

# Negotiating with Narrative

## Establishing Cultural Identity at the Yukon International Storytelling Festival

ARCTIC AND SUBARCTIC peoples have long been portrayed to distant audiences through museum exhibits, school textbooks, photographs, and film. "By their things we shall know them" remains one premise underlying images of indigenous technology, marginal economies, and the unrelenting tedium of life at high latitudes.<sup>1</sup> Such depictions collide with indigenous expressions of attachment to place and constructions of North as a homeland, rendered forcefully through land claims negotiations in northern North America, home rule in Greenland, Saami parliaments in Scandinavia, and nationalist aspirations among Siberian networks, *severa* (Minority Rights Group 1994).

More complicated imagery is emerging at cultural performances in circumpolar regions from Greenland to northern Europe and Siberia, and across northern North America.<sup>2</sup> Superficially, these public presentations appear both to invert museological conventions and to occupy a climate different from deliberate speech making. While views about transfer of land and power are deeply contested in northern communities, events such as festivals supposedly occur in a climate where emphasis is on children, celebration, and time-out-of-time (Stoelje 1992). Any investigation of the history of cultural festivals, though, leads to literature documenting longstanding tensions between local initiatives to bolster cultural autonomy and pragmatic efforts by states to incorporate diversity.<sup>3</sup> The more successful a festival, the more probable is tension between nascent political aspirations and official ceremony, making these sites vivid experimental spaces for defining identity (Karp 1991:281).

This article examines intercultural transactions occurring at one public festival in northern Canada: the JULIE CRUIKSHANK is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of British Columbia, V6T 1Z1, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada.

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Yukon International Storytelling Festival. The question that interests me centers on issues recently raised by Fred Myers (1994), who suggests that public performances of indigenous culture should be understood as tangible forms of social action rather than as texts or representations standing outside the real activity of participants. He points to a dramatic shift in popular discourse during the last two decades. Once an oppositional model, the idea that indigenous people should represent themselves (rather than be represented by others such as anthropologists) now meets widespread, commonsense approval. Yet Myers notes that contemporary critical theorists tend to treat performances of cultural identity as social texts for predictable kinds of analyses. They correctly discern inequality, but then focus on ideological interests such productions serve within the dominant system, emphasizing incorporation of colonial influences, commoditization of culture, or perceived inventions of tradition.<sup>4</sup> Such analyses, he argues, erase the ways indigenous peoples confer meaning on circumstances that confront them, having the effect of a double erasure of agency—first by colonial forces, then by postcolonial analyses. "Translation," Myers states concisely, "is the ethnographic object" in the late 20th century. (1994:679).

Anthropologists can no longer claim a privileged role as translators of culture (Asad 1986), but we are trained to provide ethnographic analysis of the translation process—to observe how ideas about culture are publicly produced and conveyed in intercultural transactions. We should be competent to compare ways of communicating about different epistemologies and to analyze the difficulties of translating between the specific and the general, the particular and the universal, the practical concerns of anthropologists (Hastrup 1993:135; Kuper 1994). Growing attention to dialogue in ethnographic fieldwork during recent decades, espe-

cially evident in work rooted in Native American narrative traditions, reminds us that questions about intercultural translation have long intrigued scholars attentive to the subtleties of conversational storytelling.<sup>5</sup>

