work in the region and invite financial support from government agencies or wealthy parishioners back home, they wanted to show (and they believed) that there was a lot of work to be done but there was a good chance it could be accomplished. They were heartened when they could cast indigenous ideas in a Christian framework, since apparently parallel conceptions provided footholds for conversion, and they were determined to change any ideas that they identified with “idols” or “devil worship.”

Missionaries obviously found Yup’ik stories both entertaining and useful in their efforts to learn the language as well. Catholic priest Francis Barnum, S.J., for example, recorded tales verbatim, with
interlinear and free translations, in his grammar of the Yup'ik lan­
guage (1901). Among the archived papers of missionaries, one can
find other examples of stories that Jesuit priests apparently tran­
scribed and used as the basis of religious lessons or to improve their
language skills. The Moravian missionary John Kilbuck, himself a
Delaware Indian, saw in the Yup'ik culture parallels to his own past
and was "strangely stirred" by their customs. Among his papers
is a short ethnography, written as if intended for eventual publi­
cation, including war and origin stories (see Fienup-Riordan 1988:
29–57).

A common strain in Moravian and Catholic missionary writings
is the emphasis on the moral basis for Yup'ik teachings, and this par­
allelism continues to shape contemporary Yup'ik understandings of
their own past; it is common for people to draw comparisons between
Biblical precepts and the more traditional Yup'ik lessons for living
embodied in lore. Naturally, the same emphasis on correspondences
and contrasts between missionary and Yup'ik beliefs (intended in
missionary writings for fellow Christians elsewhere) informed local
mission efforts; thus, some aspects of Yup'ik lore and beliefs were
syncretically reinforced more than others.

At the same time, the author function itself was apparently of lit­
tle interest to Yupiit. We have a hint about Yup'ik conceptions about
writing in the nineteenth century because some Moravian converts,
known as Helpers, began to develop a writing system so that they
could remember Biblical teachings (see Henkelman and Vitt 1985).
They were particularly impressed that writing allowed the mission­
aries to repeat what they said in exactly the same words each time.
Here the concern with faithfulness to what one heard was apparently
paramount, along with the antiquity and divine source of the words
themselves. Given the Yup'ik emphasis on other things than the at­
tribution of original ideas to specific people, it is not surprising that
their writing system was used almost exclusively for transcribing
Biblical passages and parables and was never adapted to individual
authorship.

There is also one nineteenth-century author, Edward Nelson, who
attempted a more comprehensive description of Yup'ik life. The
Eskimo about Bering Strait (1983) represents materials he collected be­
tween 1877 and 1881. Nelson gathered an excellent corpus of tales,
noting provenances and including a sample text in the Yup'ik lan­
guage. Trained as an observer of natural phenomena, he approached
ethnography with an attention to detail and an objectively descriptive
tone similar to those of other scientific reporters of his day. He was an effective practitioner of the author function: he “got it down” in a way that is still useful. Yet he unknowingly defined an authenticity both partial and potentially limiting. In my graduate folklore class, for example, I have on several occasions asked students to compare a variant of one Raven tale collected by Nelson with a telling that Elsie and I transcribed verbatim in 1981. Invariably, students prefer Nelson’s version because “it is more detailed” and “explains more.” I suspect that it was Nelson, as author, who skillfully wove the explanations into the text, for they refer to beliefs that would have been implicitly obvious to a Yup’ik audience. Students, however, assume that his version is verbatim, more complete because it was told a century earlier and therefore more original.

In the midtwentieth century, Yup’ik tales continued to be collected slowly, not only in missionary and travel publications but now also in academic writings. Margaret Lantis began anthropological research on Nunivak Island and along the Kuskokwim River, publishing results beginning in 1946. She (1946, 1953) and Hans Himmelheber (1951, 1953) were the first to offer scholarly analyses of Yup’ik folklore. Later Wendell Oswalt produced several ethnographic and ethnohistorical works, including a history of Moravian missionization that featured references to storytelling and summaries of some war stories (1963) and a short article about storyknifing, an activity in which girls simultaneously narrated tales and illustrated them with stylized symbols in the mud (1964). Like missionaries and explorers, these academics wrote for restricted audiences whose characteristics seemed relatively predictable. Each knew what he or she wanted to write and could hazard a fair guess as to what the audience would want to have explicated.

