The Weight of Tradition and the Writer’s Work

Mary Odden

In the introduction to this book, we noted that stories, to be recognized as important cross-culturally, must move beyond the interestingly exotic or inaccessibly esoteric. Throughout these essays, even where they focus on oral traditions from some academic distance, the writers hint at numerous ways that we all take stories home with us at the end of the day, identifying their values in terms of our lives. Peter John has given William Schneider moral strength in his family life; Robin Barker and her son have looked to see if the crane’s eyes really are blue; and the places Robert Drozda documented have clearly become part of his “sense of being.”

It is Mary Odden, however, who most clearly articulates for all of us the interweaving of the intellectual with the deeply personal. Her intimate and poetic writing expresses the pain and ineffable beauty of traditions lost and found. In this essay, Odden moves from an abandoned homestead, a place her father wanted her to know in some urgently inaccessible way, to a contemplation of issues raised by the preceding articles. The search to create personal meaning from both familiar and elusively distant oral traditions is simultaneously a search for the intangible connections that can bond people together across cultures and generations.

This is, perhaps, what beckons us all to listen, write, and remember oral traditions.

Nearly the last thing my father said to me, certainly the last thing I remember, was “You know what I mean, Mim.” Mim was a nickname he had for me, a special name between the two of us, reserved for the times when we would sit in the back door of the family grocery store and watch the eastern Oregon thunderstorms roll across the sky, or when I had just won a ribbon on my horse—something extraordinary like that. My mom never called me Mim, and Dad wouldn’t have used
Mim in the third person, as in “Mim did this or that.” Mim was only for me from my dad, for my ears and my heart to hear.

When Dad said, “You know what I mean, Mim,” he wasn’t talking about anything in particular. His eyes could be bluer than any ocean, and his eyes were about all that was left of the father I knew as he lay there, so I couldn’t say that I didn’t know what he meant, especially if it was anything in particular that he wanted me to understand. I just held onto his hand and nodded and let pass between us whatever it is that can pass, without words. I didn’t ask him to explain, and after I left that room, I never saw him alive again.

My dad always wanted me to understand what he knew, in the way that he had lived and understood it. One time my sister-in-law took a picture of the old homestead out in the middle of Flag Prairie, broken-down grey buildings in the middle of a sagebrush flat where the pioneers used to flag antelope. In the distance, you could see the juniper-covered hills that wrapped around the prairie. My dad asked me if I would paint it for him. He had the photograph, but it wasn’t enough. He wanted the isolation, the trying to live there, the heat and the hidden water, the stories. He wanted the flat, cold, plastic film to pass through a human heart—mine—and come out again, complete with all the dimensions he knew and felt about that homestead. And he thought I could do that for him, that somehow there was a complete Bill Looney—my father—inside me like a truth about the world that I could paint or write or say for him. I never did paint that picture. It was beyond my skill, even if I had been a very good painter.

In 1977, I was twenty-two years old and working out of Galena, Alaska, as a forest-fire dispatcher for the Bureau of Land Management. I spent several weeks on the Seward Peninsula fighting a fire that had covered hundreds of thousands of acres. During that time, I lived and worked with a crew of young firefighters from Noorvik, an inexperienced village crew put together in a hurry, the fourth or fifth group taken out of the village in that incredibly busy year of lightning fires. The first two crews taken out of Noorvik would have been the experienced firefighters, led by older bosses who were also village leaders. But the Noorvik crew on our sector of the fire was comprised of people in their late teens and early twenties, kids just out of high school who had taken the two-day training class but most of whom had never been on a fire before.

I was a newcomer to Alaska, and I had never been around many Native people. Bannock and Shoshone people were nearly invisible
in eastern Oregon when I grew up. When Indians were pointed out to me, at laundromat or bus station, I was disappointed that they looked ordinary, even a little more beaten-down than ordinary, and nothing like the grand Plains Indians in the books I had read hungrily all through my childhood, nothing like what I had imagined myself to be when my best friend and I tied feathers in our horses' manes and tore around the ditch banks on her dad's sheep ranch.