Questions about cultural translation, central to much of late-20th-century anthropology, were also raised by previous critics of modernity. Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, and Harold Innis independently asked thoughtful questions about the relationship between storytelling, cultural translation, and social action. Bakhtin from Stalhin Russia, Benjamin fleeing Nazi Germany, Innis returning to Canada shaken by his experiences in the trenches of World War I. Each was concerned about the role of oral storytelling in human history, yet each based his research on ancient and medieval texts rather than on exposure to practicing storytellers. The relevant intersection lies in their shared commitment to the potential of oral storytelling and our opportunity to investigate ethnographically what this may mean now, when many indigenous people are so vigorously asserting the importance of story to memory. Bakhtin's fascination with human artistry as communicative behavior and his optimism about the transformative potential of folk culture to destabilize official culture had its broadest application in his investigation of medieval carnival (Bakhtin 1984). Harold Innis, writing about Canada's relationship with its western and northern territories, advanced a thesis about cultural translation that began with economics and moved toward an exploration of how oral tradition challenges imperialist conceptions of time and space.<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin was concerned about deteriorating dialogue in modern society. He attributed this to loss of oral narrative forms, which once held power to intervene, inform, moral content, and philosophical guidance (Benjamin 1968). I return to their individual insights later, while letting their questions about oral narrative help to frame issues raised in this article.

The Yukon International Storytelling Festival, held since 1988, attracts audiences each summer to a Whitehorse park on the Yukon River. An emerging theme has been its circumpolar emphasis: indigenous performers from Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Siberia, and Alaska, as well as from Arctic and subarctic Canada are regular guests. Northern peoples have made concerted efforts to collaborate in recent years because of shared concerns about a deteriorating land base, erosion of subsistence economies, and submergence in larger nation states. Their representatives have forged international alliances, developing comparative and global perspectives on issues surrounding political autonomy and building networks of support that include Dene, Tlingit, Inuit, Yupik, Inupiat, Saami, Greenlandic, and other northern peoples (Inuit Circumpolar Conference 1992; Minority Rights Group 1994).

While festival promotion underscores its international nature and the circumpolar origins of performers, a majority of storytellers actually come from small communities in northwestern Canada, and the stories they tell concern intensely local issues. Land claims agreements between the Canadian government and individual Yukon First Nations are now being finalized after 25 years of protracted negotiations and have profound implications for administration of land, resources, and social institutions. On February 14, 1996, the Yukon First Nations Land Claims Settlement Act (Bill C-33) and the Yukon First Nations Self-Government Act (Bill C-34) were proclaimed into law by the Canadian government. The major challenge facing indigenous leaders as they work out practical implications of binding legal obligations is how to move ahead in ways that will both satisfy their constituents and facilitate partnerships with nonindigenous Yukoners who outnumber First Nations by a ratio of two to one.

Divergent perspectives arise not just between indigenous Yukoners and newcomers. Native Yukoners come from 14 dispersed communities and speak eight distinct languages belonging to two different language families. Despite cultural, linguistic, historical, and material disparities, they recognize the strategic importance of presenting a collective public voice in negotiating the overall agreement framing their settlement. But an idiom developed to do two things at once—to mark ethnicity to outsiders and to create internal cohesion—may become conventionalized and too restrictive to provide a meaningful metaphor for organizing personal behavior. Following enactment of legislation, views about how to make land-claims settlements work locally are becoming internally contested, mirroring larger discussions about identity emerging across northern Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, individuals are being recruited from communities to participate on legally mandated boards administering resources, education, health care, and heritage. Self-government agreements enshrine provisions for joint management of specific programs by First Nations, federal, and territorial governments (Canada 1983). After generations of the exclusion of native Yukoners from decisions affecting their social institutions and resources, this seems to connote remarkable progress. Yet there are risks: conceptual categories gaining legal and political force have become conventional during two decades of land claims negotiations, framed by Western concepts in the English language as "aboriginal rights," "self-government," "co-management," "cultural heritage," and the ubiquitous "TEK" (traditional ecological knowledge).<sup>8</sup> Even when they share terminology, indigenous people may understand these terms to have meanings very different from



those attributed by government negotiators for whom such language has become routine.<sup>9</sup>

