

that Mabel and I were driving, looking at old places Mabel remembered as a child.

"Do you know how babies are born?" she asked.

Of course I knew the facts of life. Mabel had something else on her mind.

"Like this," she said. "The spirit follows the parents for two years before it is born. It follows, watching. It knows everything. Even when it is born it knows everything.

"Until it starts walking, talking. Maybe a year old. Then it forgets, falls apart what it knows.

"Then, you know, it starts learning again. If the person gets old, REAL old, it will be all together again. In between is what you call living."

The Woman Who Loved a Snake

Orality in Mabel McKay's Stories

One day I took a colleague of mine from Stanford University to the Rumsey Wintun Reservation to meet Mabel McKay. "I want to meet this famous Pomo medicine woman," my friend said. "I've heard her talk and I've seen her baskets in the Smithsonian." My friend, Jenny, had heard me talk about Mabel also. I had been recording Mabel's stories for a book about her life. As always, Mabel proved a gracious host. She served us hot buttered toast and coffee and, for lunch, tuna fish sandwiches with pickles and lettuce. As Jenny and I ate, Mabel told about the woman who loved a snake.¹

"See, her husband, he would work at night. 'Lock the door,' he'd tell her. 'Don't let nobody in.' Every night he'd go off saying that: 'Lock the door, keep everything locked up.' She would fix his dinner, then his lunch." Mabel chuckled to herself. "By lunch I mean what he takes to work. That's what I call lunch when I was working nighttime at the cannery.

"Anyway, this woman, she says 'OK.' And sometimes, after he would leave, she'd stay up for a while. She'd clean up around, maybe do the dishes, get things ready for the morning, for the breakfast. I don't know.

"Then ONE TIME she hears a knock on the back door. 'What is that?' she's thinking. First she thought maybe it was her husband; maybe he was coming home early; maybe he got sick or something. 'But then

1. This story has been produced from tapes, notes, and my memory of my meeting with Mabel McKay on October 15, 1988. My friend—Jenny—did not want her true name revealed.

why doesn't he just come in?' she was saying. Well, then she thought maybe she was hearing things. She just kept working then.

"But it kept on, this knocking. Then she got scared. See in those days no phones up there. And this was far out, up on some white man's place there, where her husband worked. She could not yell, nothing. Nobody to hear her. Maybe she's thinking this to herself. I don't know.

"'Who is this?' she is saying. Then I don't know what he said. I forgot. Something, anyway. And she opens the door. Just a little bit. He comes in and she stands there looking at him. But she doesn't recognize him.

"Anyway, she fixes some coffee. I don't know. Gives him something to eat. They're talking around there. I don't know what.

"Next day, her husband comes home. 'What's this?' he is saying. He's standing there—by the bedroom—and he's looking down in some vase. Something there. It was on the table. 'What are you talking about?' she says. Then she goes and looks where he's looking. And she sees it, too: a snake, a little black snake all coiled up. 'What is this?' he says to her. Then he takes it out and puts it in the brush. He lets it out there.

"Next day, same thing it happens. Then the husband, he gets suspicious of that snake. 'What is this?' he is saying. Then she gets worried; now she knows what the snake is. But she don't say nothing. 'I'm going to kill it,' he says, 'chop it to bits out in the brush.' He's testing her, but she don't say nothing. Then she got REAL worried, seeing him go out with that snake.

"But next day same thing it happens. Maybe she tried talking to that man. I don't know. 'Don't stay around here,' she might said to him. But it's there again, that snake. Now her husband, he shakes her; he knows something is going on. 'What is this?' he's saying. But he had an idea about it anyway. 'You come with me,' he says, 'and watch me kill it.' He starts pulling on her arm, shaking her, but she refuses him. She won't go. She's crying by this time.

"He takes the snake out, same way, coiled around his hand. She just sees him go. Then he comes back. She doesn't know what it happened. Maybe this time he DID kill it. She's crying yet. Her husband, he comes in and says nothing. Just goes to bed.

"But he never did chop that snake up. Maybe he did. I don't know. Anyway, it went on like that . . ."

Jenny, a Ph.D. candidate in English, asked what the snake symbolized. Mabel didn't seem to understand the question. She looked at me then turned to Jenny. "Well, it was a problem, I don't know."