In the proximity of fire line and camp, my first impression was how alike we were, all of us still kids, laughing as we ran our hands around the black edges of the fire feeling for the heat left in it, walking all day through the tussocks next to Imuruk Lake, then huddling together in little groups, waiting for the helicopter to shuttle us back to camp. The crew members would be jostling each other and teasing about boyfriends and girlfriends. Sometimes we waited to be picked up for hours, since there was only one helicopter and there were many crews scattered around the perimeter of the fire. It was more than twenty miles back to the base camp, across burned tundra that in some places was already growing green again. Sometimes the young men and women from Noorvik spoke Inupiaq, and then I felt some of our difference. I felt both excluded to hear words I didn't understand and privileged to be in the country where they were spoken. Most of the time the Noorvik crew spoke Inupiaq mixed with English, and I could gather the gist of the teasing or the story, though I missed most of the references and the cues for laughter. We were all young and earning money and camping out together, so there was a lot of laughing and little to be sad about. But one day I heard one young man tell another, "You're not an Eskimo. You don't even know your traditional culture." The accuser pronounced "traditional culture" as one might say "multiplication tables," words from a vocabulary both formal and remote, as if "traditional culture" were a thing to be achieved and then recited, something you could get a ribbon for mastering. The person accused of not knowing his traditional culture was quiet and seemed ashamed. How could he not be an Eskimo, I wondered?

I heard this note of shame many times in the next few years, in the several summers I worked along the Kobuk River. One time a young friend from Kobuk told me that I knew her country better than she did, though she had lived there all her life. I could rattle off place names from my big wall map in the dispatch office, mispronunciations of names misspelled by United States Geological
Survey orthographers from the 1950s. I could even connect a few of these generally disembodied names with the textured landscape I had flown over, walked on, fished in. This strange litany seemed to Ahka to be a more "legitimate" kind of knowledge than all of her experiences growing up in a place where much of an earlier Eskimo life was still practiced—fishing, hunting, berry picking, celebrating, grieving.

Because of Ahka's statement, and occasional comments I heard from people in Kobuk and Shungnak, I began to see that between the oldest residents who spoke Inupiaq exclusively and the people in their twenties who spoke almost none, there seemed to exist a boundary, a paroxysm of memory begun in earlier generations from the onus of being an Eskimo at all and speaking that "primitive" language—both forbidden and discarded in favor of the "melting pot." The division was deepened by the elevation of this "traditional culture," by the time of my friend's coming of age in the 1970s, as something to be admired and longed for, though lost. Perhaps it was especially admired because it was regarded as lost. Some of the young people felt as though they were failing at a responsibility they had inherited as Eskimos, although the obligation to achieve a certain past is an impossible one to fulfill, as impossible as the longing I will always feel to know what my father meant, to see what he saw in the broken buildings at Flag Prairie, the desire I will always feel to express his vision in art or words.

When I think about traditional knowledge as something I have to enter, like another room, or absorb, like a foreign liquid, I have already locked myself away from seeing it as something that can ever belong to me or be a part of me. As writers writing about folklore and oral tradition, whether we are dealing with our own traditions or those of another group, we tend to objectify and probe and analyze tradition as if it were a lump of slimy stuff on the dissecting table, as if this were the way to "know" it. How much of our difficulty in learning about ourselves or others is a product of this stance?

Elsie Mather tells us in this book that part of young people's problem in entering Yup'ik tradition, in taking it into themselves and making it their own, is that they have lost an older generation's "art of learning." Instead of learning in built-up layers of experience, watching and listening and accepting that some things are "not explainable in mere words," she says contemporary students of Yup'ik culture are in a hurry to gather up knowledge. They want to "get it in a nutshell" and make instant sense of it, as if the knowledge of aging elders
could be "collected" in a bushel basket together, or lifetimes could be gathered up and saved for winter.

The word *knowledge* means different things depending on who you are. A few summers ago, I was transcribing and indexing tapes of interviews with Koyukon Athabaskan elder Susie Williams of Hughes. I was fascinated with the way Susie was so careful to specify that any stories she told were from a particular time and place: "those people, that time." It seemed to me she was refusing to create any false generalizations about her culture, or that enough of her original language carried over into English to circumvent the creation of universals which English accomplishes so easily with its copula "is."

