James Ruppert leads us to consider the encounter between tradition bearer and audience in a rather different (bright) light than the preceding two authors. He suggests that the communication between teller and audience begins long before the two actually meet. Scholars, for example, bring standards of authenticity to their “listening” so that they may simply not hear some tellings. Given a choice between a Native language telling and one in English, they often assume that the former is richer and more genuine and simply discount the English telling as a secondary artifact.

By comparing Belle Deacon’s stories as told in English with the translations of her Deg Hit’an tellings, Ruppert very effectively demonstrates that the English renditions are worth hearing. For one thing, they evidence the teller’s consciousness of her anticipated audience, what Ruppert terms the “implied listener.” The telling, Ruppert suggests, is shaped by the implied listener prior to, and in addition to, the actual audience at a given performance.

Ironically, by preferring the Native-language telling, the scholar denies his or her own listening experience as a non-Native. The scholar’s presence, too, implies a wider non-Native audience to whom the teller addresses her stories. While we want to understand how Belle Deacon thinks about and consequently addresses a community of Deg Hit’an speakers, it is equally important to hear what she wants to tell a monolingual English audience.

Are the stories, then, different? Belle Deacon insists that they are all “part of the same thing.” Ruppert explores what she may mean by this, using Toelken’s concept of “culturally moral subjects” (1981). Ultimately, Ruppert’s essay suggests that using a performance approach may prevent us from considering the imagined construction prior to any given performance. Most importantly, he reminds us that we should listen to whatever a storyteller tells.
Belle Deacon at work making baskets. Photo by Rose Atuk Fosdick, courtesy of the Institute of Alaska Native Arts, Inc.
They said this about the way my stories go.
In the time of long ago [they would tell us this]:
“If you don’t fall asleep, you can obtain the old wisdom” that was
being told to us when I was a child.
“Even if you are sleepy, you should try to stay awake.
And you shouldn’t fidget.
You should just think about everything.
Then you’ll get the old wisdom that was told to us in the past.”
After we’d thought about it a little,
“Tell it to us,” they would say to us.
When we start to tell it, [a story] is like a bright light ahead of us,
just as though it were written as we speak.
—Belle Deacon (1987: 3)

So begins the collection of stories by noted artist and storyteller Belle Deacon, Engithidong Xugixudhoy: Their Stories of Long Ago (1987). Eight examples of her movement toward the bright light are transcribed into Deg Hit’an (Ingaliik), with an English translation facing the Native-language text. However, one of the unique things about the volume is that versions told in English follow five of the tales. I would like to open with a question: How does the English telling of a Native tale by a Native-speaking storyteller differ from the original version and its translation. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the English version may actually add to our understanding of the way the tale functions as well as our appreciation of the creativity of the storyteller.

First, I should acknowledge that my comments will be based on the English translation of the Deg Hit’an. That is obviously a tenuous position from which to start, but let me add two points that give me hope that there may be some value in my discussion. First, I do not intend to discuss the linguistic conventions of Deg Hit’an storytelling. I would like to deal with macro questions of value and meaning in the stories with a full understanding that much contemporary discussion has tied meaning to form and context. Second, the unquestionable expertise of James Kari and the close involvement of Belle Deacon in these translations may lend reliability not inherent in others. As an accomplished artist in several fields, Deacon is intent on representing Deg Hit’an cultural material to a non-Native world.

Some scholars may feel that English tellings of Native tales are inferior in numerous ways. As all recording and transcription removes us from actual performance, storytelling in English modifies the texture
of the Native telling. Often the assumption has been that the English version is something like a synopsis of the tale, since there are no Native linguistic contextualization cues, no audience interaction (except for Kari and Deacon’s husband). I’m not sure this is the case with Belle Deacon’s English stories.

Clearly reading the English tellings against the translations reveals that many elements have been eliminated. There seem to be no examples of indirect address, but these are not frequent in Belle Deacon’s stories anyway. We lose the influence on the listener of what has been called “high language,” with its archaic words and elaborate metaphor, eliminating part of the frame and form that establish the performance of the story. In at least one English telling, Deacon condenses a section dealing with instructions (1987: 38). The most obvious change is that she drops sections of the stories, especially ones concerning travel (39, 59, 79). Perhaps these sections are keyed into words in specific formulas in Deg Hit’an. Once those words are not there, the mnemonic devices that hold the telling together are undermined, and sections drop out.