This was also a time when Yup’ik tales began to make their way into American children’s literature, targeting yet another restricted audience. Two collections of tales edited by Charles Gillham were in my own school library in Maryland in the 1950s. These books reflected a widespread European and American conception of folklore as unauthored public property, particularly suitable for the entertainment and moral instruction of children. In a very un-Yup’ik fashion, Gillham was careful to separate what he saw as truth from fiction for his young readers. In Medicine Men of Hooper Bay (1955), for example, he undoes much of the effect of a story in which a hunter falls asleep, then wakes up and follows a crane to its humanlike village, by ending with a caution: “Sometimes you have dreams that are silly/
sometimes they seem to be true/ But it’s usually something you’ve eaten/ When a dream ever comes to you” (94). He also appends morals throughout: e.g., “The beavers are busy people. Everyone has his own job and knows how to do it. It would be fine if everyone were as busy and as good as they” (103). The storytellers themselves, if mentioned at all, became subjects in Gillham’s own tale: “an old Eskimo … is the source of the following folk stories of these interesting people” (10). Only after publication did the stories become authored—by Gillham.

While these early folklore collectors varied tremendously, they had one thing in common: they wrote either for themselves, as in the case of missionaries learning the language, or for an audience that shared their cultural tradition. Yup’ik and non-Yup’ik discourse remained largely parallel traditions. That is, the writing activity of outsiders never stimulated the development of authorship in Yup’ik, nor did Euro-American authors see writing down stories as challenging in any deep philosophical sense. Tales were treated as translatable, reducible, and amenable to summary and editing. Thus, neither verbatim accuracy (except when taking linguistic samples) nor “intersubjective dialogue” with tradition bearers posed difficulties. In effect, the locus of activity, except for the initial telling of a tale, was elsewhere. Aesthetics were managed by the collector and publisher; interpretation took place at a distance.

In the 1970s, as civil rights, bilingual education, and ethnic pride movements blossomed, many people became actively interested in preserving their own folk traditions in writing and other nonoral media. Local language, authorship, and ownership were newly empowering. Many authors began to consider local audiences. In the Kuskokwim region, young students enthusiastically recorded narratives and photographed elders making sleds, kayaks, baskets, and other items of material culture. High-school cultural heritage magazines flourished and were proudly filled with the results of their work (see, for example, Kaliikaq Yugnek 1974–77).

This was a transitional period. The collectors were now the folk, the potential inheritors of their elders’ lore. Their readers were also more diverse. This was a historical moment when roles began, for the first time, to overlap. Writers, readers, and listeners were no longer distinct and separate. Readers now included Yupiit as well as the wider public, diverse in age, cultural background, and interests. Under different historical circumstances, the cultural heritage projects might
have faced the dilemma of collaborative representation, but their school-based nature preserved some sense of role separation. The young Yup'ik students were learning the non-Yup'ik author function because their teachers envisioned the cultural heritage magazines as ways of improving their students' English and shaping their essayist writing. Elders were seen as informants, students as writers and editors, and teachers as supervisors.

Further, because they conceived of this project simultaneously as teaching writing and preserving cultural heritage, teachers and students were unaware of the often-subtle cultural shifts that the Foxfire approach entailed. An anecdote illustrates the type of shifts that occurred. I remember acting as a substitute teacher for the cultural heritage class at Bethel (then Regional) High School in 1977. The teacher explained that when the students asked elders to tell about their lives, they all started their recollections in the same way: "When I was young, we lived in mud houses." The teacher "solved" this by helping the students edit out repetitions, name the stories, and make them "more distinctive."

In retrospect, at this point we can see the author and narrative functions begin to rub against each other. It is no surprise that at the time nobody recognized a cultural significance in the uniformity of each elder's opening statement or the fact that Yup'ik stories do not have names, given that there was little awareness of orality versus writing, and only one model existed for authoring. In fact, however, even naming stories as part of the author function is a way of limiting meaning. That is, it is because Euro-Americans are uncomfortable with indefinite proliferations of meaning that they name texts. Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* (1946), one may feel moorless when one does not know what to call a thing:

"The name of the song is called 'Haddocks Eyes.'"

"Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?" Alice said, trying to feel interested.

"No, you don't understand," the Knight said, looking a little vexed. "That's what the name is called. The name really is 'The Aged Aged Man.'"

"Then I ought to have said 'That's what the song is called'?" Alice corrected herself.

"No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The song is called 'Ways and Means': but that's only what it's called, you know!"
“Well, what is the song, then?” said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

“I was coming to that,” the Knight said. “The song really is ‘Asitting on a Gate’: and the tune’s my own invention.” (131–32)

Each of these names highlights a different aspect of the song, giving that aspect primacy in a reader’s consideration of its meaning. But Yup’ik stories have no names—no storyteller begins by explicitly stating, “The name of the story is X,” and a storyteller is equally unlikely to say that the tale is “about X.” What the tale is about is implicitly relational; meaning is created in any listener’s connections between a telling, a teller, a life, a time, and a setting.12

Cultural heritage teachers, however, encouraged their students to supply an “appropriate” name for each tale. Furthermore, editors tended to sort the tales into named categories such as Yup’ik fables or short stories.13 Since sorting and naming is a prized early educational skill, one which is routinely included in standardized multiple-choice tests (“Read the following paragraph and choose the best name for it”), the “need” to name and sort Yup’ik texts became, for high-school educators, a “teaching moment.” But the apparently simple and justifiable step of naming narratives in the process of moving performance to paper is, on a subtle level, constitutive.

Not only does naming restrict interpretation by pointing the reader toward one aspect of meaning but it also ignores the care many Yup’iit take not to state things too strongly because of a sense that, in stories and in the rest of life, words can make things happen. That is, words limit meaning because they potentially establish what is. A person, then, should ideally consider what he says carefully and be sparing with his words. In a meeting of a cooperative fish-management group, I remember that one speaker, Michael Chase, emphasized what he was about to say by twice reminding listeners: “I don’t say much. But I listen” (Morrow and Hensel 1992: 48). If meaning is newly made in each moment of reflection on oral tales, then naming and sorting them—as well as expending verbiage in elucidating them—are antithetical processes.

Sorting narratives is also constitutive in that it predisposes a reader to see certain analogies to Western genres with all of their connotations. This, of course, simply accentuates a normal cultural tendency to understand the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. Non-Yup’ik students, for instance, commonly expect Yup’ik stories to be like European fables and fairy tales. An example is the tale told by Phillip
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Charlie in which a man’s exhaustion after a long day’s hunt leads him to ask his wife to bring his catch up from the shore, a task which is properly his to do. On the beach, she is abducted by a hunter from a distant village. The husband eventually finds her and laments his predicament as he cleans a walrus skull that he has found buried in the sand. He becomes the walrus and in this form drowns the abductor. He then swims away with his wife and leaves her in the form of a rock as a visible reminder of their story. Reading the tale (in English translation) to a college class, I found that, even after cultural referents that puzzled them were explained, students were disturbed because they could not figure out a moral to the story and because the separated couple, once rejoined, did not live happily ever after.

Elsie Mather, on the other hand, felt that once the events of the tale were set in motion, a transformation was required for the man to reach the state of “nothing to trouble his well-being,” as Phillip Charlie put it. For her, the transformation of woman to rock and man to walrus left “a sense of permanence afterward, a feeling that they went to their rightful place, where they belong.” To think of the tale as a fable or fairy tale is, clearly, more than a matter of convenience.

One collector during the 1980s did honor the Yup’ik practice of referring to stories simply as quliraq or qanemciq (which he translated as “tale” and “narrative,” respectively) without descriptive titles. Anthony Woodbury’s collection of stories from Chevak (1984) was informed by linguistic training and the performance school of folkloristics, and so he adopted Native genres. Elsewhere, however, the misfit between author and narrative functions remains hidden. Writers continue to assign names for publication purposes, and contemporary audiences continue to expect them.