Anthropologist Wendy Arundale and Koyukon culture and language specialist Eliza Jones were interviewing Susie about place names and historical sites along the Koyukuk River. At one point they asked her about a particular place, and she said she didn't know it. "But we know you camped here," said Eliza. "Yes," Susie agreed, "but I don't know the stories that belong to that place." Susie was teaching them, and me the listener, and now you the reader of this essay, that she meant something different than her interviewers by the word "know," even though Eliza is a Koyukon and an insider to most of the information Susie offered in the interviews.

Susie's usage signified a process deeper than mere recognition or recitation of a name. It is something slower and more respectful to acknowledge that stories belong to places and are a part of their certain place and time. Even as we as listeners and writers borrow them into ourselves, taking and retelling any story we can "catch," as Yup'ik tradition seems to give us permission to do, I am asking myself about that translated word *catch*. A cat catches a mouse and tears it apart or plays with it until it is dead. This could work as a fitting analogy for analysis, but Phyllis Morrow tells us that Yupiit tend to leave their stories open, without explaining or analyzing. Perhaps "catch" represents a concept more like the "knowing" of places in Susie Williams's interview—respect and long acquaintance.

It is an underlying theme of many of the articles in this book that there are no shortcuts to knowledge about a folk group, yet this medium of written words is a shortcut, as are the taped voices in the archive—words cut away from the life that gave rise to them. The danger inherent in taking these shortcuts seems analogous to the danger of any listening between cultures: that I will wrongly understand and that in talking and especially in writing about what I have wrongly understood, I will silence a voice that belongs to a
person of another culture, as a starling is able to displace the indigenous bluebird whose nest is so like but not identical to its own. William Schneider expresses this concern when he writes that he understood the Peter John story about killing the moose as a measure of the strength of his concern for his family—later discovering that Peter's telling probably also meant to convey his deep faith in God as provider. We have a responsibility to storytellers to know what they “mean,” but written words, even taped voices, rob us of most of the context and dynamism of the telling situation and provide only an extremely limited acquaintance with the teller.

Still, I know that some voices become a part of my own fabric, written and taped voices layering into the memories of real experiences along rivers and in kitchens and gardens. I have been privileged to hear Susie Williams speak, though I have never seen her face. I have been in Hughes, and I can imagine her there and at the mission at Allakaket when she was young, the latter a place I can know only through the faded film of pictures and what I read from books, those books that Elsie Mather aptly calls “necessary monsters.” The most respect I can show to Susie, as an eavesdropper on her conversations with Wendy and Eliza, as a writer still hungry to tie feathers on my horse, is to allow the particularity of time and place to remain in what I write about her, a particularity that her eloquent “village English” insists upon. I want to find a way of writing that allows a reader to “hear” Susie’s words. I also want to be visible, to let a reader see my enthusiasm for wall tents and Blazo boxes and Coleman lanterns that allows some understanding of Susie’s stories, as well as the fact that I do not know Susie and that I only hear her through headphones, sitting in front of my computer.

My summer’s work in 1992 was to write down Susie’s stories for Wendy and Eliza (Williams 1988), and since then the stories have often found their way into my thoughts. Sometimes I find myself “thinking with” a story I did not understand as I wrote it down. Sometimes Susie reminds me that she is also a woman of my mother’s generation, when I remember hearing her talk about her family’s first radio or making clothing from flour sacks (and trying to scrub out the inked letters). In a way, Susie’s words have selected me and not the other way around.

Other people’s words carry certain obligations. As a writer, I want to give my reader something of both Susie and why her words are important to me. Sometimes this means imparting a sense of a story’s “otherness,” its inscrutability, its deferral of interpretation. It might
mean leaving in the text the part of the transcript that "bumps" or is uncomfortable, leaving in the snatch of singing which is a seeming non sequitur. It might mean wondering, self-consciously and in the writing, about how a word like "know" or "catch" is negotiable between speaker/writer and listener/reader and how the negotiation is complicated by translation from another language.