There are a few instances in the five stories where Deacon seems to delete references to a mystical sense of knowing about people’s actions, as if censoring information about shamanistic activity (60). She even drops one reference to urine (40). These omissions may be due to her sense of what is appropriate to talk about in English. As an accomplished storyteller, she naturally assesses the English-speaking audience’s interpretative role. Since she realizes that the target English audience is not present, she must create an imagined one. In literary studies, Wolfgang Iser (1978), following Wayne Booth (1961), has called this conception “the implied reader.” I would alter that to suggest that Deacon creates an implied listener. Thus she can project the listener’s role, his or her interpretive standpoint, onto the telling of the story. This is, of course, also true of her telling of the story in Deg Hit’an and may be characteristic of all collected and recorded narratives. The implied listener’s contribution to meaning is embedded in the narrative before the actual listener’s collaborative contribution and is modified by the storyteller’s interpretation in performance.

In other ways, the English telling continues some significant elements of her art but in a less comprehensive manner. We lose some of her emphasis on sensory detail, but much remains. There is less dialogue in the English version, though it is still an important part of the telling. Her provocative use of questions posed to the listener, both in the voice of characters and her own voice as storyteller, is
retained, but there are fewer instances of it. Questions still form a significant stylistic element designed to create audience participation as well as introduce a level of interpretation, in Tedlock’s sense of the word (1983). While the English tellings are dynamic, there appears to be less dramatic tension between the characters. There is significant switching from past to present tense as Deacon tries to find an English analog for the Athabaskan verb’s ability to create the feel of a continuing past in the stories.

While many formal and stylistic elements carry over into English, Deacon seems also to be searching for new contextualization clues. In the English version, she seems more likely to mention contemporary items like marbles and chain saws that would be difficult to explain in Deg Hit’an. As is to be expected, she also seems more inclined to explain the cultural significance of actions. At one point, she interrupts the telling with a comment about her lack of knowledge about a part in the story. This list of differences ought to be enough to make problematic any analysis that wishes to point out the value of an English-language telling. Yet there may be something we can learn from these English versions.

Perhaps my position will become clearer if we look at a story told in Deg Hit’an and translated into English as “The Old Woman Who Lived Alone.” In it, an old woman living alone ingeniously kills a bear who comes into her house. As she puts up the meat, Raven unexpectedly comes to stay with her. She feeds him and then wants him to leave, but of course Raven doesn’t go. He stays, pretending to work, all the while stealing her food. Eventually, as part of a plan to get rid of him, she offers to clean his head and stabs him in the ear with her awl. She throws him over the riverbank onto the ice. He regenerates the next day, and she does the same thing again, only the second time she cuts off his claws and pushes him into the water hole and under the ice. Soon after this, two of Raven’s wives arrive with their children. When one child finds Raven’s claw, they attack her, and the old woman kills the wives and kids by drowning them in the water hole. Then she lives for a while without food until she goes out into the woods and hangs herself.

The cultural significance in the story seems to revolve around the main character’s ingenuity and self-sufficiency in a situation that would normally offer no hope for an old woman without family and a hunter. Her good fortune in acquiring a great cache of meat is mixed with the misfortune of attracting a gluttonous raven, as well as the ambiguity of killing a bear and eating its meat.¹ The laws
of hospitality are pushed too far until she must kill her guest. This provokes retribution by relatives whom she must also kill.

The suicide at the end is presented as an act of despair, since she is starving with no hope of reprieve. Deacon describes her situation, “Then her food ran out and she was without [food] for a long time / And then she went out into the woods and hanged herself. / That is all” (1987: 103). Suicide in traditional Deg Hit’an culture was highly unusual and a sign of insanity, though references to leaving old people to die are not unheard of (Osgood 1958: 148). While the ending might be intended as surprising, it seems to focus the implied listener on the complex of “culturally moral subjects,” as Toelken (1981) calls them: on the old woman’s too literal and too extensive compliance with the expectations of hospitality to the point where she exhausts even her normally meager food supply. It is only then that she acts to kill Raven. Her final suicide emphasizes the mental and personal results of such improper actions.

The English telling runs pretty much the same until the end, when the old woman laments that people have led her into living the wrong way. She has no food and says, “I don’t want to live for what I done.” Deacon says she goes into the woods and that she doesn’t know what happens to the woman. At first glance, we might suspect this reflects a hesitancy to refer to an action like suicide that is forbidden by contemporary religious attitudes as well as an acknowledgment of the belief that one should be remorseful for killing. The ending could then be seen as a result of the storyteller’s accommodation to the values of an implied English listener.