"Why didn't he, I mean the husband, just kill the snake?" Jenny asked.

With an incredulous look on her face, Mabel focused on Jenny. "Well, how could he?" she asked. "This is white man days. There's laws against killing people. That man, he would go to jail, or maybe get the electric chair, if he done that."

Jenny's response to the story, that is, her question, prompted in turn a response from Mabel that exposed what was different about their respective worldviews regarding the story. For Jenny the snake was symbolic of something and, in that sense, supernatural. For Mabel the snake/the man was part of one coexistent reality, a reality that is located in historic time and subject to its strictures. Mabel mentioned that she knew the woman, that she often visited her when she lived in the same area north of Clear Lake. "Then one night I seen that man. He was handsome, too," she chuckled. "It was late. Lakeport grocery was closing and I seen him come out with groceries. He didn't take the road. He went the creek way, north. Then, I say to myself, 'I bet I know where he's going.'"

"Maybe he just carried the snake with him and left it in the vase each morning before he left," Jenny offered. "Like a sign."

Mabel laughed out loud. "Like a sign. That's cute. Why he want to do that?" She lit a cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. "See, I knew he was odd. He's moving in cold, late at night. Snakes don't do that."

"Well, was it man or snake? I mean when you were looking at it?" Jenny was desperate now.

"You got funny ideas," Mabel answered. "Aren't I sitting here?" She tapped her cigarette in the aluminum ashtray on the table. "You do crazy things like Greg. And he's Indian! He gets ideas where he wants to know this or that so he can write it all up for the people. Well, it ain't like that what I am saying."

Jenny told me that for weeks she kept thinking about Mabel and the story. "Hearing that story, just hearing Mabel, I thought more and learned more about myself in one sitting than I have with Shakespeare in ten years," Jenny said. "I've been studying Shakespeare and, well, if my ideas change, and they do, at least the text is the same. With Mabel what is the story? There is so much more than just the story and what was said that is the story. I wanted to write it, you know, when I was thinking of things, so I could think about it. But it—whatever it is—wouldn't stay put. Mabel was right: 'It ain't like that what I am saying.' Greg, how are you going to write her stories?"

Once again Mabel confounded her interlocutor. She undermined clear-cut, unqualified answers. She opened the context in which the

exchange took place, exposing what made for people talking and listening. Jenny, in retelling "The Woman Who Loved a Snake," will remember that for Mabel the snake/the man was not what it was for Jenny and that the difference spoke of the differences between them. I am reminded of the context, of the world Mabel and I share when talking, every time I try to write something she said.

Writing recreates oral experience in given ways. The transcriptions of American Indian oral literatures, for example, sometimes provide nothing about the context in which the literatures were told and recorded or the manner in which they were translated. In the end we have a story as an object devoid of the context that might suggest something about the story beyond our interaction with it as an independent text. The context of the story consists of story and reader. Based on their biases and purposes for writing, writers select and shape what they experience orally. In the example just cited, editors might decide that a certain story is the whole Indian story. Writing then fixes or makes permanent not only oral experience but what is actually an interpretation of that experience. In this sense, Mabel's talk impedes these literate tendencies for closure by continually opening the world in which oral exchange takes place. "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" is a story not only about the woman in the story but about Jenny and, as I will show in this essay, about me.

Jenny's instinct was literate. "I wanted to write it . . . so I could think about it." She thought if she had a written (fixed) text she would be able to sort out what was in her mind from what was on the page. (Of course Stanley Fish and a host of others have been telling us for some time that such sorting is problematic at best with written texts.) It was not just a matter of what was spoken that made writing the oral story problematic but also what was unspoken. The unspoken that was exposed in the verbal exchange, in this case the different worldviews of Mabel and Jenny regarding the story, became part of the story such that a straight version of "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" (Mabel's narrative without Jenny's presence as a listener) would hardly represent Jenny's experience of the story. Even if Jenny were to write a conventional version, and even if she were to include the brief conversation with Mabel about the story, she would not automatically have a clear picture of her experience and the way she negotiates that experience in time. So much of Jenny's verbal encounter—that which might be transcribed from a tape recorder—had life and significance not only in terms of what was unspoken in the immediate context but in the days and weeks ahead as

Jenny kept thinking about the story and her relationship to it. As she said, the story "wouldn't stay put." She told me: "I began to think of snakes differently. People too. All kinds of things came up. I went back to my dissertation on Shakespeare and began to think about Shakespeare's historical period. How was I understanding that period? How was I understanding Shakespeare as a result?"