More overt problems surfaced as Yupiit read (or read about) the ethnographies, missionary reports, and other written sources describing their own culture. Often, when I was working with Yup’ik colleagues on writing projects, I heard serious concerns about misinformation that had been propagated by non-Native writers. The same people, however, were reluctant to author materials that corrected these impressions. Ten years later, when we talked about collaboration, Elsie Mather expressed what I think is the same dilemma they felt: “I have problems with interpretations of the Yupiit made by outsiders. I am also uncomfortable with making interpretations. I like the idea of people making meaning of life in their own terms.”

The author and narrative functions, then, really came into conflict as people began to think about representing not just their lore or their
language but themselves, through these cultural expressions. Yupiit who taught or cotaught Yup’ik language classes and conducted cultural awareness workshops with non-Native students, for example, were continually barraged with questions. Their students expected explication of customs and behaviors—they wanted “authors” to tell them how it was. Yup’ik teachers were often uncomfortable with this role; they expected others to extrapolate their own personal and private conclusions actively and variously as they accumulated experience interacting with Yupiit. This expectation did not succeed outside of a Yup’ik audience, for whom the terms by which people make their own meaning are largely shared. If they are not totally baffled, non-Natives are likely to become sidetracked by their cultural assumptions. They may, in effect, look in vain for the moral of the story, be disturbed because there is no “happily ever after” ending, or find some reference (innocuous, to Yupiit) shocking or offensive, as occurred with one story in which a fish, having been defecated on the outskirts of a village by the man who ate him, reflects gratefully on the man’s careful action.15

It is obvious that values and daily experiences of life on the tundra and rivers are not likely to be absorbed during everyday living by readers or students from other traditions. It is less obvious that explaining such things is discouraged as a very part of the Yup’ik tradition that is being explained. And here we arrive squarely in the present, facing a catch-22 situation as collaborators. When I am concerned about inaccuracy, for example, I am reminded that one cannot be accurate, but one can be wrong. When I want to hear whether my ideas are wrong, Elsie Mather comments: “I find myself fluctuating between wanting to discourage some of your conclusions and at the same time I want to follow the Yup’ik way of respecting what others have to say. The Yup’ik expression for tolerating what is questionable is the saying, ‘What is true will prevail.’”

So we return to the nagging question: can collaboration bring a dual perspective to bear on a narrative tradition? After all, even this notion of dualism is an oversimplification. The audience for a written tale not only will include non-Yupiit with a variety of backgrounds but also a diverse Yup’ik population: young Yupiit monolingual in English, living in larger urban communities, or less steeped in village subsistence activities; college-educated Yupiit; and so on. We begin to debate the very purpose of widening the audience for a narrative tradition beyond that of its original oral performance. Are we trying to increase cross-cultural understanding? (“Even if an explanation is
not wrong, it is not complete.") In whose terms can we help people appreciate the tradition? ("I like the idea of people making meaning of life in their own terms.")

Clearly we are caught between the author and narrative functions, between saying too much and too little. That cultural contexts require explication is no news to folklorists, nor is the dilemma of just how much contextual information is necessary; certainly there is no way to fully recreate the context of the original telling, not to mention the entire cultural background which informed it. Here, however, I raise a different issue: if, from a Yup'ik perspective, explication itself is counterproductive, does one shift the field of meaning of the tradition by approaching the question of its field of meaning at all? Is this a legitimate enterprise? It seems that collaboration creates a working space for the recognition of cultural difference, but it is merely a staging area for a more honest and self-aware interaction than that represented by the old researcher/informant dichotomy, not a solution.

What, then, have Elsie Mather and I done? We have agreed to limit explanatory notes and state openly that they are incomplete. We have also pointed out that these notes are addressed to non-Yupiit and those younger Yupiit who may be out of touch with narrative traditions. We have primarily restricted ourselves to explaining aspects of the motifs, themes, and general cultural setting which are clearly necessary for readers to understand the stories.

Beyond this, defining the limits and topics of discussion has not been easy. And, in addition to our common concerns about explication as culturally uneasy turf, each of us also finds the ground shaky in distinctly personal ways. As the academic member of the team, I have to grapple with the expectation that my contributions to the world of "the literature" will be valued only insofar as they are original, individually "owned" insights. This creates a certain pressure toward high-risk interpretations; that is, going out on an intellectual limb to say something new or at least express myself in a unique way. Because of its twin emphases on ownership and authenticity, the academy is suspicious of collaboration at the same time that it applauds the presence of Native voices. The author function asks, "Whose work is this really?" If Elsie Mather is assumed to be the "real" author, then I am undoubtedly guilty of appropriating her ideas. If I am the "real" author, then her byline must be mere tokenism. There is no room for coequal collaboration within the author function.