As a writer of nonfiction about the north and its people, I want to dispel the "disguise of certainty" of objective writing, just as many anthropological writers are struggling to do. Objective writing has tended to angle civilization above the heads of cultures, a perspective that is a "particular epistemological stance of Western civilization," according to Michel Foucault (as paraphrased in Phyllis Morrow's essay). How can I reduce the steepness of this angle as I regard the culture and the individual life process of a person who is my "subject"? How can I offer enough context so that my readers can find their own importance in this person I find so important, yet defer interpretation of a subject's words so that a story does not turn into "why the beaver slaps its tail on the water"? How can I make my participation (my interpretive frame) visible and yet remain respectful and maintain a sense of the "other's" ownership?

Julie Cruikshank begins her introduction to Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders with the following words: "One of the liveliest areas of discussion in contemporary anthropology centers on how to convey authentically, in words, the experience of one culture to members of another" (1990: 1). If this is impossible, the struggle to achieve it can be lovely.

The Angle of Power

A coldness blows between writer and subject in the very word subject. It rouses an issue of political and social power. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli suggests that "the very need for anthropological research in western societies implies the recognition and observation of otherness in subjects who are not on the same social and political plane with the observer" (1991: x). In this view, the very act of observation is a position of power, typified by the fact that the observer has a mobility in and out of the situation that is generally not shared by the object of study. The student of culture has typically been an outsider, notebook and camera and tape recorder at the ready. This is the model of learning that anthropology has presented.
In the 1968 film, *Yanomamo: A Multi-Disciplinary Study*, an anthropologist bends down to a woman in a hammock. The woman is holding a baby, and the scientist bends over them to write “B101” on the woman’s arm. Some twenty-five years later, I find this very hard to watch (and so would most contemporary anthropologists), even though the film has prepared viewers for the numbering of subjects by telling us that the study is being conducted “in a culture where there are strong prohibitions against using people’s names.” This statement is one of the most interesting in the entire film. There must be a context for using people’s names if people have them. So the prohibition must be against using people’s names in a certain way. What is naming in that society, and how is it antithetical to labeling or numbering? In the anthropologist’s frame of reference, like my own, numbers and names are nearly interchangeable. If I want to discuss my taxes or my phone bill, I am more likely to get results by telling the official at the other end of the line one of my numbers—social security or telephone—than my name. So if the Yanomamo people have prohibited the use of names in the way anthropologists want to use them, there is something for me to learn about the Yanomamo, those anthropologists, and myself. Why am I so offended by a scientist marking a number on a human being as if that human being were a bottle of urine?

In much objective writing—third person, present tense—there is a clear sense of looking down, from scientist to subject, from civilization to culture. I have been thinking about maps lately: how maps are made from a certain elevation and include selected features; how they turn elevations and spatial distances into all there is, devoid of spiritual dimensions, devoid of stories, devoid of the way one route can be immeasurably harder to travel than another blue line of the same length. I have been thinking that I am the center of my particular map of the universe. That map notes only the places and routes I know, not by population or distance from each other but by their importance to me, my memory of them. Is Susie Williams the center of her own map of the places she knows, in her way of knowing? Or does her sense of particular places and times and people as owners of stories “decenter” her in this abstraction I have made by flattening and mapping Susie’s worldview? And as Eliza lays the inch-to-the-mile chart down in front of Susie—something I cannot see; I only hear the voices and the large map crinkling and hissing across laps—what translation is being made between Susie’s memory of the time it took to go from one camp to another and the cross-hatched green-and-white paper in front of her?
Some people can’t pass their private pilot’s examinations just because they can’t learn to read a map. This may be because they will not trust that the map is a metaphor for topography, or because what is on the map does not look like what they see out of the airplane window, those passing, changing shapes. It is a kind of algebra, to let an unchanging symbol stand for a changing thing, even to let your life rely upon it.