More and more scholars of oral literatures are looking to the broader contexts in which these literatures live. Specifically, they are considering what lies beyond the spoken word, beyond their perceptual range as listeners and readers, and what that larger context says about their position as literate speakers and writers for and about oral traditions. Concerns regarding context become particularly significant in cross-cultural situations. After struggling with the question as to whether structure or texture generated meaning in Navajo stories, Barre Toelken, with the help of Tacheeni Scott, a Navajo who knew the stories, resolved that

actually both structure and texture unite to provide an excitement of meaning which already exists elsewhere, in the shared ideas and customs of people raised in an intensely traditional society. . . . Thus, the stories act like 'surface structure' in language: by their articulation they touch off a Navajo's deeper accumulated sense of reality. . . . They provide culturally enjoyable correlatives to a body of thought so complicated and profound that vicarious experience in it through entertainment is one of the only access points available to most people.

(110)

Toelken asked the storytellers questions and found that "by seeing the story in terms of any categories [he] had been taught to recognize, [he] had missed the point" (73). Dennis Tedlock notes: "The problem of the mythographer is not merely to present and interpret Zuni myths as if they were objects from a distant place and time and the mythographer were a sort of narrow, one-way conduit, but as events taking place among contemporaries along a frontier that has a long history of crossings" (292). Tedlock is not just talking about Zuni contemporaries. He is stressing the presence of the mythographer who positions the Zuni storytellers in certain ways, and whose interpretation of the situation will partly depend on a subjective interpretation of the stories produced in the context of his presence. After writing about his experience and sense of an oral story-telling event, Tedlock says: "Everything that has been reported here concerning the events of a certain November evening at Zuni, New Mexico, rests finally on conversational and more broadly

interactional grounds, and it was there, just there, that it was even possible for me—and now, I hope for us—to understand at least a part of what was going on. . . . Here I say, leewi (all), which means it's someone else's turn" (301).²

Without ever directly addressing the question about what is oral in an oral exchange, or what constitutes context, Toelken and Tedlock suggest that in an oral exchange there is much that is unspoken—the histories and varying perspectives of speakers and listeners—which may or may not be evoked verbally in the exchange itself or in continued exchange. Mabel's story and conversation with Jenny—Mabel's talk—reminds us that in oral discourse the context of orality covers the personal territory of those involved in the exchange, and because the territory is so wide, extending throughout two or more personal, and often cultural, worlds, no one party has access to the whole of the exchange. One party may write a story, but one party's story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river.

While this may seem obvious, it underscores what it is we do when we tell, transcribe, or write about oral texts. Basically, in whatever form or manner we deal with oral texts, whether orally or literally, we continue their life in very specific ways. This is just as true about an oral exchange within a single culture as it is about an oral exchange that is cross-cultural. No two personal worlds are identical anywhere. This does not mean that we are not, or cannot be, distanced or critical, for critical response is part of hearing. We sort out what we hear, unconsciously and consciously, and this sorting has to do with our cultural and personal histories and the situation of our hearing.

My discussion here continues the story of "The Woman Who Loved a

2. Other scholars—linguists and social scientists in particular—have studied differing coherence systems in oral and written communication, an approach that is basically comparative and contrastive and that focuses on the relationship and differences between spoken and written language in human interaction. The works of these scholars, most notably Erickson (1984) and Scollon and Scollon (1984), show that there are different kinds of nonliteracies and that scholars must remember this fact when considering issues of orality and literacy. Scollon and Scollon note: "We feel that this [Northern Athabaskan] oral tradition is strikingly unlike the bard-and-formula oral tradition [i.e., the Homeric tradition studied by Parry and referred to by Ong via Parry] so often advanced as the representative of oral traditions" (182). In Northern Athabaskan storytelling, sense-making is dependent upon audience response as it is for the Chicago-based Afro-American youth (whom Erickson studied) in their general verbal (oral) interactions. Further, Tannen (1982) shows that it is not just a matter of orality vs. literacy but that there is an "interplay in spoken and written discourse in various settings" (4). The work of these scholars focuses primarily on the spoken and written word, and, while this focus is important in a variety of ways, particularly in terms of what it can tell us about different learning styles, their work does not explicitly consider the larger world in which either the oral or the written word lives and is made meaningful as do scholars such as Toelken and Tedlock.