As a new mental representation of the same story, the storyteller’s interpretive act fixes the position of the implied listener within a series of previously existing cultural contexts. This narrative, then, provides a new perspective on the dynamic totality of meaning which the story in all its versions generates. When the old woman kills Raven, his wives, and his children, she puts herself into the position of “someone who always kills people” and thus is ready to be killed herself, as often happens in oral narratives of western Alaska. As a killer of other beings, she has no place in the contemporary world, which must be rid of cannibals and other deadly obstacles to harmonious living. As the murderer of a powerful shaman, it is likely she will also die. Osgood has noted the Ingalik fear of those who seek out seclusion (1959: 67), but the old woman also takes on a male hunter’s role to kill the bear. Even more seriously, she kills the powerful trickster/transformer Raven, who is responsible for much of the shape
of the world. All of these actions bring about her separation from the normal human community. Indeed, as Osgood has observed, for the Ingalik, killing any woman is evil, even if the women are Raven’s wives. And the murder of a shaman will cause the death of the killer (100).²

Her remorse and suggested suicide in the English version shift the focus from a more social consideration of mores such as hospitality to a deeper spiritual probing of an individual’s response to unexpected bounty of a questionable nature. Such good fortune may lead to violence, as one must establish an appropriate relationship with a powerful spirit being which sometimes follows in its wake. This new interpretation proceeds from no change in audience except the implied listener. Could the story now be consciously or unconsciously directed to a spiritless society intent on gaining material prosperity at all costs? Or is the total sum of culturally moral subjects accessible to the storyteller from any one version of the story?

Now if we think that this version may help the English reader appreciate the story, the question still remains whether a Deg Hit’an listener would have any real appreciation of this other dimension or if the English telling really gives both audiences something additional. I’d like to delay my answer to that question until we’ve looked at two more stories.

In the story translated as “The Man and Wife,” a couple work tirelessly every day and accumulate all the riches they need. The wife makes the hunter Indian ice cream every day, until one time when she doesn’t feel well and decides not to make it. The hunter comes home and insists. She goes out to make the ice cream and disappears. The hunter laments her loss and wastes away until Raven comes and takes pity on him. He tells the hunter that a powerful giant from the world below has kidnapped his wife. Raven and the hunter make a giant fish out of a log and bring it to life. The man travels in the fish and brings the wife back. Raven instructs them on how to burn food and clothes to thank him and then leaves the two happy and reunited.

In the Deg Hit’an version translated into English, Deacon makes much of the dramatic interrelationship between the husband and wife. A conflict is developed between the husband’s drive to hunt every day and the wife’s desire to have him stay home sometimes. Deacon comments that he treats her like a doll, placing her on his knee when he returns. The husband’s grief and guilt are emphasized as well as the happy reunion, and the latter is celebrated by the woman making Indian ice cream for the man and Raven. The culturally moral
subjects include the value of industriousness versus personal satisfaction, roles of men and women, the emotions of grief and remorse, the willingness of the spirit world to help those who cry piteously, and the establishment of a vehicle for communication with the spirit world.

In the English version, Deacon adds some generalizations about the woman and her accumulation of wealth. She says:

I don’t know for what, they just get so much ahead. Ahead to eat, you know. And that way they just have e——verything. And they kind of are well-to-do. And they have everything [that] they think of or know, ’cause this woman is just too smart, and she do too much work, you know. But her husband don’t know it; her husband don’t know that she’s making so many things. (1987: 34)

Then Deacon adds a new detail not in the translated version: “Well, when he wear out his clothes, she make another for him and they don’t use old clothes, mostly new things, because they have too many” (34). She later observes that the giant takes the woman because she is “the most beautiful and most handy worker” (36), and that the hunter so enjoyed Raven’s company that he didn’t think about his wife. These new details shift the focus from a discussion about social roles of men and women and the creation of ritual connections to the spirit world toward a more abstract discourse on the accumulation of wealth.

