How does a traditional Native American elder in the Yukon maintain a spiritual balance in the face of the catastrophic consequences of Euroamerican colonization, and what is the intriguing yet crucial role that stories play in that process of personal and tribal survivance? Angela Sidney’s life spanned the Klondike gold rush era and most of the twentieth century, encompassing the development of tribal colleges and a renowned international storytelling festival hosted annually in Whitehorse that she helped cofound and in which she regularly participated during her later years. She told her ethnographer, Julie Cruikshank, “Well, I’ve tried to live my life right, just like a story” (Life Lived 20). In these few words, Sidney communicates her people’s oral storytelling heuristic that demonstrates ways of living for tribal members’ consideration, learning, and application. As Native American writer and oral tradition scholar Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) expresses at the outset of her novel Ceremony:

I will tell you something about stories,

. . .

They aren’t just entertainment.

Don’t be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death. (2)

For Sidney, her fellow indigenous elders in the Yukon, and many of the
indigenous peoples of the world, there is a deep and enduring valuation
of the power that stories exert for the health, balance, and integrity of
persons, families, clans, tribes, and communities. As Silko makes very
clear, stories are far more than mere entertainment; they provide a
crucial means for the transmission of tribal and family history, moral
and ethical guidance, and spiritual and ceremonial practice.

In Cruikshank’s volume *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of
Three Yukon Native Elders*, the three Native women elders all affirm
the sacred station held by words, speech, and stories. One of the
women, Annie Ned, was described as “a powerful figure in southern
Yukon society, where she has lived for almost a century . . . and is
recognized throughout the Yukon as having special knowledge about
spiritual power”; Ned stresses “the power of words . . . [and] the value
of discretion,” noting “that only a fool speaks indiscriminately [and
that] the inappropriate use of words can bring serious consequences
to both speaker and listener” (355). Within an aboriginal worldview,
stories and their words are understood to wield both creative and
destructive power. The speaker of language and the teller of stories
have great responsibilities in the choice of their words, but the con-
versive (conversational and transforming) nature of oral storytelling
means that listeners, too, wield co-creative control in their respective
fleshing out of the told stories. When Cruikshank sought to record the
autobiographies of Native women elders in the Yukon Territory of
Canada, the women made it very clear that storytelling among their
people was understood to be symbolically coded with multiple and
overlapping meanings which are interwoven throughout and which
require the co-creative effort on the part of the listener-reader for
meaningful understanding. Silko confirms the listener’s active partici-
pation in stating that the story lies within the listeners, waiting for the
storyteller’s assisted unearthing—much like Socrates’ description of the
oral philosopher as a midwife (“Language” 57).

The stories that the old Yukon women related can be broadly delin-
eated within the categories of personal life histories and traditional
tribal or clan myths; however, in the custom of skilled and guiding
storytellers, the stories that the women chose to tell (whether tradi-
tional or historical) offer explicit and implicit life lessons, which are
invariably informed by the ancient and sacred teachings of the women’s respective tribes and clans. The older aboriginal women pointed out that “practical and spiritual knowledge are inextricably enmeshed: women used the same sets of abilities to confront transcendent beings and to survive in everyday life” (Life Lived 344). Therefore, the ethical and moral guidance within stories, whether they were mythical or historical, was directly relevant to the women’s lives (and, more broadly, for virtually any person’s life). This chapter presents an introduction to ethnographically produced Native women’s autobiography through the storytelling lens of one of the Native women elders: Tagish/Tlingit elder Angela Sidney. By means of a close conversive reading of several of her stories, the sacred center of those stories will be seen to emerge from behind the surface texts of traditional myths and historical stories of the Klondike gold rush, Euroamerican and Eurocanadian colonization, missionization, residential schools, and tribal and familial continuance. While Sidney affirms the importance that the sacred has manifested throughout her life, in her later years as a Bahá’í, her spiritual trajectory has led toward an integrative globalism enabling her to maintain and interweave her faith in her tribal sacred traditions and the Anglican Church in a postcolonial coherence.

The past five-hundred-year history of global European colonization and conquest privileged the realms of geopolitical resource appropriations (land, mineral, vegetation, human) and religious conversion. An inclusive openness and recognition of the different approaches to the sacred across tribes led many indigenous Americans (lexically signifying a broad hemispheric demographic) to respond to Christian missionization with a theological sophistication that few Europeans or subsequent Euroamericans could comprehend. Many Native peoples embraced what they saw as spiritual truths within Christianity, while still maintaining faith in their tribal sacred traditions (Contemporary American, Brill de Ramírez 96–115), notwithstanding the fact that church theologies posited an exclusivity that bespoke a spiritual worldview categorically divergent from that of the indigenous affirmation of the sacred in its diverse manifestations. In God Is Red: A Native View of Religion, historian Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) explains that Native people understood that different peoples and tribes had different sacred practices and teachings and that each tribe’s religion was comparable in truth value to that of every other tribe: “No tribe, however, asserted its [religious and tribal] history as having primacy over the accounts of any other tribe. . . . Differing tribal accounts [of
creation and oral tradition] were given credence because it was not a matter of trying to establish power over others to claim absolute truth” (100). Such openness of religious diversity contrasted significantly with the church dogma and missionary zeal that precluded acceptance of the validity of indigenous sacred tradition.

In light of the destructive religious history of the missionization of aboriginal peoples, religious studies professor Jace Weaver (Cherokee) notes, “Remarkably, despite brutality, a great many Natives did willingly embrace the alien faith, and some of them went on to carry the message to others” (Native American 5; also Other Words 285). Stan McKay, a Cree member of the United Church of Canada, offers his First Nations perspective regarding the similarities that he notes among traditional Native beliefs and the ancient tribal teachings of the Hebrew people as related in the Old Testament: “We, like them, come out of an oral tradition which is rooted in the Creator and the creation. We, like Moses, know about the sacredness of the earth and the promise of land. Our creation stories also emphasize the power of the Creator and the goodness of creation” (qtd. in Treat 52). Like McKay and many of the other indigenous peoples of the Americas (especially throughout Latin America), Sidney’s spiritual beliefs and practice included a delicate combination of Christianity and aboriginal sacred ways, notwithstanding her experiences with the hegemonic impositions of colonialist missionization in the Yukon.