Snake" in specific ways. Mabel's story, characteristic of her talk, opens the vast territory that is oral and, in so doing, not only suggests the extent of the territory but also lets the territory be talked about and explored. The story reminds me of this and in turn of other stories and experiences. While I am Indian and am familiar with certain aspects of Pomo culture, I am, like Jenny, literate and have specific literate expectations, including the urge to fix, when writing, stories and ideas in given ways.³ Mabel bucks these literate expectations so that neither she nor any aspect of her world is seen as or reduced to anything other than what it is, in all its complexity and difference; and I am never more reminded of how her talk frustrates such expectations than when I write about something she says. "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" then is as much about orality and interpersonal and intercultural discourse as it is about anything else. You may or may not be able to glean this dimension from a mere transcription of Mabel's narrative. You might, for example, look at the husband's interaction with the snake, the wife's interaction with the snake, or the husband's interaction with his wife, as an encounter with an "other" and then project from the nature and outcome of the encounter. But let me continue my story here of "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" by telling you more of it as I heard it and as it became particularly meaningful for me:⁴

Mabel and I were parked along a road on the south side of Clear Lake, where we had a view of the lake and of Elem Rancheria, the old village site and present-day reservation of the Elem tribe of Pomo Indians. Mabel had been talking about her maternal grandmother, Sarah Taylor, and about how the Elem people initiated her into their dances and cult activities after Sarah's people, the Cache Creek Pomo, had been removed from their land and ceremonial grounds by the non-Indian invaders.

"'You will find a way, a way to go on even after this white people run over the earth like rabbits. They are going to be everywhere,' he was saying. That's Old Man, I forgot his name. He had only Indian name, Taylor's father, Grandma's grandfather. He's the one saying these things."

Mabel opened her purse, pulled out a cigarette. She lit her cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Below us, on the narrow peninsula of Elem, smoke rose from the rusted chimney tins of the small, dilapidated houses. A lone dog barked in the distance.

"Well, it was over here, below them hills," Mabel said, gesturing

3. Of course a nonliterate audience probably would negotiate Mabel's talk in ways very different from those of us with certain strong literate tendencies.

4. This story has been produced from tapes, notes, and my memory of my meeting with Mabel McKay on November 20, 1988.

south over her shoulder with her chin. "This things, they come over the hill in a trail, long trail. So much that dust is flying up, like smoke wherever they go. And first to see them this people down there, where you are looking. 'What is this?' the people saying. Things with two heads and four legs, bushy tail, standing here on this hill somewhere, looking down at Elem people.

"Lots of people scared, run off, some far as our place, Cache Creek. They tell what they seen then. All Indians, Indians all over, talking about it then. 'What is it?' they is asking. Nobody knows. People is talking about it all over the place. Lot's scared. I don't know. People say different things.

"Some people somewhere seen them things come apart, like part man, then go back together. Then I guess maybe they knew it was people—white people. I don't know," Mabel said and chuckled. "They Indians dance and pray. I don't know. Then they was saying these things mean, killing Indians and taking Indians."

Mabel drew on her cigarette and leisurely exhaled. "But he seen it in his Dream, Old Man. He said what is coming one day, how this would be."

"So they knew what it was coming down this hill," I ventured.

"Hmm," Mabel said, gazing across the lake. "They knew what he meant by 'white man.'"

"So why did they run? Why all the fuss?"

Mabel rubbed out her cigarette and looked at me as if she had not understood what I said. "If they knew from Old Man's prophecy that white people were coming, why didn't they know what was coming down the hill? Why all the fuss?"

Mabel started chuckling, then exploded with loud, uncontrollable laughter. She caught her breath finally and asked, "How can that be? You ever know white people with four legs and two heads? Maybe you do. You're raised around them—your mother's people. I don't know," she said, chuckling again.