In the Yup'ik tradition, the ideas most valued are those which have
been contributed by others, each with the benefit and unique perspective supplied by his or her own experience. When one has something innovative to say, one references it to the authority of oft-repeated wisdom. The English-language proverb states that one should not hide one’s light under a bushel. The Yup’ik equivalent states that one should keep one’s rustling noises to oneself. Using the former style with a Yup’ik audience may sound presumptuous; using the latter style with an academic audience, one may be overlooked.

For Elsie Mather, the ground particularly shakes when she adopts the conflicting stance of both researcher and informant. As a researcher, she becomes curious to ask inappropriate questions and knows that older cultural contexts need explication for current audiences (both local and distant). As an informant, she is often in the position of emphasizing things which culture bearers intentionally do not explicate. Providing a metacommentary on the difference does not solve the problem, since such an explicit discussion is unwelcome to many Yup’ik members of the audience. Since we often work with recordings of tales made by other collectors (ranging from radio-show hosts to students), as well as those where Elsie Mather was part of the audience, it is not always possible for her to avoid making generalizations by choosing the option of describing the personal context and meanings of a story for her.

My own comprehension of these difficulties grew slowly as I began to realize some of the implications of my own cultural tradition. A series of anecdotes shows the progression in my awareness. One day my nine-year-old son came home from school and told me a story he had made up. For this assignment, he said, each child in the class had to create a “legend.” The teacher had posted a chart, with columns conveniently prelabeled—they included categories such as “trickster” and “human-animal transformation.” Each third-grade folklorist was to match appropriate motifs or character types with those he had “invented.” The effective point, I suppose, was to demonstrate to each child that he or she bears a considerable folk tradition. But there was something less conscious going on here. Never mind that these looked more like folktales (as I found myself ironically explaining), my son was insistent that they were legends. It seemed typically Western: what was consistently highlighted was genre, individual invention, categorization, and analysis.

I juxtapose this anecdote to some of my earliest experiences learning about Yup’ik preferences. I remember, for example, practicing grammatical patterns with the help of a tutor. I was translating a
series of words with third-person absolutive endings: “He goes; she speaks; it is big,” I intoned. “How do you know it’s a ‘he’?” snapped my tutor. She could be a difficult person to get along with, and this pickiness seemed the last straw in a degenerating teacher-student relationship. “Because it’s awkward to say ‘he, she, or it’ every single time,” I replied, wondering why I had to tell her again that I knew gender is not grammatically marked in Yup’ik.

Some years later, my absolutes no longer in question, I began collaborative efforts to write language-learning materials and to transcribe and translate Yup’ik folklore. By this time, my main concern was to “get it right.” I understood the resentment that came from seeing poor translations in print, accompanied by inaccurate commentary. Now, however, another problem emerged. The non-Yup’ik writers on the team wanted to include sociolinguistic information, an area not considered in the existing teaching grammar. The Yup’ik members of the group supported the idea but were uncomfortable with most of the sociolinguistic observations that were made. “No, it’s not wrong,” one person said; “in fact it’s very accurate. It’s just that we’re not sure we want people to know about it.” Again I thought I understood. Inaccurate information was harmful, but accurate information could be, too, since it violated the protective boundary between insider and outsider. In the past, outsiders had done a lot of harm with what they had learned, suppressing a variety of customs.

The final anecdote is a current one. Elsie Mather and I recently readied a story for publication (Morrow and Mather 1995); since it was meant for a general audience, the introduction carefully explained some of its cultural context. The well-known story told about a woman who returned from the afterlife and informed people how to “improve” their ceremonies for the dead. We explained something about the historic ceremony for the dead and the naming customs which perpetuate relationships among the living and dead. We also wrote about a metaphoric value of the story, its reminder that people should not remain aloof to the needs of others. I thought that this time the problem had been solved. Someone passed on to me the comments of one Yup’ik reader, however, who said he wished that he had not read it. He thought he’d rather not know why his people did the things they did.