Public storytelling in the Yukon occurs in a context where indigenous peoples are struggling to defend autonomy. They are deliberating among themselves whether to work within terms of the dominant society, using the language of policy making that increasingly dominates public transactions between indigenous Yukoners and non-Natives, or to reject those terms and insist on asserting positions using their own paradigms. In the following pages, I discuss how this process unfolds at the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, where I have been a participant for several years. The analysis is based on my continuing research documenting oral tradition with Yukon Athapaskan (Dän) and Tlingit elders since the 1970s, regular attendance at the festival from 1989 until 1994, participation as an instructor at a festival-sponsored elderschool in 1993, and discussions with performers, festival organizers, and audience members in 1992, 1993, and 1994. After providing some background, I summarize four performances by elders from Alaska, northern British Columbia, and the Yukon at the 1993 and 1994 festivals, commenting on how each frames issues of identity. These performances were selected because I have talked with the narrators and have seen each of them perform on a number of occasions during the last two decades. I suggest that each speaker structures his or her narrative to convey themes of identity by linking social institutions, land, and social history.

The issue of audience is critical and one to which I return later. Audiences include local indigenous people, international indigenous visitors, families from the local white community, and tourists visiting the Yukon at the summer solstice and eager to attend local cultural events. Some listeners know the speakers well, are intimately familiar with the context from which they speak, and bring understandings learned in communities where stories would conventionally be told, songs sung, and dances danced. Others are hearing the performers for the first time and may embrace expectations from popular festivals. To the degree that storytellers are aware of audience diversity, they may face difficult choices, as we see in performances discussed below. The festival provides a rare opportunity to address issues that concern broad audiences in a relatively informal setting. If narrators use explicitly indigenous forms to address political issues, they risk censure. If they use more implicit forms, they may be heard only by those who share local cultural knowledge. How do competing local and global frameworks complicate the audience reception of contemporary performances? And what messages does the language of indigenous narrative convey to multicultural audiences?

## Festival Background

The 1988 Northern Storytelling Festival was launched in Whitehorse, with funding from the Yukon Arts Council, a nongovernmental agency supporting local artists. Registered as a nonprofit society, the festival now has a board of directors, a newsletter called *Ts'édän Hunday*, and an energetic network of volunteers. Each year, efforts are made to schedule festival activities to coincide roughly with the summer solstice, and most events occur in two enormous tents with additional performances in smaller outdoor tents. With up to 3,000 visitors attending some years, ticket sales receipts have totaled as high as \$16,000. Core organizers have always included indigenous women and men, but the majority of volunteers involved in the mechanics of administration, fund-raising, advertising and mounting the festival have been nonindigenous.<sup>10</sup> In 1994, for the first time the festival was cosponsored by the Kwanlin Dän First Nation, formally acknowledging the centrality of local indigenous storytellers to the festival's ongoing viability.

Since the festival's inception, references to authenticity (often phrased with reference to linguistic diversity) have figured prominently in its promotion. Newspaper reports from 1988 noted that participants would arrive from six countries speaking 20 languages, adding that "the storytelling festival is an especially strong tool for northerners to preserve their culture" (*Yukon News* 1988). That year, participants came from Cape Dorset, Hudson's Bay, Iceland, Greenland, and the Yukon. The following year, more countries were represented: Greenland, Russia, northern Japan, Iceland, Denmark, Alaska, northern Canada, and Zimbabwe. Again, the newspaper reported the number of languages spoken: "English, French, Ukrainian, Han, Tagish, Tlingit, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Kaska, Loucheux, Cree, Finnish, Japanese, Danish, Icelandic to name a few" (*Yukon News* 1989). The third Northern Storytelling Festival brought Tukak Theater from Greenland (Hanson 1986) and groups from Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Canada, and the United States, and the fourth brought "sixty-four storytellers from around the world" (*Yukon News* 1991).

By 1992 the name had been changed to the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, and for the first time visitors were able to attend from Chukotka in northeastern Siberia. The Hooper Bay Traditional Dance group, including more than a dozen energetic elders ranging in age from early sixties to late eighties, also came that year, making their first public appearance outside Alaska. They returned in 1994 accompanied by Roy Bell, grandson of the 90-year-old group leader, who was interviewed about his work documenting Yup'ik

song, dance, and stories and his plans to study performance art in Seattle the following year (Jenkins 1994).