She lit another cigarette, then straightened in her seat. "Sometimes takes time for Dream to show itself. Got to be tested. Now we know what he told about, Old Man. He was told . . . He said lots of things: trails, big trails covering the earth, even going into the sky. Man going to be on moon he was saying."

"But how did HE know that?"

"But sometimes Dream forgets, too. Like them snakes. Old Man come in MY Dream, give me rattlesnake song. 'You going to work with this

snakes; they help you,' he is saying. Then, after that, I seen them. All over my house I seen them: porch, closet, in my bathtub when it's hot, all over. Then I say to him, to that spirit, 'This is modern times, better take that song out of me . . . I don't want nothing to happen. People around here might call animal control place.

"You know, peoples around here they don't always understand things like that."

Mabel was not merely making a comment about a gap in understanding between two cultures but also, intentionally or not, pointing up what I had just experienced as a result of my interaction with her. I had been implicated: my own understanding, or lack of understanding, had been exposed. The sentence in context, like the story about intercultural contact in context, pointed beyond itself to the present, opening the story of the two people talking and listening. Here I was busy taking notes and tape-recording her stories for a book about her life, as I had been for the past six months, and, as always, she reminded me of my prejudices and point of view, locating me in the present, turning a story she tells into a story of our exchange. Contact narrative became an instance of culture contact and culture contact a story.⁵

Not new news for Mabel.

Not so ironically I was just laughing a month before at Jenny's question about what the snake symbolized. Non-Indians often ask what this or that symbolizes, as if signs and semiotic systems were trans-cultural. I was used to stories about snakes. I have heard how rattlesnakes were used by certain medicine people for healing the sick. There are stories of rattlesnake cults in which cult members handled the snakes, asking the snakes for special powers, for guidance. And always there is talk of snakes taking the form of human beings and vice versa. It seems to me that the ways snakes are viewed by the Pomo vary from tribe to tribe and even from person to person within a given tribe. So much depends on the situation, who is in the situation, who is telling about it, and who is listening. Jenny was an outsider, a non-Indian from the university. Suddenly I felt the same way.

Presuppositions that predicated my question about Mabel's story

5. Here I use the term *culture contact* in the broadest sense, as Gregory Bateson says, "not only [in] those cases in which the contact occurs between two communities with different cultures and results in profound disturbance of the culture of one or both groups; but also in cases of contact within a single community. In these cases the contact is between differentiated groups of individuals, e.g. between the sexes, between the young and old. . . . I would even extend the idea of 'contact' so widely as to include those processes whereby a child is molded and trained to fit the culture into which he was born . . ." (64).

about first contact between natives and non-natives were overturned by her laughter and her question to me, "How can that be? You ever know white people with four legs and two heads?" I had assumed a literal, linear relation between prophecy, or Old Man's Dream, and so-called empirical reality, a relation which posits a kind of fundamental difference between the two states that Mabel may not share. I must begin to consider a worldview in which dream "[g]ot to be tested," as Mabel said later, commenting on both the story and my reaction to it. This difference between Mabel and me is an essential feature of the context in which words are spoken, and that context influences how the words are presented again here, in the way I am now telling the story in this essay.

The contact narrative about what the people of Elem encountered is embedded in the longer narrative about Mabel's grandmother, Sarah Taylor, which in turn is embedded in the conversation about Mabel's life as we sat in a car above Clear Lake, which is embedded in our work over the last six months, and so on. The context is ever widening. Still, a dialogical dynamic can be seen in the straight contact narrative just as easily as within the context in which the narrative is told. Mabel made context within the narrative independent of my interjections by commenting on the narrative. Her remarks about Old Man "see[ing] it in his Dream" were interpretive and reveal a dialogue she had with the text about the coming of those "things with two heads and four legs" such that this dialogue made the story. Old Man "seeing what [was] coming one day" is as integral to Mabel's narrative as what the people of Elem saw coming "over the hill in a trail." The story, or the part of it she told, about what the people of Elem saw is likely to be an interpretation rather than a literal retelling on Mabel's part; therefore, it is a comment on another version of the first contact between the natives and the non-natives, in which case we have a comment on a comment, an endless cycle of text becoming interpretation becoming text.⁶ Mabel's dialogical dynamic that might otherwise be interior (unspoken) was exposed in the oral presentation of the story.