The Anglican Church was the central Christianizing force in Sidney’s life: “Shortly before Angela’s birth, the Anglican Church had established a mission at Carcross, where it set up a residential school known as Chooutla school” (Life Lived 31). Throughout her life Sidney was active in both church activities and her tribal and clan sacred traditions. Although the church presented itself in contradistinction to indigenous belief, Sidney’s traditional openness and inclusiveness enabled her to embrace both traditions as aspects of one overarching realm of the sacred. Her lifelong commitment to the sacred makes it not so surprising that, late in life, she would follow a number of her relatives in accepting the holistic teachings of the Bahá’í Faith, in which she found an affirmation of the sacred in its myriad and diverse forms. Cruikshank explains that Sidney “has become actively involved in the Bahá’í faith. She has paid a great deal of attention to reconciling her present beliefs with the shamanistic ideas she learned from her parents, uncles, and aunts, and with her own longstanding membership in the Anglican Church. Her account has a splendid coherence, and as
usual, she makes narrative connections between events in her past and present life” (*Life Lived* 36). Sidney specifically points to prophetic statements of a tribal elder who lived prior to the colonization of the Yukon. She and her relatives believe that the Bahá’í Faith represents the fulfillment of the prophecies of a renowned Pelly River medicine man (ibid. 154–58).

For Sidney and many of the world’s aboriginal peoples, the sacred is very simply and profoundly a way of living. Sidney draws on her knowledge of traditional storytelling to understand how the people are to live, including those stories’ moral and ethical imperatives and their respective senses of tribal, clan, family, and regional history. Within such an interpretive frame, Sidney interrelates “two prophecy narratives” to show “that intellectually there is no necessary conflict between Anglicanism, Bahá’í, and indigenous shamanism. She is able to use this framework to provide an entirely satisfactory explanation of her ability to integrate ideas that others might find contradictory” (Cruikshank, *Social Life* 133). The colonial missionization of the Yukon brought Christianity to the aboriginal peoples of that region, and as a result the people were introduced to religious doctrine that privileged particular Christian denominations at the expense of other religious and sacred practices. While Sidney did accept the truth of Christianity and was an active member of the Anglican Church, she also maintained her faith and participation in her aboriginal sacred traditions. Contented with her separate faiths in Christianity and tribal ways and having been taught church exclusivity, Sidney initially resisted becoming involved in the Bahá’í Faith: “I think I was the last one joined in because I’m Anglican. All of my kids joined the Bahá’í. That’s why I joined in, me, too” (*Life Lived* 155). She points out a number of reasons for her acceptance of the Bahá’í Faith: the importance of a unified extended family participation, past tribal prophecies, and a belief in religious inclusiveness. As she related to Cruikshank, “When I think about that Baha’i faith [sic], it just brings back remembrance of that old Major [the shaman], what he said. I think about it. . . . That’s why I joined it. But still Baha’i never told us to quit going to church. . . . I sure like to go to church, keep up my old religion” (ibid. 158). As a highly respected traditional elder, Sidney comes to the Bahá’í Faith finding a sacred way that confirms her tribal and Christian faiths by means of a postcolonial global inclusiveness that enables her to rise above the divisive views and consequences of the Eurocanadian colonial mission- ization of the Yukon.
At the surface levels of ritual, dogma, and practice, the dichoto-
mies between the three faith-based traditions would make Sidney’s
embrace of all three patently mystifying to many; yet through the
deeper storytelling lens of the religious traditions’ conversive roots,
Sidney finds each focused on a lived relationship with/in the sacred,
of creation, and a creator—regardless of each faith’s respective cul-
tural, geographic, and historical differences. Sidney well understood
the diversity of the world’s cultures: as a Native woman whose life
spanned the twentieth-century Yukon, her life and world were defined
by the intersections of Russian, American, Canadian, and aboriginal
worlds. As a traditional Native elder, she also understood the deeply
rooted interconnections that pervaded what she saw to be an inher-
ently and intricately interdependent world. Her family’s involvement
in the Bahá’í Faith demonstrates a worldmindedness that coheres a
diversity of experience within the scope of the sacred as understood in
both conversively interwoven and historically diverse ways.

In spite of her global awareness, commitment, and activities late in
life (and perhaps also because of all this), Sidney’s life and stories are
expressly elucidative of her times and tribal cultures. As Cruikshank
notes, “Mrs. Sidney is well known in the southern Yukon as a narrator
of traditional stories and as a teacher of Tagish and Tlingit customs”
(qtd. in Sidney, *Place Names* 1). In fact, Sidney was one of the cofound-
ers of the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, in Whitehorse,
with its strong emphasis on the traditional cultures of the diverse
yet interrelated circumpolar regions; Sidney was an active storytelling
participant at the festival even in the final year of her life (1991). She
worked tirelessly with Cruikshank to record stories and information
about her people that she felt important for future generations—pro-
ducing many collected volumes such as *Tagish Tlaagú: Tagish Stories*
(1982). Her stories straddle the realms of ancient and precolonial
indigenous America and the subsequent and continuing colonial reali-
ties of contemporary Canada and the United States (with the Yukon
spanning both nations).

An interpretive turn to the conversive accesses several of Sidney’s
life history and traditional stories, opening their storyworlds to their
listener-readers with the intimacy of a familial storytelling circle, wel-
coming a diversity of readers who might otherwise be alienated from
the stories by virtue of distances in geography, culture, language, and
times. Regardless of the ostensive content of her stories, each story
invariably revolves around its sacred center that holds all together
within its centripetal attractive force. As Weaver affirms, Native American sacred traditions manifest a distinctively “communal character” that he contrasts with the Christian emphasis on personal salvation: “Native religious traditions are not practiced for personal empowerment or fulfillment but rather to ensure the corporate good” (Native American Religious Identity 21). For Sidney, the mere act of sharing her stories is a means whereby she consciously intends to perpetuate the integrity of her people’s traditions and values. Deloria explains that this indigenous sense of community welfare holistically embraces the whole of creation—with each person’s integrative commitment to live in concord “with other living things and to develop the self-discipline within the tribal community so that man acts harmoniously with other creatures . . . [understanding that humans] are dependent on everything in creation for their existence” (88). Sidney’s stories are oriented within a very clearly defined geography and sense of spatial belonging, which are also the sites of familial and tribal devastation at the hands of the colonizing powers. Yet even in the poignantly painful stories of her people’s colonization and the tragic effects on her own family, Sidney’s stories speak a sacred center that welcomes and embraces all. She shares her stories in the powerfully moving voice of a conversive storyteller who wants her readers to step into her stories and experience them from within, understanding the events deeply and empathically and, with her, emerging from those stories with new vision by which we, too, can orient our lives. In this fashion, we are invited into a decidedly non-Western world where older women’s stories and relationships provide the mainstays of their people’s sacred centers. As such, we engage a sacred vision of the world that articulates an applied spirituality to be manifested in consciously interrelational and interdependent ways of living. Several of Sidney’s stories provide examples of the sort of interpersonal spirituality by which she guides her life, but in light of the collaboratively ethnographic process of recording her stories for textual publication, it is necessary to document that process in order to show her ownership of the stories and her conversive craft in their telling.