The mapping of culture, like that of topography, is a flattening of what is round and multidimensional, held in many different forms and memories, into a common representation that stands for the whole. It is useful if I understand it as an interpretation, dangerous if I begin to see it as the thing itself. In Robert Drozda’s words in his essay: “The authenticity of the land is detached from the landscape and conveyed to paper, where it can be further divided and legally manipulated.” When the cemetery sites or berry-picking places or hunting areas of a certain group of people are set down on paper, with a list of who’s buried here and who goes there, then according to a Western cultural convention, it seems possible to make rules about privilege and ownership, compartmentalizing significance as if we can regiment the activities and concepts the map represents.

We, as in the Western civilization “we,” are the heirs of Aristotle’s ideas about the universal nature of human minds and also his metaphysics, which says we have to stop the world and remove ourselves from it in order to look at it.1 This is a dangerous combination of theories. Once we have removed ourselves in order to be scientific, it is then possible to draw conclusions about categories and forms and assume commonalties of concepts as if we were not part of the process, to proceed with our production of one-dimensional maps.

The conversion of information to map or words is interpretation in which the interpreter is invisible. Maybe what is most shocking to me about B101 is that I actually see the anthropologist writing on the woman’s arm.

English and “Still Time”

I remember as a young person reading about my ancestors and others in James H. Hawley’s Idaho: The Gem of the Mountains (1920). The country described was the Boise Valley, Silver City, and Jordan Valley, Oregon, the very country I was living in, but in the book it
was peopled with family accounts from the early 1900s. Some described my own great-grandparents' farms and ranches. The present tense in those accounts, coupled with their great distance from my life, heightened my sense of nostalgia, of loss. I read about the heads of stock, the amount of acreage put under irrigation, and the names of children born in that immediacy of long ago. The writing was meant for a contemporary 1920s reader who would recognize many of the names and nod his head at that progressive, modern West. The Shoshone and Bannock and French explorers were already ghosts and the Idaho of the 1960s and 1970s undreamed of. My then-present landscape and experiences became footnotes to that powerful, still time—the real Idaho, lost forever. This was the place and time my father was born into, and I think the little rock houses and the broken grey homesteads all led him back to longing for that childhood place.

If the angle of political power in some anthropological writing is downward because of the impulse to classify and objectify, another byproduct of objectification angles the point of view upward to a subject on an impossibly static pedestal, nearly platonic and outside time. Romantic absorption with the object of study can also devalue the cultural position of the examiner and create a nostalgic reality for the moment or person or culture being described—the noble savage, the Gold Rush.

My father's longing for those places of memory and invention and the books and pictures my family kept of those times helped to draw me into my own intellectual life. There is a hunger for many lives that draws us past ourselves. But the dead are dangerous—this is our life, not theirs. The present-tense description of a moment in time is a snapshot from a moving train. The objectification it creates and its accompanying power to generate nostalgia and longing proceed from the use of language, not experience.

The very structure of English and other Indo-European languages puts a stop to the world. English is noun-rich, whereas Alaska Native languages are verb-rich, so that translation into English flattens the complexity of narrative and other verbal art. Also the English verb to be has the double function of copula, joining subjects and predicates, or standing alone as in God is, meaning exists (Benesch and Krejci 1992: 77). We can say, "Society is changing." But we can also say, "Society is," creating the very thing we will then look for evidence of. Employing this one handy feature of our language, we can fill up the world in less than seven days ourselves!
First Person

I am particularly interested in what happens when an anthropological writer or anyone else writing "about" something shifts to the first person. It seems very like getting out of the pew and going up to the front of the church, not to turn around and sing or preach, but to kneel in front of the altar, separately and visibly committed to whatever subject we are all focusing on. I don't think it is stretching the metaphor beyond the breaking point to say that whatever we turn our attention to is on a kind of altar, selected from the chaos of events and ideas in our lives. The author, visible or not, is the initial supplicant in the proliferation of meanings between author/teller and reader/listener. While all subject-pointed writing continues to employ third-person stances, and we all benefit from the rich objective writing of anthropological observers before us, it is fascinating and useful when ethnographic accounts offer a first-person view of contemporary observers in the midst of their own observations.