Reflecting on these incidents, I find myself facing a serious dilemma. The last three interactions can be seen as progressive steps toward an impasse. Each demonstrates a basic distress associated
with specifying meaning. The grammar lesson overtly recognizes a Whorfian distinction between Yup’ik, where gender is contextually implicit, and English, where speakers have to specify gender even when they cannot know which one to specify. My teacher’s annoyance was not with my lack of grammatical knowledge but with my ignorance of a cultural preference for expressing the ambiguous as ambiguous. The situation with the materials development project underscores the dangers of making generalizations that may become truths. It is related to the first interaction in that both represent an untoward blending of the descriptive and the prescriptive (for in some ways, saying makes it so). This can be related to the protection of cultural boundaries, but the incident with the recent article suggests a more inclusive understanding.

This incident is the most problematic of all, for here a work was produced collaboratively, with an awareness of cultural differences between the collaborators and the need to create a text informative to non-Native readers and accurate and acceptable to Native ones. In fact, the piece described some of the cultural differences I have just mentioned. Yet the response of that Yup’ik reader was not “I do not want you outsiders to know why we do things,” but “I do not want to know why we do these things myself.”

Amidst these constraints, Elsie Mather and I straddle the author function and the oral tradition. We remain awkwardly aware that suggesting one explanation rather than another results in a kind of harm and providing none may produce another. It is interesting to note that Phillip Charlie, who told the story in which the man becomes a walrus, also felt the need to offer explanations, since his story was addressed to an unseen radio audience. For these listeners, he provided one level of decontextualization, moving the oral performance from an immediate and interactive context to a delayed and distant one. What he chose to explain were practices and items related to material culture and subsistence; he did not explicate other meanings. He was comfortable with this stopping point, closing his narration with a traditional formula: “There are no more words to the story.” In transmitting stories in a print medium, in another language, to another audience, we are never so sure when to stop.

It seems that with collaboration, the best we can hope for is that truths will prevail. If the Yup’ik reader feels that we have already said too much, and the non-Yup’ik reader is hungry to know more, then we have left you with the tension that we feel. It is an honest compromise; we satisfy our consciences as best we can and leave the rest of
the meaning making to you. To the extent that we can maintain the betweenness of our dialogue, we reduce Foucault's question, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" if not to "the stirring of an indifference" (1984: 120), then at least to a more muffled roar.

In collaboration, we have foregrounded what may be essential incompatibilities between frameworks of meaning. At the same time, however, collaboration has taken us in important new directions, by mixing up the "our" and the "other" of our knowledge about other cultures and letting friction develop between different ways of conceptualizing discourse. Collaboration, I would argue, tends to entangle, untangle, unravel, and enrich dialogue between Native and non-Native collaborators, tradition-bearers, listeners, and readers—and it shows us that these apparently contrasting categories of people overlap and intertwine, especially in these media-shared times. To presume to know anyone's meaning is to stand on shaky ground, but only in looking for meaning are we learning that ... and, of course, much more.

Notes

1. The paper was written for a forthcoming special edition of *Oral Tradition*, edited by Barre Toelken and Larry Evers, on collaboration.
2. Representation on paper is necessarily different from the situated performance of an oral form. Characteristics of orality such as repetition, formulaic phrasing, and nonverbal signaling are inherently difficult to render or appreciate on paper, and reducing the oral to a written format unavoidably obscures and distorts any given performance. It also has the effect (equally true for audiotape and film) of focusing the attention of a removed audience on one telling amongst the many that any given person normally hears throughout his or her life in many personalized contexts. Readers interested in orality and literacy in relation to the verbal arts will find a useful bibliography in Finnegan (1992). Dennis Tedlock and ethnopoets such as Jerome Rothenberg (1968, 1972) have particularly focused on poetic devices for rendering oral performance and have effectively shown how inseparable form is from content. Scollon and Scollon (1981) offer a relevant discussion in relation to cross-cultural communication.

