Epilogue

We offer this book with both humility and a sense of accomplishment. We feel a bit like a young girl who has completed her first basket or a boy who has killed his first game. Like them, we are pleased; we see our work as a significant start, and we are indebted to the traditions of our forebears as well as offering an original and unique contribution to that tradition. We sense that if we really want to understand oral tradition and contribute meaningfully to the dialogue which is well under way elsewhere, we must expand our audience, and we must broaden our investigations as well. There is much to learn about the way people in the North and elsewhere communicate meaning through the stories they tell and the ways they tell them. This book, then, our rite of passage, is an offering by northern scholars to the lively conversations about language and cultural expression now going on.

There is an urgency to this work, for while we expect oral traditions to evolve and change, we also know that the stories that are told now represent an important moment in time, a moment that deserves all the skills and perceptions we can muster. For this reason, we look both to our fieldwork and to scholarship in other parts of the world. In adding to the discussion, we wish to ensure that northern scholarship proceeds with both the benefits of “outside” knowledge and a sensitivity to the special conditions and local voices which teach us how to listen and learn.

The special conditions of the North are also those which should be urgently instructive to students of oral tradition elsewhere. In Alaska and Canada, the political climate is one in which the voices of indigenous peoples are becoming increasingly insistent as they struggle to maintain (or obtain) control of their land. As power relations between indigenous and nonindigenous residents shift, we have become increasingly sensitized to the subtlety and serious consequences of our work together. These are also worldwide political trends, but they are perhaps farther advanced in the North than elsewhere or at least more consistently in the forefront of our lives. In these essays, we
have tried to offer others the benefits of a trail that has been at least partially broken in.

The trailbreaking ultimately involves trying to understand verbal exchanges that trigger and shape meaning in both our minds and the minds of narrators and audiences. In *Symbolising Boundaries*, anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen comments that “it is in the nature of the symbolic to be imprecise... If we could pin down the meanings of symbols, then the symbols would have become redundant, because we would have moved from the symbolic to the technical” (1986: 3). Elsewhere, he elaborates that “much of what symbols ‘mean’ or express may be beyond or behind consciousness... either because these meanings are so inchoate as to be inexpressible, or because their value depends on their being left unstated” (1987: 12). Because oral traditions are largely symbolic, we face the same dilemma as any other interpreter of such forms: when we want to talk about meaning, we are put in the particularly challenging position of trying to interpret that which is itself interpretive.

Another way to say this is that if we have trouble objectifying the oral tradition, it is because its very slipperyness is what makes it meaningful, or to be more precise, its imprecision is what allows people to make meaning with it. Our difficulty, then, is a logical consequence of its nature: the oral tradition is negotiated, performative, and interpretive. It cannot be captured. Yet we seem to have to continually relearn this. There is always the urge to “preserve” “it.” The problem is that both the notion and the object of preservation are problematic.

They are problematic because oral tradition is less about tellers and texts than about relationships. Unfortunately, this truth is obscured by the words that we use for oral traditions (*verbal arts, oral literatures*), which tend to focus on either the performers or that which is performed. That makes it more difficult for us to remain mindful of the fundamental relational qualities that underlie both. In fact, it is people’s relationships with each other and their experiences that prompt all telling, remembering, and hearing. Because oral traditions live when they are told, preserving texts on paper or in other static forms does nothing to maintain the relationships through which the cultural processes we term traditions are enacted. Because oral traditions are only told when they live, as the relationships among the people that tell and hear them change, so do the symbolic forms with which they make meaning. The conservatism of traditional *forms* notwithstanding, oral traditions are only meaningful when they connect people,
places, and events in changing relationships. There are no meanings without meaning makers. So preserving the forms is like preserving fleshless bones. What we can reconstruct or infer from their structure at best lacks warmth and subtlety and at worst gives us a false sense of accomplishment.

That said, what gets “boxed” in our writings, the objects of preservation, have to be more than text, more than context, even more than performance. All of these suggest that an instance of narrative is something already accomplished. Narrative becomes past tense, an object of reflection. We have to find ways to convey a sense that narrative is, rather, always accomplishing. And we, as a sometime audience of narrative, are always learning, rather than learned.

One lesson that comes through clearly in this book is that it is easier to maintain a sense of humility, of not knowing (which more faithfully respects the inchoate nature of the symbolic), when we remain close to the communities that make a practice of relating through these narratives. When we as academics are drawn into relationships and are recognized as listeners who want to retell, people tend to keep us honest and on the run. To the extent that we cannot preserve and interpret but really only participate and retell, we can perhaps convey something of the relational qualities of oral tradition.

Can we do this in good faith? Can we write without appropriating and objectifying? Can we say something worth saying without making ourselves less or more than our sources? Writing itself can never be relational and interpretive in the same way as oral traditions. Yet it can be powerful. If we try, we can do more than merely capture the words. We can at least make readers aware of the environment that creates, nurtures, and sustains oral tradition. Each of these essays has made this attempt; collectively, they suggest that there are many ways to broach understanding. In the late twentieth century, both the oral traditions and the animals of the North remain largely unfettered. When we encounter them on this trail, it must be with humility and respect. We must not try to take them into intellectual captivity, or like nineteenth-century zookeepers, we will have preserved only their pale and distorted reflections. We need them to return.

References