Native American Autobiography, Ethnography, and Conversive Storytelling

At what point do a Native American woman’s stories that emanate
from her own life experiences fit within the reifying boundaries of “autobiography” and “ethnography,” and what tools do readers need in order to understand those stories within the respective familial, tribal, regional, and sociohistorical origins of the tales? Through a conversively informed listening-reading approach, readers can begin to step through the ethnographically constructed text in order to access their originating stories. As readers and interpreters of any ethnography, we have great responsibilities in how we respond to that material. The conversive (co-creative, relational, transformative) nature of storytelling invites an interactive participation in the stories that lie beyond the textual surface. As I explain elsewhere, at the center of conversive communications are relationships; the term “conversive” conveys both senses of “transformational and regenerative power (conversion) and the intersubjective relationality between the storyteller and listener (conversation)” (Contemporary American, Brill de Ramírez 6–7). This can be seen in the various conversive structures and strategies used by storytellers, “such as the privileging of relationality over individuality, domains in which meaningfulness is defined relationally rather than semiotically, voice shifts that reflect the presence and necessity of participatory listener-readers, and repetition for learning rather than for memorization” (ibid. 6). But this requires conversive reading (listening) strategies on the part of readers and conversive mediating strategies on the part of ethnographers and editors in order to facilitate Native storytellers’ storytelling on paper.

Kevin Dwyer asserts that anthropology “creates otherness and objectifies it” (142). While this is true, it is not invariably the case. In the collaboratively constructed volume Life Lived Like a Story, Cruikshank assisted three Native women elders in transmitting their stories through a textual medium. Cruikshank took great pains to work with three First Nations women elders in the Yukon (Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned) in helping them record whatever stories they chose to relate and preserve for their children, grandchildren, future descendants, and other readers. In the development of this volume (and the other publications produced from her time in the Yukon), from start to finish, Cruikshank’s work centered on the establishment of deep and enduring relationships with those with whom she worked. This distinctive aspect of the project led to a very empowered, open, and willing storytelling on the part of these old grandmothers, who felt sufficiently comfortable to refocus the direction and method of their work with Cruikshank when necessary.
All three of the Native women with whom Cruikshank worked took their respective responsibilities for the volume very seriously. In their storytelling, they include many conversive strategies to help their listeners and listener-readers become part of the stories—and this becoming is the crucial transformative step toward meaningful and deep understandings of the stories. In contrast to texts, Native American oral stories are to be understood conversively from within. A number of diverse yet interrelated literary critical reading strategies can move us toward this end, but to access the range of co-creatively reciprocal and lived storytelling meaning, the reader must become a listening-reading participant and find meaning, thereby, from a lived interaction with the story from within (Contemporary American, Brill de Ramírez 6–7, 129–54). All three of the Native women storytellers use voice shifts, conjunctions of diverse times and places, episodic and associational structurings, conjunctions of the everyday and the mythic, personification of nonhumans, emphatic expressions and silences, song and prayer, and additional explanations of details in the stories that listeners might need. Interestingly, all of these strategies are employed at different points in their stories and not only in the traditional stories or myths but also in the more everyday stories about their own lives and experiences. Through the lived relationships established among the three Native women elders and Julie Cruikshank, all four of the women’s voices come through clearly, directly, and honestly, regardless of the layers of textual mediation involved in the ethnographic process.

Cruikshank explains that all three of the women maintained control over what they chose to relate. In response to direct questions about their own lives, more often than not the women would tell stories that rarely were straightforward answers to the original questions. These answers, often crafted in the aporetic and open-ended form of stories, shifted the discussion away from the discursive realm of information and toward the conversive domain of meaning. Cruikshank explains this part of their working process by noting, “Although the older women responded patiently to my line of inquiry for a while, they quite firmly shifted the emphasis to ‘more important’ accounts they wanted me to record—particularly events central to traditional narrative” (Life Lived 14). For these women, clearly the larger and deeper meanings of traditional stories were seen as much more important than the more limited scope of the specific details of their lives. What the women chose to emphasize were stories rather than information.
In response to Cruikshank’s requests for lived histories from the gold rush era of the Yukon, what Cruikshank received were cryptic traditional stories with little obvious connection to that historical period. While *Life Lived Like a Story* asserts its emphasis on the old women’s stories, the book’s presentation emphasizes Cruikshank’s initiating historical agenda in which she sought information “that might contribute to land claims negotiations” (June 24, 2000, letter). As Cruikshank explicitly notes, the traditional stories offered in response to her questions at first confused her until she was able to take those stories and interpret them as explanations about parts of the women’s own lives (*Life Lived* 15). Thereby, the book as a whole appears to be primarily focused on the women’s own personal life histories, but as a conversive listening-reading approach demonstrates, the larger focus and orientation of the book and its stories are rooted within the very historical inquiry that began the project in the first place, namely, the Klondike gold rush. Sidney and the other women consciously chose to tell the story of the gold rush deeply and meaningfully through carefully selected and intricately interwoven life history and mythic stories. When read conversively, the volume *Life Lived Like a Story* becomes a powerfully moral tale about the ways by which people can survive cataclysmic upheavals, such as the hurried gold rush colonization of the lands and peoples of the Yukon (perhaps with Bear representing Russian presence as well).

A close look at one of Sidney’s “traditional” stories will help clarify the conversive process of oral storytelling that, on paper, invites reader participation as co-creative listener-readers. As Silko explains, “The storytelling always includes the audience and the listeners, and, in fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storytellers’ role is to draw the story out of the listeners” (“Language” 57). Cruikshank confirms this specifically in relation to Sidney’s craft: “Angela Sidney understood, as only the most talented storytellers can, the importance of performance—how performance involves not simply a narrator but also an audience, and how narrator and audience both change with time and circumstances, giving any one story the potential range of meanings that all good stories have” (*Social Life* 28). To understand stories is to engage with them in the close intersubjective manner of conversive relations. When we interpret stories that are told to us from the distanced lens of outside observers, not recognizing the extent to which we, as story-listeners, are participants in the stories as much as are the storyteller and story characters, then the stories, their
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characters, and their events often appear “bewildering” to us (Life Lived 15). What is required, however, is to move the reading process away from the objectifying “artification” of Native women’s lives and toward a conversation between the listener-reader, the Native women storytellers, their stories, and their ethnographer-editor. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong explains, “numerous kinds of relational subjectivities are possible, that a subject . . . may be more or less individual or more or less relational in diverse contexts” (168). Each of the women elders’ stories is interconnected and interwoven, in light of the women’s own interwoven lives, the interwoven historicity of their stories, and the interwoven nature of stories. This requires readers who will reorient their expectations of a primary focus on the women’s lives with the traditional mythic stories as a gloss and, instead, approach all of the stories as interrelated parts of the larger stories of human survival, Yukon colonization, and indigenous sacred expression.