This shift becomes even more apparent when the English telling emphasizes Raven’s knowledge about the couple’s extensively packed cache. The hunter appears not to know what the wife has placed in the cache. In this telling, the wife also feels that there is a spiritual force that is influencing her to become sick; perhaps she has done wrong and something will now happen to her. Also when the couple are reunited, wealth again comes to the foreground. They want to pay Raven as if he were a mortal shaman. He refuses, emphasizing his inability to breathe in this world and his need to return to the spirit world. He asks them to burn the food and clothing for him on a fire. The amassing of wealth has drawn the notice of the evil giant (as such an accumulation drew Raven’s attention in the earlier story), and it is only by the dissipation of the excess wealth through the creation of the fish, the visit of Raven, and the burning of the gifts for the spirit world that a proper balance can be restored. Fortunately the couple also has a spirit ally in Raven so that they can succeed. The English language version gives Deacon the opportunity to reemphasize
meanings existing in the tale as an interpretive response to an implied listener.

The last story I want to talk about is one translated as “Polar Bear” (see the appendix). In it, a successful hunter is married to a jealous, strong woman who beats him up constantly. A grandmother and granddaughter live at the edge of the village, subsisting on the charity of the jealous wife. One day the hunter returns from an especially successful hunt. He is the object of much admiration by the village, and the jealous wife beats him up in front of everyone. Later in the kashim (community house), he decides to leave the village for good early the next morning. He paddles for three days across the water and reaches land. Meanwhile, the granddaughter, who has been in puberty seclusion, has gone out early and, contrary to instructions, has looked up and out to sea and glimpsed the hunter as he was leaving. She doesn’t tell anyone. The jealous wife finds her husband gone and literally tears the village apart. She comes to the grandmother and threatens to kill them unless they tell her what the village has done to hide her husband. The girl reveals what she has seen. Over the objections of the community, which asserts the traditional taboo against a “corner girl” getting into a canoe, the wife sets out after the husband, taking the girl with her.

Meanwhile, the husband has found an area rich in game, and another woman has invited him to stay with her. The new wife’s spirit power lets her know that the jealous wife is coming. As the new wife and the jealous wife fight, the latter is torn to pieces. The hunter and his new wife prepare to burn the jealous wife’s body and belongings. They find the corner girl and ask her to stay with them. They live happily until the hunter wakes one morning with his voice gone and the knowledge that they must return to the village. The new wife hesitates to go, but the hunter insists. She obeys but wants to use her own special paddle. He wants to use his. They start out over the water using his paddle, and a storm overpowers them. They are knocked into the water, and when they rise to the surface, the hunter and the new wife have been transformed into polar bears and the corner girl into a mermaid.

In the translation, Deacon elaborates on the details of the interaction between the woman and the village. Her domination of her husband is the first step in her mastery of the village. The village’s and the husband’s lack of control of the woman, her violence in wrecking the village, and her attack on the new wife are given detailed treatment, as well as the way she once again violates the community’s traditional
order when she makes the corner girl get in the canoe. As the woman vents her destructive jealousy, she disrupts personal, social, and spiritual values. All eyes are on her, and our pity is with the husband.

The English telling, on the other hand, emphasizes the hunter’s experience of domination and seclusion. Deacon adds the detail that the jealous wife uses her husband’s meat to win friends, while he sits alone at a party in the kashim. Deacon notes that he “had to look at his feet. Never look around nowhere because he’s scared of her, because she’s too powerful” (1987: 58). In other words, he must act exactly like a corner girl in puberty seclusion.

At the end of the English version, Deacon adds the detail that the new wife dresses up and looks beautiful. Deacon strongly emphasizes the wife’s reluctance to go on the trip. She gives the new wife many additional lines of dialogue, explaining that she will acquiesce to taking the trip across the sea if it is her husband’s will. The new wife explicitly predicts their death if the husband insists on using his paddle, but in the end, she goes along with his wishes. Foregrounded is the irony of the husband, who had no power to exert his will previously, now insisting on a tragic course. The new detail about the way the husband would walk around previously with his eyes downcast ties him explicitly to the girl in puberty seclusion. His act of abandonment and the girl’s offense are linked in such a way as to create serious doubt about the positive nature of his actions, especially in fleeing from his duty to restrain his wife. This English telling explores his choices and his failure to be a male role model with no little irony about when a husband should exercise his will and when he should listen to his wife. It appears that in this version of the story, the culturally moral subjects surrounding his actions are brought into focus.

