When Our Words Return
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About the Authors

Each of the contributors to this volume has sought out and found rewarding ways to pursue collaborative projects with Alaskan and Yukon Native peoples. In Alaska and the Yukon, trust develops slowly between people, and long-term personal relationships form only after the newcomer’s words begin to return, contributions are recognized, and the inevitable mistakes and misunderstandings are exposed. The essays in this book demonstrate the value of community investment in each step of the research, whether it be analyzing stories, exploring historic sites, or writing an elder’s life history. Many of us feel that these experiences have been as important to our personal and professional growth as our formal training.

The contributors to this book have also grown from working with each other as both professionals and friends. We come from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds and have worked with each other in various capacities. We don’t fit into neat categories, nor are we easily labeled. In some cases our relationships have been those of “student” and “teacher.” Here the labels obscure the rich backgrounds that these students have brought to the classroom. We include a school teacher, a Yup’ik language and culture specialist, a researcher of Alaska Native historical sites, a literary scholar specializing in Native American literature, a graduate student in English whose experiences in rural Alaska provide the heart and soul of her writing, and finally, four cultural anthropologists whose personal and professional experiences stretch widely across Alaska and the Yukon and who share strong interests in folklore scholarship.

Elsie Mather was born in Kwigillingok and raised in southwest Alaska. She holds a degree from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. For many years she has conducted language instruction and cultural research at Kuskokwim Community College. When she is not too busy cutting and smoking her family’s winter supply of salmon, she willingly shares knowledge of her Yup’ik culture. She is often asked to speak at conferences, she has served as a translator at international meetings, and she has published several major works in and about the
Yup’ik language, most notably Cauyarnariuq (It Is Time for Drumming), the first full-length original work in an Alaska Native language.

Phyllis Morrow first went to the Kuskokwim region in 1974 as a Ph.D. student at Cornell University. She was looking for a field site and found a home. In 1979, she became director of the Yupik Eskimo Language Center at Kuskokwim College in Bethel. She held this position until 1981 when she began work for the Lower Kuskokwim School District, developing the Yup’ik language and culture program which is currently in use in high schools in southwestern Alaska. Since 1987, she has been on the faculty of the Anthropology Department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her research on cross-cultural communication in the justice system and her work with Yup’ik oral traditions provide academic excuses to remain personally connected with people in the Kuskokwim Delta.

Julie Cruikshank received her advanced degrees in anthropology from the University of British Columbia. Her major work has been in the Yukon with elders, but she is no stranger to Alaska, where she has done research and conducted workshops. Her recent work, Life Lived Like a Story, has strongly influenced the direction of research in the North and is frequently praised as an example of the way to conduct long-term life-history research with elders sensitively. She is presently a professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver where she lives during the school year, returning for a part of each summer to the Yukon. She is known for her amazing professional energy and her caring mentorship of students. This is probably due to the fact that she was mentored so well by Yukon elders.

Robin Barker has moved progressively farther north. She graduated with a teaching certificate and a bachelor of science in child study from Tufts University. After a couple of years of teaching in rural Vermont, she moved to Bethel, Alaska, in 1974 to do itinerant teacher education in the region’s villages. Eventually, she worked in a variety of education programs for teachers and parents, who introduced her to Yup’ik culture. Robin and her husband Jim, a professional photographer, lived in Bethel for twelve years. Five of Jim’s photographs are a handsome addition to this volume. For Robin and Jim, Maggie Lind’s small red house by the river became a favorite visiting place where tea and storytelling followed a day of snowmobile travel or drift-netting for salmon. Up the slough from Maggie’s, just past Elsie Mather’s house, lived her friend Phyllis Morrow. When she wrote
the essay for this book, Robin was a graduate student and instructor in the University of Alaska Fairbanks's School of Education. Her job took her to urban schools where she found the cross-cultural casting and catching of words to be just as compelling as her experiences in rural Alaska. Now she is education coordinator of the Tanana Chiefs Conference Headstart program.

Robert Drozda is an independent researcher and student of Alaska Native cultures. He has traveled and worked extensively in western Alaska from 1981 to the present. Much of this travel included visits to remote villages and surrounding areas as a federally employed field investigator of Native historical and cemetery sites. He has also made numerous personal trips to many of these same places, observing and listening to the residents and the land and learning through a form of participatory research he calls "hanging out." His training, for the most part, has been experiential, informal, and practical. He is currently working on a project documenting Cup'ig Eskimo place names and the cultural geography of Nunivak Island. When he's not traveling, he spends his time with his wife, little brother, their nine-or-so dogs, and his vegetable garden in Fairbanks.

James Ruppert enjoys a joint position in English and Alaska Native studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He is past president of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL) and has published many articles on Native literature, both oral and written. His books include a description of the life and work of Native author D'Arcy McNickle and a volume forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press on contemporary Native American literature.

Patricia Partnow moved to Alaska in 1971, having lived in a variety of towns and suburbs as the child of a career Marine Corps officer. She arrived with a fresh master's degree in anthropology, which she put to work in museums and educational institutions (including a public school district), designing learning materials on Alaska Native cultures. She returned to graduate school at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1989 to study anthropology with dual emphases in folklore and ethnicity. Her dissertation research was conducted between 1990 and 1993 on the Alaska Peninsula. Her doctoral degree was awarded in 1993, and since then she has been doing anthropological contract work, writing a book on Alutiiq ethnohistory and directing a planning grant for the National Endowment for the Humanities Exemplary Award project.
William Schneider began his fieldwork in Beaver, Alaska, in 1972, where he met and worked with Turak Newman and Moses Cruikshank, two men who have strongly influenced his knowledge and appreciation of oral tradition in the North. Schneider’s first professional employment was with the National Park Service, where he worked with Native regional corporations during the identification stage of the historical and cemetery-site selections for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. He was then assigned to a major study of the National Petroleum Reserve on the North Slope, and this marked the beginning of his association with Waldo Bodfish, Sr., which eventually led to the oral biography, *Kusiq: An Eskimo Life History from the Arctic Coast of Alaska*. Since 1981, Schneider has directed the Oral History Program at the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, where he and his colleagues are pioneering Project Jukebox, which uses computers to access oral recordings and related texts, maps, and photographs.

Mary Odden writes essays on northern and rural subjects. She has served on the editorial board of *Northwest Folklore* and recently created a correspondence course which is an introduction to folklore and oral history. Her essays have appeared in such wildly diverse publications as *Northwest Folklore*, *The Alaska Trapper*, and *The Georgia Review*. Mary lives with husband Jim and daughter Kari, migrating seasonally between summer work in McGrath, Alaska, and her winter home in Nelchina, Alaska.