Continuance Through Tragedy in the Story “How People Got Flint”

As one of the most well-known storytellers in the Yukon, Angela Sidney was still at the height of her storytelling craft when she worked with Cruikshank. Our attention to her stories echoes their importance among her people, for in the Yukon most of the First Nations storytellers are women (Life Lived 346–47) analogous to the old women griottes of Africa, whose wealth of stories are viewed as extensive libraries. In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh-ha notes that “the World’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women” and that the death of each griotte is the equivalent loss of “a whole library” (121). Although Sidney’s stories are presented as life-history narratives, their relevance and meaningfulness are much broader. In the tradition of indigenous oral storytelling, Sidney conversively crafts both her life history and mythic tribal stories with complexly interwoven threads that articulate intricate stories of great suffering because of, and remarkable survival despite, the colonization of the Yukon. In the introductory discussion that precedes Sidney’s section of the book, Cruikshank notes that Sidney repeatedly emphasized that the stories needed to be pondered and considered deeply. Sidney relates that, as a child, she learned the importance of thinking about stories in order to discover their meanings (Life Lived 31). Cruikshank was forced to
consider this in her own engagements with Sidney’s stories: “Whenever I ask her what it is that children actually learn from these stories, she replies by repeating the story for me. The messages, she suggests, are implicit, self-evident; the text, she would argue, should speak for itself” (ibid. 32). Sidney simply repeats the story. With each retelling, there would be some slight variations, perhaps simply some alterations in tonal emphasis or special pauses in which the storyteller might intend her listener to hear the emphatic voice shifts as a means of making those connective links even easier to traverse and, thereby, to understand (Contemporary American, Brill de Ramírez 129, 222).

A conversive listening-reading approach to Sidney’s stories involves the reader in the considered interweaving of those diverse stories whose episodic and associational meaningfulness becomes apparent once they are understood in close juxtaposition as facets of the larger unfolding story. By breaking up the constructed life-history narratives in the text and interrelating the traditional mythic stories with the women’s own lived stories, we can see how each story comes to enrich and illuminate the others in strikingly meaningful ways. In this manner, rich symbolic and metaphoric allusions in the life-history stories emerge, along with historical facticity in the traditional stories. As folklorist John Miles Foley clarifies, “As we study the oral record more thoroughly, we learn that the oral tradition is often more accurate historically than the written record.” And, as this essay elucidates, mythic stories, too, can shed historical light. For example, the first traditional story in the childhood section of Sidney’s stories, “How People Got Flint,” centers upon themes of imperialist disempowerment that lead to potentially genocidal effects, with the especially tragic deaths of little children: “My kids all froze up on me”; desires for retributive justice: “Let them die like a stone”; the importance of close family relations: “Oh, Grandpa, . . . I guess you’re right”; the importance of people helping each other out: “Go all over the world. People need you”; struggles to survive hardships in this world: “People were having a hard time”; and the realities of death and life after death: “when people are dead, they come back like this” (Life Lived 73–74).

In “How People Got Flint,” Bear is the only person who has flint to make fires for warmth. Because of Bear’s appropriation of the flint, everyone else is struggling to survive the cold. Mouse tricks Bear and steals the flint, but since Mouse is little and could be caught by Bear, Mouse throws the flint to the other animals. Fox takes the flint and runs away, throwing it on some rocks where it breaks into smaller
pieces. Then Fox throws the flint all over the world so that everyone will have it. Although this seems like an end to the story, Sidney chooses to continue the story, relating that Fox then takes some dry rhubarb and pushes it into a lake. When the rhubarb floats back up to the surface, Fox says, “I wish that when people are dead, they come back like this”—depicting a desire for earthly reincarnation. Bear, who is still upset with everyone for stealing “his” flint, responds in a contrary manner: he throws a rock in the lake which sinks, saying, “I wish that when people die they would be like that. Let them die like a stone” (74). Bear’s anger is emphasized by additional line spacing on the page after this statement, indicating Sidney’s emphatic pause after Bear’s comment. After this line spacing, the storyteller says, “He was mad,” followed by another emphatic pause to really stress Bear’s response. Sidney then ends the story with the framing device of a grandfather relating the story to his grandchild.

A close conversive listening-reading of Sidney’s story “How People Got Flint” conveys a number of teaching messages and meanings available to the listener-reader. These messages and meanings are accessible via different conversive cues throughout the story that work to get the listener-reader’s attention and to alert her or him to elements indicative of deep meaning. Obvious elements of the story that would be immediately recognizable to readers unfamiliar with traditional storytelling strategies are the attribution of personhood and intentionality to animals and the interconnections and interdependencies between different animals and humans. Silko explains, “The remains of things—animals and plants, the clay and the stones—were treated with respect. Because for the ancient people all these things had spirit and being” (“Landscape” 83). As James R. Holmes comments about our determinations regarding the status of personhood, “Up to the present time, we have recognized as persons only those individuals who have the embodiment of homo sapiens, namely human beings. There is, however, nothing about the concept of a person that requires persons to be human beings” (30). Sometimes traditional stories with animals as the main characters do actually tell us about those specific types of animals, but often such personifications of animals serve as a strategy that enables the telling of stories in ways that avoid the specificity of particular individuals or groups of human persons. Most readers would be familiar with this strategy in its various contemporary manifestations in comic strips and cartoons.

Interestingly, Sidney’s story about flint, a bear, a fox, and other
animals is entitled “How People Got Flint,” which leads the reader to initially assume that the term “people” refers to human persons. Sidney begins her story by relating that only Bear had flint and that “people were having a hard time—sometimes fire would go out, you know” (73). In this one statement, Sidney includes longer emphatic pauses (marked by the text’s punctuation of a dash or period) for her listener-readers’ reflection upon those hard times, further indicated by the direct address of the second-person voice shift. To ensure that her listeners and listener-readers do not limit their interpretations of the story to the surface levels of textual information and literal meanings, Sidney’s craft frustrates any potential simplistic understandings of her stories. Immediately after telling us how hard a time the people were having, she complicates our ideas about the people’s hard times without fire by both broadening and deepening the very concept of what constitutes people or persons in the world. She does this by adding more information about those “people” who were really struggling: “Mice are the ones that really got it” (e.g., had a hard time [73]). Here Sidney personifies mice as some of the little people (small, diminutive, those with little power) who were having such a hard time. Sidney also uses two other conversive strategies to emphasize the personhood of animals: referencing them with names (Bear, Mouse, Fox) as proper nouns and depicting them behaving in ways similar to humans, such as having Mouse and Fox throw the flint to keep it away from the much bigger and more powerful Bear.