When Jean Briggs's *Never in Anger* was published in 1970, its first person viewpoint was regarded as unusual. *Never in Anger* is a field study of a small group of Eskimo people living north of Hudson's Bay. In this section from her introduction, listen to Briggs's concern with the issues of movement versus the anthropological present tense in which she feels she is expected to write:

> The book is a still life also in the sense that Utku life, like that of other Eskimo groups, is changing. Some of the practices and attitudes described here already at this writing belong to the past; and there is no telling how long the Utku will remain in Chantrey Inlet. But having made it clear that the book describes a particular moment in time, for simplicity's sake I shall avail myself of anthropological privilege and refer to that moment in the present tense. (1970: 7)

This paragraph is ironically noteworthy because Briggs only employs this expected present tense for a few introductory pages, and the remainder of the text, three hundred pages or so, is written predominantly in first person, past tense, which highlights motion and intimacy in a particularity of experience absent in more general, objectifying texts.

The following passage from Briggs describes a permissiveness and affection toward small children: "I, like her family, delighted
in luring her onto my lap, in feeling her warm, wriggly little body in my arms, and in snuffing her small dark head. I delighted in society’s permission, more accurately, in its injunction, to respond to all Saarak’s commands” (1970: 117). Briggs’s account is a scene, a narrative of a particular place and time. The presence of anthropologist as participant is inescapable in Jean Briggs’s way of writing, as is the momentary nature of experience. Briggs’s form is corporeal, seated in the picture. The position of the observer is inside the observer’s consciousness, so the narrative is first person. One of the central issues of the Briggs book becomes the learning experience and changing attitudes of Briggs herself, visibly germane to her observations of the Eskimo group.

I believe that the first-person, past-tense storytelling mode comes close to acknowledging the lever-pushing, ventriloquizing author function and frame while still allowing the careful “those people, that time” of the Susie Williams accounts. It seems to me to be respectful of the particular ownerships of time and place. By itself, or interspersed with other types of presentations, it allows insider or outsider readers and students of culture to break into, even to argue with, observations made by a flesh-and-blood person. Could it be that past characterizations of what Eskimos “are” and what their culture “is” have pointed a still life which is difficult for young Eskimo people to crawl out of, to claim their lives as “Eskimo” lives? Can books, those necessary monsters, become less monstrously distant and static and allow young people to enter into a dialogue with their pages?

I’ve been back to Jordan Valley, Oregon, where my father was born many times. I’ve felt the rough, pink cinder stones of the house he was born in. When I was in my late teens, I had a job on a lookout near Jordan Valley, and I had friends living in the rock house, which had long ago passed from my family’s ownership to that of my friends, the Skinners. One night I sat in the swinging chair on the front porch until the stars came out, wondering whose life I was living. Both sides of my family had their roots in this part of the country, a mining district since the mid-1800s, and here I was, drawn to the scene of all their encounters, only the mine shafts were abandoned, and the people in the stories were all gone. I wondered how my life could ever be as important as that of the little girl who had grown up in the big white house next to me and given birth to her children in the rock house behind me. I had no sense of my fresh memories joining my grandmother’s and my father’s words about this place, just a sense of loss that I hadn’t listened enough. Like my father, I felt the loss of
stories I hadn’t heard, names of places I hadn’t learned. Stories and even the places they belonged to were washing off the map, robbing me of the real. It was always a “they” when I thought about my family, never an “us” in all our continuing, changing, differing connections with the country. As I grow older, I see myself sitting at the foot of family stories, still listening, and I can forgive myself for only hearing what I can hear.

In her essay, Julie Cruikshank writes of herself in relation to her subject. She describes ethnography as conversations between “anthropologists and our hosts,” dialogues that “open the possibility that we may learn something about the process of communication [emphasis added].” Dialogue and conversation are diction from level ground, a respectful discourse between equal parties, but when Cruikshank goes to first person to narrate the story of her involvement with Angela Sidney, she often refers to their relationship as that of student and teacher. Cruikshank gradually incorporates Sidney’s way of relating traditional narratives into her present life experiences: “Even though she is no longer able to participate actively in our dialogues, they continue whenever her words surface unexpectedly while I am puzzling about some problem, just as she undoubtedly hoped they would.” Cruikshank views ethnography as dialogue, but when she enters her own picture, it is also as a younger person approaching an elder with questions, not just about the past but about the way to conduct her present life.