In my experience, Yup'ik storytellers and translators have not thought the idea of "fixing" fluid, interactionally responsive oral forms in writing to be a major problem per se. There is widespread interest in recording, broadcasting, and printing oral narratives since people
have less opportunity to hear and enjoy them in more spontaneous contexts. Narratives are seen as a good focus of cultural preservation as long as permissions are obtained, qualified people are involved, and distribution plans are approved. The problems, as I will discuss, arise at other levels of interpretation.

3. Foucault gives Freud and Marx as the prime examples of such authors of discursive possibility.

4. Actually, as he points out, this is no simple task, either.

5. Unlike Tlingit storytellers, Yupiit do not recount a detailed genealogy that establishes their right to tell a story. Fewer relationships are mentioned in a Yup’ik narration; typically, they include the name of the person from whom the narrator heard it, the narrator’s relationship with that person, and perhaps the narrator’s or an earlier teller’s relationship with his or her listeners. There are no ownership rights for Yup’ik tales. Anyone who has been “lucky enough to catch a tale” may retell it.

6. Both unpublished writings and mission publications may be found in the Archives of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the Oregon Province Archives of the Catholic Church in Spokane, Washington.

7. Lynn P. Ager (now Wallen) wrote a master’s thesis on this topic in 1971, and an article in 1974.


9. The cultural heritage effort was modeled on Eliot Wigginton’s Foxfire approach. Ann Vick, who had been associated with early Foxfire publications, came to Bethel to work with local teachers and eventually edited some of their students’ writing into a book (Vick 1983: 269–344).

10. For the elders framing their recollections, “we lived in mud houses” was probably a key phrase to evoke “the old days” for their youthful listeners. The move from those “real houses” (nepiat) to nuclear-family-based, above-ground frame houses was contemporaneous with, and related to, many major cultural shifts in the early twentieth century.

11. At another point (47–49), Alice also gets to briefly enjoy the freedom that namelessness permits. In the nameless wood, she is able to befriend a fawn. Because neither remembers that they are human and fawn, the animal is not afraid, and Alice is not surprised at their coequal relationship. Here Carroll plays with something like the delicious but dangerous idea of the democratization of the fictive.

12. Although manifest in culturally specific ways in Yup’ik expression, this relational quality is a general feature of oral traditions. See Narayan (1989) for examples from India and Cruikshank’s essay in this book, “Pete’s Song,” for the Yukon. After reading this essay, Elsie Mather commented that Yup’ik stories are “usually recalled or remembered by some action, rather than by some abstract expression or idea. Since
a story can apply to different situations and is often recalled by something happening at the moment, labelling may also confine it to only a certain time and place" (personal correspondence with the author, May 1994).

13. See, for example, Tennant and Bitar (1981), which was compiled from materials originally collected as part of Bethel Regional High School’s cultural heritage project.

14. When Woodbury arrived in southwestern Alaska, I was working in the Yupik Eskimo Language Center with Elsie Mather and other language specialists, just beginning a major folklore transcription and translation effort. He helped us in our search for a format that would better reflect the richness of oral performance.

15. For a term project in one of my classes, Allison Kinyon-Coggins read this tale to a variety of individuals and recorded their reactions. She found that this detail so preoccupied many listeners that they had little else to say about the story.

16. We know too well that the transcription and translation processes in themselves are interpretive.

17. This is true when the coauthors are both academics as well. Coauthored publications do not count as much for tenure, and it seems to matter very much who is listed as senior or first author.

18. Elsie Mather thought that others might also feel this way. Compounding what I regard as Yup’ik cultural feelings about analysis is the more general issue of being written about at all. I recall the comment of the schoolmaster who had read Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s ethnography of his village: "It’s not your science [i.e., your accuracy] I’m questioning, but this: Don’t we have the right to lead unexamined lives, the right not to be analyzed? Don’t we have a right to hold on to an image of ourselves as ‘different’ to be sure, but innocent and unblemished all the same?” (1979: vi; brackets are Scheper-Hughes’s). Unlike Scheper-Hughes’s ethnography, our writing has never concentrated on revealing the darker side of life, but arguably being written about at all involves a loss of innocence or at least a loss of the ability to take things for granted.

References


Angela Sidney with Julie Cruikshank, 1980. Photo by Jim Robb.