At this point, one might still be tempted to bracket out the complex identification of animals as persons and simply trivialize the story as an animal story with little or no direct relevance to human persons in the world. However, Sidney includes three additional elements to her story that prevent this. The first is her explanation of the importance of flint to help with keeping fires lit. This reference at the very beginning of her story clearly delineates and emphasizes the importance of flint as something directly relevant to human persons. She also ends her story with a referent that emphasizes the importance of this story for human persons. By both beginning and ending the story with human referents, Sidney makes it completely clear that this story is far more than a simplistic animal story. In her concluding frame to the story, the story’s relevance for human persons is made manifest in the fact that the story is presented as being told by a grandfather to his grandchild. While the animal characters make the story that much more accessible to children and also clarify the story’s fictional,
ahistorical, and mythical nature, the specific references to actual realities in the world (the widespread presence of flint, the importance of flint for people’s fires, and the nature of human death) directly emphasize the deeper significances for human persons. The final events of the story with the rhubarb stalk and rock in the lake and the grandfather’s concluding comments to his grandchild further underscore the relevance of the story specifically for human persons. In these events, we learn about human mortality and life after death.

The story additionally teaches the importance of interpersonal cooperation (with Mouse and Fox providing flint for everyone) and not being selfish and mean (as is Bear who wants to keep the flint just for himself, even though as a bear with lots of fur, he did not even need the flint in the first place). However, the coded nature of traditional storytelling is such that even these more literal and simpler aspects of the story can be understood in much more complex and meaningful ways for adults. As Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser point out, “Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences, in situations where some of the audience may be competent to decode the message, but others—including those who might be dangerous—are not. Thus a coded text is by definition complex, and its messages may be ambiguous” (414). In fact, James Clifford states that this is also the very process of ethnography, which “is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. . . . Ethnography decodes and recodes” (“Partial Truths” 2, emphasis in original). Presumably, with any ethnographic work we have multiple levels of encoding and decoding at work for the reader and listener-reader to decipher.

The associational and episodic structuring of traditional storytelling provides many of the additional connective links necessary to understand the deeper meaningfulness of the stories. For example, when the trickster Crow stories are told juxtaposed “in a series” of stories, Cruikshank notes that “different people tell different episodes in different order” (qtd. in Sidney, *Tagish Tlaagú 90*). Insofar as Sidney’s story “How People Got Flint” is concerned, the linking of the three stories (the theft of the flint, the submersion of the rhubarb stalk and rock in the lake, and the actual storytelling event with the concluding conversation between the grandfather and grandchild) both complicates the stories and simplifies them in that very conjunctive process. While Bear’s selfishness is obvious, additionally significant to the story is Bear’s thick coat of winter fur and the fact that he had no need for the flint at all. This is especially underscored in Sidney’s statement about
where Bear kept the flint: “They say Bear tied it under his tail where he had long hair under there” (74). Within this one sentence, Sidney emphasizes the mythic and ancient power and importance of the story (“They say . . .”), points out Bear’s possession of an entirely unnecessary object (“he had long hair”), and communicates Bear’s selfishness in a particularly graphic, scatological, and comic way (“Bear tied it under his tail”).

By immediately following her evocations of hard times with the comic description of Bear and his prized possession, Sidney balances out the seriousness with lightheartedness, the sadness with humor, and past times (people struggling without fire) with imagined events (Mouse stealing flint from under Bear’s tail). Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria) explain that such humor, especially depicted by clowns, “helps contrast imbalance and balance, order and disorder, in such a way that even a child can understand the basic concept of balance” (309). In the comic behavior of Mouse reaching under Bear’s tail to chew off the flint, we can only imagine the storyteller acting out that event as Mouse lifts up Bear’s tail, wrinkles his nose, makes a terrible face (as everyone laughs, imagining the smell), and then completes his onerous task.

Relational and Episodic Interconnections

This particular story is the first one that Cruikshank places, with Sidney’s approval, after the prose narrative section “Childhood.” Sidney agreed to the edited organization of the text with its episodic structuring created through the juxtaposition of the more traditional stories with the chronologically ordered personal stories. This episodic arrangement is also true of the other stories in Life Lived Like a Story. Indeed, the vast majority of Native stories produced by various contemporary and past ethnographers, and most contemporary literatures by Native writers, regardless of gender, are told within the episodic and associational formats of their respective tribal and familial oral storytelling traditions, in which the stories are interwoven with each other in a range of meaningful and deepening ways. Stories have their own range and depth of meanings accessible to the listener or listener-reader at different levels of understanding and from various perspectives. The meanings are not textually bound, but rather they arise through the interrelationships that develop between the storyteller, her (or his)
listeners, and the story. As I explain elsewhere, “This conjunction of diverse worlds and events (lived and imagined, past and present, historic and mythic) reflects the relational focus of storytelling, where the connections made between realities and domains are emphasized, and a more textual discursive privileging of separate events and subjectivities is deemphasized, if not altogether absent” (139). Part of the listener’s and storyteller’s conversive responsibilities include making and recognizing the interconnections between and among different stories—including the stories that the storyteller relates, other stories that the listener has been told and remembers, stories that the listener has actually lived, and the immediate story of the storytelling event. These interconnections can be seen in the important interrelationships among the traditional stories that Sidney chooses to relate in conjunction with stories from her life.

In “How People Got Flint,” very serious issues of life and death, human mortality and human spirituality, greed and selfishness, and generosity and caring are presented in the stories about Bear, Mouse, Fox, Grandpa, and his grandchild. Similarly, in her selection of stories that reflect back on her childhood, Sidney expressly relates these personal stories in ways that touch on the deeper issues of human existence in the world, including the real-world effects from the Euro-Canadian colonization of the Yukon region. The other traditional stories in the “Stories from Childhood” section also center upon these themes, including human mortality and death (in a story about two old ladies who help care for the world), and lessons for children and parents in respecting each other (as in the little boy who criticizes his food or the mother who gives her son moldy fish to eat). The lessons in these stories provide the needed framework against which to approach Sidney’s own life stories. This is especially evident in the stories she chooses to include about her childhood—stories that also revolve around the themes of life, death, language, and naming, and what it is that peoples hold sacred.

The section entitled “Childhood” begins with Sidney’s birth and naming, and then turns to stories about her siblings (especially her beloved sister Dora who died as a young girl), tales of boarding school experiences, and other stories from those years that struck Sidney as sufficiently relevant to retell, including a traditional old lady story. It is also significant to note that, in choosing stories to share with her non-Native ethnographer and for a larger readership of Native and non-Native Yukoners and others (as Cruikshank has explained,
“Her conscious audience was always for folks in the Yukon” [June 24, 2000, letter]), it is telling that many of Sidney’s stories especially emphasize the colonialist relationships that developed with the arrival of Euroamericans and Eurocanadians in the Yukon and the inevitable consequences for the First Nations people who lived there. Instead of focusing on specific events that involved only her family and other Native peoples, Sidney selects stories that are more demographically inclusive, even if that inclusivity, at times, unveils the realities of a racial colonization whose effects endure into today. Perhaps these stories exemplify her acute awareness of her broader audience and her interest in educating diverse Yukoners (and others) about the truths of her times.