While such a dynamic may be present in Mabel's narrative independent of my interjections, and while I may be able to talk about the dynamic, I could only gain a sense of its significance for Mabel and of the

6. Tedlock has illustrated that when listening to a Zuni storyteller listeners are "in the presence of a performing art, all right, but are getting the criticism at the same time from the same person. The interpreter does not merely play the parts, but is the narrator and commentator as well. . . . At times [listeners] may hear direct quotations from that ["original"] text, but they are embedded in a hermeneutics" (236).

limits of my own projections with regard to its significance when we talked about it. Mabel's exchange with me, as with Jenny, opened the narrative to new territories, or, more specifically, to the territory of our meeting together in the instance of my hearing a story.

Of course, scholars can excerpt the contact narrative or any part of it from the larger story. Folklorists, for instance, might want to compare various textualized versions of the same tale and attempt to discover the true, or what Hymes calls "authoritative," tale (Hymes 1981, 79–141). So if they were to determine, let's say, that one text, or tale, of what the people of Elem saw was the authoritative Lake County Pomo contact narrative, they would effectively exclude the larger context in which the narrative was told and still lives for the various Pomo of the area and, subsequently, the means for getting an idea of how the narrative might be meaningful for different Pomo beyond the folklorists' interpretations. "A systematic study of variation in performance" (Hymes 1981, 86) of textualized versions of a given tale might show that the so-called true tale is being used or performed in different ways structurally, but that the significance of the difference is understood only in terms of the folklorists' interpretations. Likewise, if scholars were to consider the text proper as only what Mabel says before my interjections, they may be able to discern the dialogical dynamic that I have seen, but they would not have the opportunity to know any story about the text except that of their own invention. Little, if anything, would inhibit their culture-specific projection, which, in turn, can engender further discussion about the projection and spin the discourse further and further from the Indian narrator and her narration.

Again, as I indicated in the last essay, I am not using Mabel's stories and my interaction with her simply to indicate the limits of a text-centered approach to oral literatures or to extol the virtues of contextual studies. "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" and "What the People of Elem Saw" suggest to me, in the ways they come together as one story for me, the territory of orality and a way that territory is opened with Mabel's talk. When Mabel told Jenny about the snake, I saw how I understood Mabel's world; when she told me what the people of Elem saw, I discovered the limits of my understanding of her world. In both instances, I learned there is so much more than just the story and what was said that *is* the story. Mabel's talk not only reminds me of what is at stake when writing, or textualizing, oral experience but also suggests that the writing, as much as possible, should reflect oral tendencies to engage the larger world in which the spoken word lives so that it is seen

for what it might or might not be beyond the page. To answer Jenny's question presented at the start of this essay regarding how this is done, specifically how I write Mabel's stories, I offer this same essay as a model of, though not necessarily a model for, writing what Mabel says. Mabel is saying: Remember that when you hear and tell my stories there is more to me and you that *is* the story. You don't know everything about me and I don't know everything about you. Our knowing is limited. Let our words show us as much so we can learn together about one another. Let us tell stories that help us in this. Let us keep learning.

Naturally stories are told differently in different situations, and tellers often do not suggest much about the situation in which they are told or invite further discourse about the stories or the world of the stories. In the last chapter I discussed how Kashaya Pomo scholars Herman James and Essie Parrish in their work with linguist Robert Oswalt used frames to open and close their stories, a use which is likely to reinforce certain literate tendencies that would diminish the larger world of the stories and their tellers. See the following contact narrative told by Essie Parrish to Robert Oswalt:

This that I am going to tell is what the people thought when they first saw a boat.

In the old days, before white people came up here, there was a boat sailing on the ocean from the south. Because before that they had never seen a boat, they said, "Our world must be coming to an end. Couldn't we do something? This big bird floating on the ocean is from somewhere, probably from up high. Let us plan a feast. Let us have a dance." They followed its course with their eyes to see what it would do. Having done so they promised Our Father [a feast] saying destruction was upon them.