It seems clear to me that the English tellings allow Deacon to explore new interpretations and representations of the narrative. However, without the influence of situational differences and audience interaction, we can hypothesize the existence of an implied listener who presages a performance interaction with an actual audience. While the performance elements of narrative art may be important, perhaps they have been overemphasized; they may not tell us as much about Deacon’s art as we think. I am still left with the question of why an interpretation that emphasizes the male role should be emphasized for an English-speaking audience. Is there something more than just interpretation working here? Something more essential to the story?
When I asked Deacon about changes that might appear in telling a story to different audiences, she insisted that the stories are always told the same way every time, saying, "No, it's the same always; you tell the story from the beginning and go through to the end; nothing is added." I asked her about changes when she told her stories in English, and she replied, "No, it's the same story." I pushed on, asserting, "But you use different words; some characters say different things." A little exasperated, she concluded, "Yeah, but they're all part of the same thing."  

It seems that for Deacon it is the story that is important, not the audience, the context, or the language. Perhaps she perceives some level of deep structure that cannot be compromised in the telling so that various interpretations are latent. Indeed, much of the dramatic action and thematic interplay is the same in all the versions of the story. But the storyteller's interpretation seems to come from an already-existing dynamic of meaning embedded in the various culturally moral subjects in the narrative and only partly responds to an implied listener's influence. This dynamic is what I call the field of meaning which an oral narrative evokes. Deacon's "old wisdom" resides not in any one conclusion about the meaning or moral of a story nor in any one interpretation that she might give for any telling. The existence of an implied listener may evoke a particular rendition, but that possibility only exists because the narrative itself possesses a dynamic interaction of meanings that lies deeper than formal narrative structures. Each telling is a walk through that field. The same landmarks are there though we take new paths and linger at different spots on various days.

The English telling is still the same story, and it can reveal the old wisdom as it enters the arena of meaning in that story. It is clear to me that serious attention to the English versions can help the non-Deg Hit'an come to a more complete understanding of the fields of meaning in each tale. Ultimately, I cannot show that it will improve the appreciation of a bilingual Deg Hit'an audience, but as I think about the way utterance excites the dynamics of cultural value and artistic insight, it seems to me that each telling of a story foregrounds and advances one locus of the many ongoing cultural conversations from which understanding emerges. As such, each telling, even an English one, opens the possibility of a new excitement of meaning. I hope that folklorists, anthropologists, linguists, and other collectors of oral material will not automatically discount English tellings of Native tales and that when the opportunity presents itself, these will
be found and preserved. Belle Deacon's job is to tell the story, to follow
that bright shining light until it is reached. Our job is to listen to the
story over and over in as many versions as possible until we grasp
some of the old wisdom.

Notes

1. Since she is past the age of menstruation, the taboo against eating bear
meat no longer applies, but a certain amount of ambivalence remains.

2. Raven's actions and functions are parallel to those of shamans in other
Deg Hit' an stories and society generally. The killing of a raven is taboo
(Osgood 1958: 136). It is a positive action to kill an evil shaman, but it
is probable that the shaman's spirit will destroy the killer (149). Traditionally,
the body of a shaman was cut up because otherwise both the
body of the shaman and that of the killer would swell up (150).

3. This emphasis on the ambivalence about accumulation of wealth is
also apparent in a videotaped English version Deacon told at the State
Museum in Anchorage, where she was demonstrating her craft. In this
tape, she expands on the beginning of the story by elaborately describ­
ing the woman's various sewing accomplishments. Osgood also notes
some cultural ambivalence about the female accumulation of wealth
(1959: 69). If we believe with Melville Jacobs that the tales reveal areas
of social tension, then we can see female material accumulation as an
ambivalent social act, one capable of attracting notice by a spirit being
(1959: 2, 4, 12).

4. Kari notes that the term corner girl refers to a menstruating woman.
It comes from the practice of sequestering these women in corners of
houses.

5. Osgood notes that it was considered shameful for a man to act like a
woman (1959: 67). In discussing the Yup'ik, Fienup-Riordan also notes
that a girl's violation of puberty seclusion taboos may result in destruc­
tion of the spirits of animals. When the woman breaks the taboo, she
collapses the distinction between the animal and the human world. The
place where the man is when the violation occurs determines where
he will forever reside (1983: 216). The hunter in the story is out to sea
when the violation occurs. He and the corner girl will remain in the
sea world as opposed to the village one. VanStone also notes that such
an act might cause a hunter to lose his skill (1979: 38).

6. Deacon's comments are from a personal conversation with the author
References


The Alaska Peninsula. Map by Robert Drozda.