The Sacred Significance of Naming
Amid the Disjunctive Discourse of Colonization

The very first story that Sidney shares about her early years centers on the presence of a white prospector mining near her family’s home. Shortly after her birth in January of 1902, the prospector George Dale came to her father’s house to escape the winter cold. When he was shown the little baby, Sidney relates that he said, “Oh, that baby looks so sweet. Just like a little angel. . . . Call her Angela” (Life Lived 66). This one story conveys volumes about the colonizing interactions between white and Native Canadians. In Sidney’s version of this story, George Dale, who had only just met her father, tells him what his daughter’s name should be, with apparently no consideration that the child might already have a name, either in the Indian way or the white way or both. Years later, when Sidney’s husband meets George Dale by chance, Dale informs him that he is Sidney’s godfather. The cultural divide is evident in the divergent ways that those involved see this history. After twenty years have passed, Dale recognizes Sidney’s maiden name and claims her as his godchild. In contrast, when her husband returns home and asserts that he has met her godfather, Sidney denies any knowledge of such a relationship. When she asks her mother about it, her mother tells her that when she was baptized, there was a “white man” present, presumably George Dale: “Somebody took you off my arm and held you. So it must have been George Dale. White man, anyway.” Whereas George Dale remembered his role in being named Sidney’s godfather, Sidney had never even been
told about his presence, and her mother has no recollection of George Dale other than that there was some white man present. Concluding her story about George Dale, Sidney ends by reiterating, “So he’s the one that gave me this name, Angela” (67). In Sidney’s case, her first name, Angela, connects us back to the days of the Klondike gold rush and its cataclysmic effects on the aboriginal peoples of that region. For Sidney, the discursive impact came early with a name “given” to her in infancy by a “white man” prospector. The enduring empowerment of conversive relationship within her close tribal community subsequently transformed that name into the referent by which she was known to those close to her: Auntie Angela.

This story gives us information about the origin of Sidney’s English name “Angela”; nevertheless, the specific factual information or details in stories is merely that—the superficial facticity of story texts. Stories (unlike texts) go far beyond the surface level of their narrative texts. The details in stories are there to provide the added keys that help our entries into and understandings of the stories’ meanings. Cruikshank explains, “Meaning does not inhere in events but involves weaving those events into stories that are meaningful at the time” (Social Life 2). Readers of orally informed stories need to be careful not to let the significance of the details overshadow the larger import of the overall story to which those facts are in service. If Sidney only wanted us to learn the origin of her first name, there would have been no need for her to relate that fact within the scope of a larger storytelling. She could have merely said, “A white prospector in the area saw me when I was a baby, and he gave me the name ‘Angela.’” However, Sidney chooses to relate this one event as a story. What remains for Sidney’s listener-reader is to read through the narrative text and begin to listen to the story that will emerge through the listener-reader’s engagement with Sidney’s words, intonations, and silences. In this fashion, the story of her name opens up into a far deeper story about the power of language, the importance of a person’s name, and the intrusive and lasting effects of outsiders upon Sidney’s family and world, and the efforts of Canadian First Nations people to transform the disempowering effects of that colonization, as best they could, into personal, familial, tribal, and community strengths.

In Sidney’s story, the white prospector comes to Sidney’s family home for food and shelter on a cold winter night. Sidney emphasizes that it was a really cold night: “It was a cold, cold night, he said” (Life Lived 66, emphasis in original). Perhaps this emphasis is to explain
the miner’s visit to the Indian family, a visit the white man might not have made unless absolutely necessary. Whether his visit is explained only in terms of his need for warmth, his presence in Tagish John’s (Sidney’s father’s) home is a presence that would not have been as readily reciprocated. It is unlikely that the Native peoples of Canada during the early part of the twentieth century (or even today, for that matter) would have been as welcomed into the homes of the white Eurocanadians as Mrs. Sidney’s family and many other Native peoples have welcomed non-Native people into their homes. The tenuous relationship between George Dale and Tagish John’s family is further underscored by Dale’s total absence from the world of the family since his visit, with the apparently lone exception of his presence at Sidney’s baptism when, as her mother recollects, a white man held the baby (67).

In Sidney’s recounting, Dale goes to Tagish John’s home assuming he will be welcomed and receive shelter from the cold. There he is shown their new baby. As a visitor accepting the family’s gift of hearth, within a conversive relational framework, his acceptance of the family’s gift would be considered a sign of his friendship. That Tagish John considers it such is evident in his desire to show the white miner the new baby—thereby bringing Dale further into the world of the family. Dale compliments the baby and then has the audacity to tell Tagish John what name he should give the baby and that he (Dale) should be her godfather “because I’m the first person she saw” (66). Presumably, Dale meant that he was the first white person, since clearly there were other persons in the home. Within a conversively aboriginal worldview, Tagish John’s gifts to George Dale (shelter, acceptance of the baby’s name, and the baptismal godfather role) would have been symbols concretizing their friendship. Furthermore, the ceremonial importance given to naming and the fact that Tagish John accepts Dale’s wish and names his daughter Angela clearly show Tagish John’s appreciation of Dale’s “friendship” and his perception of their relationship as far more than a passing acquaintance. However, it appears that Dale neither understood this nor took his role in the baby’s life seriously since Sidney had no memory of ever meeting him or even of having been told about him. Dale’s connection to Sidney is largely discursive. For him, the words, the surface facts of the story, the text are what matter. Yet for Tagish John’s family, Dale’s lack of a lived and enduring reciprocity regarding the friendship makes him and the friendship unsubstantial and therefore unremembered. For them, the names, the words, the text must be grounded in reality with the
sort of relational connections in the world that make Dale’s presence substantial to the family.

Sidney’s story of her naming tells us about the colonialist prerogatives of the white settler community and the presumptions and behaviors that had real-world effects on the First Nations peoples in Canada. In contrast to Dale’s view of naming in which a white man with a marginal connection to a Native child can decide the child’s name, Sidney explains how sacred names are in her culture: “You’ve got to give kids a name as soon as they’re born. Otherwise they get lost—their spirit gets lost—that’s what they claim. I’ve got two names: Stóow for my grandmother—my mother’s stepmother—and Ch’óonehte’ Má” (Life Lived 67). Names given to children were traditionally names of other relatives within the same clan, emphasizing the connective links that helped to keep the community together: “The nations [clans] own the names. Indians don’t allow different people to use their names” (Haa Shagóon xx). Sidney’s comments about the weight given to naming within her culture contrast sharply with the presumptuous and colonial attitudes of a white man who tells an aboriginal couple what name they should give their daughter even though his relationship to the baby being named is marginal. The weight of this one story is further deepened by three subsequent stories that relate (1) the upheaval of the indigenous Yukon a century ago, such that Sidney never received the coming-of-age naming ceremony that was traditional for girls (a loss she felt deeply); (2) the deaths of her parents’ first three children (which occurred a few years prior to Sidney’s birth) from the diseases that the prospectors and other outsiders brought into the Yukon; and (3) the death of a beloved younger sister who dies in a missionary-run residential school and whose name is given to the next daughter who is born.