When they had done so, they watched [the ship] sail way up north and disappear. They thought that [the ship] had not done anything but sail northwards because of the feast they had promised. They were saying that nothing had happened to them—because of the promise of a feast; because of that they thought it had not done anything. Consequently they held a feast and a big dance.

A long time afterwards, when white men had come up and they saw their boats, they then found out what they had thought was a big bird was otherwise. It wasn't a bird they had seen; they had spied a sailboat. From then on we knew that they hadn't seen a big bird.

This is the end.

(Oswalt, *Kashaya Texts*, 224–47)

The text, as with virtually all of the texts in Oswalt's collection, is effectively framed so that it is closed ("This is the end"), inviting neither further story nor inquiry into the world of the story.

By looking at Mrs. Parrish's contact story, we can further appreciate

the ways Mabel does not end or close her story but opens it continually, by the dialogue she has both with it and with the person hearing it. Her story—her talk—counters literate tendencies that would close the vastness of its world and, hence, the complexity of its teller.

In closing I must mention again that Mabel should not be seen as representing a typical Pomo speaker or storyteller. Her talk—her narratives, conversations, responses to questions—seems in many ways unique. I have known other Pomo storytellers who expose internal dialogue they have with a story they are telling. I have also known Pomo storytellers to implicate their listeners in what they are saying. None of the speakers I have known, however, is as consistent in these matters as Mabel. But I have not done a study or comprehensive survey. I have only looked at Mabel's talk in terms of its effect as I have known it, not in terms of the ways it may or may not represent traditional or typical Pomo discourse.

Specifically, I have explored in this essay the ways Mabel's talk counters literate tendencies to close the oral context in which oral communication takes place. Mabel's dynamic is not, I am sure, the only way to break open that immense oral territory, nor is it any guarantee that the territory will be opened. So much depends on the interlocutor. And, as demonstrated with Mrs. Parrish's narrative, some speakers, inadvertently or not, may keep the gates to the territory closed. The territory—all that is oral, spoken and unspoken—is as vast as the culture which it gives life to and from which in turn it takes life. For that reason it is as impossible to generalize about "oral discourse" as it is about "culture." They are inseparable from and specific to particular people, either as the people interact with one another from a shared knowledge base or with groups (or individuals) with a different knowledge base and history. Within a given group or between groups certain kinds of discourse may be aggressive or prompt fear; other kinds may do just the opposite. It depends on the given circumstances in the broadest sense. Mabel's talk, which is oral, provides an opportunity to explore the territory for individuals who may in some ways share her territory, such as myself, and for those who do not at all, such as Jenny. The territory, after all, is not empty, unpeopled.

After Mabel told the story about the people of Elem seeing non-Indian invaders coming "over the hill in a trail," we headed east, back to the Rumsey Reservation. On the way home, Mabel again told the story of "The Woman Who Loved a Snake": "It was across there. Up in them hills where she lived. That time Charlie [Charles McKay, Mabel's husband] running stock up there. By stock I mean the cattle. Charlie always

wanted to have the stock. That woman lived there. Sometimes she would come down the road the other side there and talk to me. Anyway, how it happened she was alone at night. Her husband used to go off working, where it was I don't know. I forgot. How it happened she hears this knocking one night, at her door . . ."

I was quieter now, listening.

"Well, you see, I know about them snakes," she said as she finished the story. "They can teach about a lot of things."

Mabel pulled her purse to her lap and began rummaging for her cigarettes. I looked to the cold, damp winter hills. Too cold for snakes, I thought to myself.

"Hmm," she said. "Maybe you'll get some idea about the snakes." I looked at her and she was laughing, holding an unlit cigarette between her fingers. "I know you. You'll . . . you're school way. You'll think about it then write something."

She was right.⁷

7. Portions of this essay have appeared in my "Fieldwork as Cultural Contact and Cultural Critique: Mabel McKay's Model," a paper presented at the 1989 California Indian Conference, Humbolt, California, and in my "Conversations With Mabel McKay: Story as Contact, Contact as Story," a paper presented at the 1989 Association for Study of American Indian Literature (ASAIL) session of the Modern Language Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

PART TWO

About Pomo Baskets and Secret Cults: Cultural Phenomena