William Schneider says the best way he knows to illustrate his point about how important it is to know tellers’ circumstances is “by sharing a very personal experience with Chief Peter John of Minto.” He tells us that he met with Peter John primarily to “ask him important questions about the way to live ... to speak about family responsibility and help me think through ways to lead that part of my life.” Even if the reader is more interested in Peter John’s life than William Schneider’s, I think it is important to know Schneider’s stance and attitude at the telling, how he also came to Peter John as a younger person to an elder, asking about how to live.

Communication takes place between living persons in a certain situation. Phyllis Morrow told me a story about her early fieldwork, how she found it impossible to write up her field notes because she couldn’t adopt a stance without a sense of writing to someone. Assigning a static “meaning” to her experiences proved impossible because she recognized that it would put a stop to the conversation and learning process. She refers to something like this when she writes about
collaboration in her essay: "Personal meanings proliferate through tellers and listeners." In the field situation, she finally ended up sending long letters to friends, finding it necessary to use the first person because it encompassed her own involvement in the fieldwork and also invited responses from her correspondents.

Robert Drozda’s third-person description of the interethnic difficulties between Yup’ik informants and historical-place and cemetery-site examiners is interesting and informative in itself, yet he finds it important to switch to first person later in his article identify himself as an investigator moved by his experiences from “ignorance and naïveté” to a position of thankfulness to “the patient (and impatient) teachers and lessons that have helped me along the way.” He closes his essay with a letter from Marie Meade, a Yup’ik woman involved in the examinations, written to a Bureau of Indian Affairs manager of the project. Drozda tells us that this letter “adds a dimension which extends across cultures and contrasts to the starkness of mere physical description. Perhaps such experiences and values truly capture the deeper meaning that the preservation of Native historical places possesses.”

Drozda seems to be saying that third-person description can give us the “what” of ethnography or situation, but we depend on something more personal to give us the “why.” In Meade’s words: “I especially will not forget the thrill and joy of my uncle Nickolai Berlin when we took him to his birthplace. It was wonderful to watch as he spoke of his first years of life on that land.” It is the sense of Meade listening to her uncle that makes me eager to hear him speak of those first years. For me, too, it would be important to carry a sense of niece listening to uncle into a session with the tape or transcript from that occasion. Interestingly, when Drozda gives us a glimpse of himself, his stance, like that of Cruikshank and Schneider, is that of an increasingly respectful student.

When some first person is included in ethnographic or any subject-oriented accounts, we can’t squirm away from the issue of motivation. Alaskan oral traditions (and especially languages) may be like endangered species, to be protected in their living habitat for the sake of the cultural diversity of the world, but first-person accounts also allow me to see real people valuing knowledge in personal ways, wanting to “get some of the old wisdom.” An author who lets me see him or her come to a tradition or a teller for old wisdom gives me a perspective from which I can both respect and respond to what the writing describes. That perspective helps move knowledge from
something I should want to learn, like the multiplication tables, onto the intangible ground from which I draw my life.

Holding On, Passing On

Part of my definition of a human is maker of meaning. As a writer, a pursuer of a particularly virulent form of meaning making, I must acknowledge the power that language has to create and recreate the world—not just a language, but language in motion—a dynamic and powerful link between tradition and performer/writer, between performer/writer and audience/reader. To spread the author function around to whoever interprets and incorporates stories seems reasonable to me, without reducing the authorship of storytellers. Words stop with each of us for a while, long enough for us to invent our worlds with them.

Language is not the observer, not the observed, but a third, created world between the two. This is due not only to the difference between speakers but to the separate, active nature of language itself. Language does not weigh anything—it has no tangible surface to be measured—yet it exerts a force which makes things happen. It carries and creates our concepts, consciously and unconsciously, as we use it. As folklorist Charles Briggs writes, “Language is not a passive instrument for describing a world that is independently constituted. Through its performative force, language can affect action, whether it is the baptism of a baby or the delivery of a command” (1988: 8).