In the seemingly simple life-history narrative of Sidney’s name, she communicates an intricately interwoven story that demonstrates her people’s commitment to an applied spirituality that goes beyond the mere sentiment of Dale’s claim of being her “godfather.” The power of stories lies in their unifying effects as they bring persons together in community and individuals together in their integrating relationships with all of creation. In the colonizing disruptions of the Yukon, traditional sacred stories went untold and ceremonies omitted, perhaps even forgotten (as in the failure to have an aboriginal naming ceremony for Angela Sidney as a girl). Traditionally among First Nations peoples, gifts received and given were understood as
symbolic of developing relationships among people, and those gifts and relationships were to be honored with effort in continuance. As Sidney explained to Cruikshank, prior to the colonizing Euroamerican and Eurocanadian presence in the Yukon, even those relationships that were initiated during the early years of the fur trade were taken very seriously among the aboriginal men of various tribal groups: “In the trade in furs which took place in the last [the nineteenth] century, firm and lasting partnerships were established between coastal and interior men” (Tagish Tlaagú 99). Sidney emphasizes that the movements of peoples and families divided up communities while also creating new relational interweavings. In sharing the stories of her people’s moves and removes, she relates a meeting she had with people on the Alaskan coast. When she mentioned that she was from the interior, the coastal man replied, “Oh, my . . . My great-grandmother told me, ‘Two women went that way, inland. Two or three. They got married inland!’ Now I’m glad to meet you” (Life Lived 39). Through their sharing of mutual oral history stories, they confirmed for each other the historical fact of their interwoven stories, histories, and tribal and familial relations. As Sidney concludes, “I know now the truth that coast people are our relations”—with all the weight that the aboriginal concept of “relations” conveys (ibid.).

Storied Life Lessons

A conversive storytelling approach to Angela Sidney’s stories is crucial to enable the reader to move beyond a more surface interpretive lens that would artificially divorce traditional mythic stories from personal life-history narratives, relegating each, respectively, to what would otherwise be perceived as the separate realms of the fictionally archetypal and the factually historical. Conversive engagements discover Sidney’s life-history stories to be factually true yet also symbolic and rich in meaning. Concomitantly, the traditional and mythic stories, while offering spiritual and moral lessons, also turn out to be historically, tribally, and personally significant. Relational and episodic meaning is evident throughout her stories. Sidney’s story about her first name relates actual historical information, and the story of Bear, Fox, and the Mouse people retells a traditional mythic story from her tribe; yet, when read together in a conversive manner, it becomes clear that the two stories are very much the same story of power differentials, coloni-
ization and its consequences, disjunctive intercultural communications, aboriginal people’s struggles to survive, beliefs in life after death, and the moral, relational courage by which the people were taught to live.

Isolated from their tribal and historical contexts, the traditional stories lose their actual relevance to persons’ lives in the world (e.g., those of their readers) and, thereby, take on the objectified and textualized forms of storied and mythic artifacts—interesting as evidence of an earlier and exotic “other” world and time, relevant as historical artifacts of interest to Sidney’s descendants and fellow tribal members, but not immediately relevant to the lives of those of us distanced from their originating worlds by time, geography, and culture. Analogously, readings of Sidney’s life-history stories, separated from their traditional storytelling frames, deprive the personal stories of their deeper, time immemorial meanings and their larger tribal and regional histories. As Cruikshank relates, “Gradually I learned how narratives about complex relationships between animals and humans, between young women and stars, between young men and animal helpers could frame not just larger, cosmological issues but also the social practices of women engaged with a rapidly globalizing world” (Social Life 46). The disjunction of the mythic and sacred teaching stories from the everyday and historical events of Sidney’s life attenuates all of the stories into mere traces of interpretive concept; what is needed is the everyday grounding and mythic deepening that together provide the meaningful anchors for both the traditional and life-history stories.

Angela Sidney’s lifetime traversed cataclysmic changes in the lives of her family and fellow tribal members, and yet in her conversive storytelling, Sidney communicates much about the potential postcolonial “survivance” of First Nations people beyond their historical condition of Eurocanadian colonization (Vizenor 169). For Sidney, such personal and familial survivance is framed in spiritual terms that acknowledge and build on the past while focusing on the future of a changing world. As Cruikshank emphasizes, “A recurring theme in Mrs. Sidney’s account is her preoccupation with evaluating and balancing old customs with new ideas” such that in her eighties (and in the 1980s), she sought “to reconcile orthodox [aboriginal] spiritual beliefs with a potpourri of religious ideas [Christian and Bahá’í] introduced to the Yukon during her lifetime” (Life Lived 23). By interweaving diverse manifestations of the sacred, Sidney brings them together within the rubric of one larger, world-embracing story. In his essay “The Politics of Knowledge,” Edward Said makes a poignant call for
just the sort of “worldliness” that Sidney achieves and demonstrates in her storytelling. As Said explains, “What I am talking about therefore is the opposite of separatism, and also the reverse of exclusivism” (28). Sidney does just this, what Vine Deloria (Lakota) advocates in his call for Native peoples to “be prepared to confront religion and religious activities in new and novel ways” (65).

Through her storytelling skill, Sidney is able to relate the history of her life and times with all the force and effect made possible in story. Readers who work to read beyond the text to access the symbolically rich stories will find a multiplicity of conversively informed meanings that are the true reward of conversive listening-reading. The range of stories in *Life Lived Like a Story* communicate far more than can even begin to be explicated in one essay, and ideally each reader as a listener-reader needs to plumb these stories’ interwoven depths for herself or himself. So doing, Sidney’s and the other women’s stories will become especially meaningful to each listener-reader as the stories come to life beyond the bounds of textual fixity and into a newly resurrected storytelling with each co-creative, conversive listening-reading response.

Without the day-to-day experiences of coming to know people and their worlds by actually living in those worlds, such relational engagements across time and place can be achieved in powerfully real and meaningful ways through story. Globally, people have been articulating the truths of their worlds since the beginning of human existence. Ignorance of the world’s diversity (spiritual and otherwise) is far less due to peoples’ silence and more due to the absence of listening ears and seeing eyes; textual distance and objectification disengage and disincline readers from a co-creative, close, and empathic listening to others’ stories. Sidney and Cruikshank provide a strong corrective to those “stories [that] are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world,” for, as Said reminds us, stories “also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (*Culture* xii).

The past several decades of feminist, cultural, postcolonial, and other postmodern criticisms have drawn our attention to the many stories of diverse humankind. Our responsibilities now remain to learn how to listen to stories conversively by means of those pathways that enable us to enter and become active coparticipants in the transforming, empowering, and healing stories of the world. This is why people have told stories from the beginning of time until today. In this wise woman’s tales, we will be able to hear Sidney’s diverse stories of
the sacred that permitted a traditional indigenous elder in the Yukon to express ancient sacred, tribal beliefs that affirmed her indigenous ancestry, her deeply lived connections to the sacred, and her commitment to a vision of global community. Notwithstanding a lifetime of unimaginable loss, turmoil, and suffering at the hands of the colonial powers of church and state, Sidney maintained a firm grasp of the crucial role that storytelling has played and continues to play in the health, integrity, and balance in people’s lives. Her gift to us is her storytelling; our responsibilities are to receive her gifts with attuned conversive ears. “‘Well,’ she concluded one afternoon, ‘I have no money to leave to my grandchildren. My stories are my wealth’” (Life Lived 36). As Sidney says, “Well, I’ve tried to live my life right, just like a story” (ibid. 20).

Notes

1. Far more serious is the extent to which Christian missionary work in Indian country has overtly been part of colonizing ideologies and agendas. George Tinker writes that “Christian missionaries . . . were partners in genocide,” noting their “complicity in the destruction of Indian cultures and tribal social structures—complicity in the devastating impoverishment and death of the people to whom they preached” (4). Jace Weaver makes even more explicit the culpability of missionaries in the destruction of tribal cultures: “Missionaries, in their colonialist drive to assimilate Natives, told those they converted that to become Christian meant to stop being Indian” (Religious Identity 5; also Other Words 285). The colonialist devaluation of indigenous sacred practices, on behalf of both church and state, forced many tribes to take their tribal ceremonies underground for extended periods of time until those practices, discouraged or outlawed, were openly permitted by their colonizing governments. Maintaining the integrity and freedom of tribal sacred practice has been an ongoing struggle throughout the past and continuing colonization of Native peoples by the various European, Euroamerican, and Eurocanadian nations. This being said, it must be noted that the various European nations colonizing North America were not uniformly disparaging of indigenous culture. Included in Michael Oleska’s Alaskan Missionary Spirituality is an early Russian letter from Orthodox bishop Petr that recognizes parallels between the traditional stories of the Alaskan Natives and many stories in the Bible. Perhaps even more significant in his 1894 letter is his affirmation of the divine origins of traditional indigenous belief: “It must be noted in accordance with God’s Holy Revelations the Aleuts and the Kadiaks [sic] were not completely bereft of God’s Grace, as a result of which there remained with them a sense of morality which prevented them from falling into ultimate sin” (71). This level of respect for indigenous spirituality represents one of the few exceptions among the majority of Christian missionization efforts toward Native populations where the embrace of Christianity invariably was intertwined with a devaluation of tribal culture.
2. Elaine J. Lawless advocates a changing “role of the ethnographer in the wave of thinking about a ‘new ethnography’” to the extent of rejecting “the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar’s position as more legitimate because it is the more educated or more credible one” (302, 312). Recently, some anthropologists have begun to take conversive approaches in their own work, providing new models of relational, collaborative, and intersubjective fieldwork—what Judith Okely has described as “lived interactions, participatory experience and embodied knowledge” (“Participatory Experience” 3). The process of transforming stories into constructed texts varies from text to text, editor to editor, and storyteller to storyteller. As James Clifford writes, “Whether brought by missionary, trader, or ethnographer, writing is both empowering (a necessary, effective way of storing and manipulating knowledge) and corrupting (a loss of immediacy, of the face-to-face communication Socrates cherished, of the presence and intimacy of speech)” (“On Ethnographic Allegory” 118). Paul de Man explains such a contradiction in relation to autobiographical works: “any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical. But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be” (922). In relation to ethnographically informed Native American autobiographies, we can either read the ethnographic text as a discursively constructed text that yields information and fact about the “informant’s” life and times, or we can become conversive listener-readers working to listen to the underlying stories that offer a deeper realm of meaning and symbolism.

3. In this collection, Cruikshank works co-creatively with the three Native women elders, enabling them to speak their highly skilled storytelling craft through the mediative layers of the text. Although this volume is technically a work of ethnographic collaboration, it is also a collection of the Native women’s creative storytelling that combines tribal myth and belief system, colonial history and its consequents, and the women’s own craft. As such, this volume contrasts from “much of the early construction of published American Indian autobiographies [that] went through a linguistically and ideologically interpretive process that transformed conversive tellings into discursive texts that, more often than not, diverge substantially from their storied beginnings and instead present the ideologies, language, and discursive forms of the colonizing power of the academy” (Brill de Ramírez, Native American Life-History Narratives x).

4. From without, we can point to the various semiotic significances displayed in the textual narratives; also from an outside, albeit relational, reader-response approach, the reader can bring the world of the text into his or her interpretive life; a dialogic reading enables reader access to the (often op)positionally presented voices in an apparently heteroglossic and logocentric text; and hermeneutics illuminates the various meanings of the text as understood through the reader’s own orientation to that text (Brill de Ramírez 6–7, 129–54).

5. Revisionist scholars, like Judith Okely and Johannes Fabian, have argued rightly against the imperialism and objectification inherent in anthropological fieldwork. Fabian asserts, “field research is fundamentally confrontational and only superficially observational. To acknowledge that Self and Other are inextricably involved in a dialectical process will make anthropology not less but more realistic” (20). In the same vein, Okely writes, “The field worker, as opposed to
those who analyse other peoples’ material, has a peculiarly individualistic and personal confrontation with ‘living’ data” (“Self” 171). As long as the fieldwork orientation follows a discursively constructed format, the communications process will be varyingly dialectical and dialogic with the inherent (op)positional stances present among all involved. However, a conversively informed set of relationships that are established among the fieldworker and all others involved definitionally avoids the confrontational situation that Okely and Fabian warn us about. Julie Cruikshank’s work with three Native women elders in the Yukon stands out as a model for such work. Cruikshank was devoted to ensuring the primacy of the women’s voices and stories while at the same time providing sufficient additional background information to enable non-Native and non-Yukon readers access into and understanding of the women’s stories.

6. As Stephen A. Tyler explains regarding the diverse communication patterns manifested by orally told stories and their textualized versions, “Orality makes us think of many voices telling many tales in many tongues, in contrast to the inherent monologism of texts that only tell different versions of the one true tale” (136). Further, Clifford emphasizes that “experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic processes are at work, discordantly, in any ethnography” (“On Ethnographic Authority” 142).

Works Cited


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