The power of words, their force and our need to respect them, is everywhere throughout this volume. Robert Drozda tells us, “The power of the word, gaze, and thoughts can make things happen in Yup’ik.” Phyllis Morrow talks about why Yup’ik stories are not named and describes a Yup’ik sensitivity to both the creative and limiting power of words.

Patricia Partnow’s article portrays a group of people inventing themselves anew, changing themselves as they modify the stories about the time before and after the Novarupta eruption. Partnow comes to Perryville asking for “old stories and history” and finds an active shifting of myth and history around a tangible boundary between past and present. Rarely are we privileged to consider such persuasive evidence that present circumstances change tradition and that language confirms it. Yet to a degree that varies by cultural convention, genre, and individual style, storytellers treat words from and
knowledge about the past with a careful regard. Partnow lets us see Father Harry appending the words “must have been” to events he relates but did not himself witness.

It seems like a paradox that respect for ownership of words and the witness of people from another place and time are present in oral tradition alongside acknowledgments (and other evidence) that words also belong to the present. Even in Tlingit society, where ownership of stories is prized and fought over and fidelity to the exact repetition of words and expressions is a high virtue in traditional narratives, one of Tlingit-Tagish storyteller Angela Sidney’s chief motivations for wanting to relate the Kaaax’achgóok story at the opening of Yukon College is to give her audience a story they can “think with.”

Thinking with stories is not the same as knowing what they mean. In the introduction to The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories, Alessandro Portelli writes that he “stumbled inadvertently” into the Trastulli stories and realized he did not know what they meant. Not knowing, he returned again and again to the people who told them, gradually recognizing the way his own stance and research methods were affecting his “understanding of the other” and the stories (1991: 43). The deferral of knowing what the stories meant was more rewarding for Portelli than immediately understanding them would have been, because it caused him to question and redefine his own identity and gave him a longer time to live with them and learn. Not knowing exactly what my own father “meant,” or what he thought I knew, is a memory that lives inside me, and I return to it again and again.

Can I, as a writer, pass on the discrepancy, the ambiguity, the thing that I don’t know? Can I give the reader something to think with, instead of explaining why the crane has blue eyes? The discrepancy between the “fact” level of truth and the obscurity of meaning in a story needs to be preserved long enough for me to live with them, and this seems to require a certain openness on my part. I want to wonder over various tellings of stories and allow the differences to teach me, instead of nearly unconsciously consolidating and homogenizing. I’d like to be more hunted by stories than a hunter.

My mother told me so many conflicting proverbs that I finally found it necessary to peel truth off the saying and stick it on the situation, good training for a folklore lover. She not only shared the “Don’t hide your light under a bushel” that Phyllis Morrow cites as a marker for a Western cultural tendency toward individualism, but she would also say, “There’s nothing new under the sun.” She said, “Look
before you leap," but I liked it better when she said, "Faint heart ne'er won fair maid." I liked that long before I knew what it meant, because of the archaic sound of "ne'er," because of the balanced alliteration of "faint heart" and "fair maid," and most of all because of the mood she was in when she said it.

I haven't completely given up on that twenty-year-old's question about what family history and stories mean to me, what parts of them are my own life, as if they were dressers and china cupboards to be passed on in unchanging lumps. But I am beginning to see that the concentric circles of words and scenes and whole stories wash over me again and again during the different times I need them. As a writer, I can learn to respect both stories and tellers and the dangerous written word that fixes them in a misleading stasis. I can try to hold the writing open to the reader, like a letter from a certain place and time.

Notes

1. "As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affectations themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind..." (Cooke and Tredenick 1962: 15). And as a basis for our Western science: If "there is to be a science of knowledge of anything, there must exist apart from the sensible things some other natures which are permanent, for there can be no science of things which are in a state of flux" (Apostle 1966: 218).

2. Dennis Tedlock, who early on drew attention to many of the participant/observer dilemmas and championed dialogic and poetic representations, expressed caution about first-person monologues of anthropological experiences, which he deemed "confessional," while also admitting that such accounts keep "contact between individuals and between cultures" visible at the presentation stage (1979: 390).

References