Public projections of authenticity are balanced by the local concerns of First Nations who increasingly view the festival as a vehicle for translating cultural axioms to broad audiences. Over the years, local performers have become familiar with and confident about the venue—large tents and milling crowds in an open-air park—and have been able to assess the competence of their audiences. They have watched audiences grow, expand, and change in composition. They have experimented with storytelling strategies, noting which kinds of stories elicit the most engaged responses. They are all aware that performing in large tents in a downtown city park differs dramatically from the cultural context of storytelling in their own homes, but they accommodate their audiences, weighing the seemingly decontextualized setting with the opportunity to speak to receptive listeners. While visiting performers sometimes bring translators and speak in indigenous languages, most local storytellers prefer to address their audiences in English rather than work through an intermediary.

Performers' adaptability was impressively evident during summer 1994, when organizers were forced to move the entire festival indoors on the second day, as violent winds ripped through the site, toppling sound equipment and tearing tents. Relocated across town to a formal stage at the newly built Yukon Arts Center with its state-of-the-art lighting, sound equipment, and sloped seating for several hundred people had no inhibiting effect on performers, and elders carried on telling stories much as they might have in tents. The only noticeable difference was that audience members who usually move casually from tent to tent were more likely to remain seated politely from beginning to end of each performance in the theater.

Again, performers are very attuned to audience. Indigenous storytelling assumes a relationship between speaker and listener. A listener becomes knowledgeable by hearing successive tellings of stories and may mull over, reinterpret, and absorb different meanings with each hearing. One dilemma facing performers at this festival is that predominantly urban audiences have limited familiarity with indigenous narrative styles. Even when stories are told in English, listeners hearing them for the first time often have great difficulty understanding them at more than a superficial level. Yet many visitors are attending the festival precisely to experience "authenticity," "cultural distinctiveness," and "cultural preservation" and so listen for such messages even when they are hard to understand. With more indigenous participants attending each year, performers can sometimes work on two levels. On one hand, they recognize the limitations of a diverse audience unlikely to hear subtleties of the stories and songs; on the other,

members from their own communities have heard the stories before, are present as knowledgeable and critical listeners, and are attentive to nuances. This ability to address dual audiences is especially apparent when songs are sung in indigenous languages and some listeners hear levels of humor or pathos opaque to others. It becomes more sharply focused when a performer publicly addresses issues contested within his or her own community but not easily grasped by the larger audience.

## Connecting Story to Land

Four storytellers performing in 1993 and 1994 illustrate the distinct ways in which messages are presented and received. A Tlingit elder established clear links between land, story, and ceremonial objects. A Tutchone-speaking couple made connections between land, songs, and past events. An Inland Tlingit elder linked land with clan histories that she has recently published in collaboration with a linguist. And an elder from the First Nation cosponsoring the 1994 festival unexpectedly read newspaper clippings and letters documenting the forcible removal of indigenous people from the site where the storytelling festival was being held. If the first three performances met universalistic expectations of broad audiences even when we might not fully understand the content, the fourth illustrates the process of control and resistance inherent in any festival, the inability of festival organizers to stage-manage all performances, and the unwillingness of tellers to be restrained by tidy regulations. Collectively, the four performances speak to issues of intercultural transaction connecting storytellers with audiences.

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Connections between story, object, and land were posed by Austin Hammond, senior elder of the Lukaxaxádi Tlingit clan, who spoke at the festival on June 27, 1993. At 82 years of age, the trip of almost two hundred miles from his coastal home in Haines, Alaska, had been a first for him. Accompanied by the Tlingit theater group he founded and instructs, Naa Kahidi, he entered the large tent to address an audience of several hundred people. First, he established the relevance of his story for a Yukon audience by stating why he had traveled so far, by reminding listeners of the longstanding trading relationships and kinship ties binding coastal Tlingit and interior Athapaskan peoples, and by naming his own classificatory brothers and sisters from the Yukon interior.

He then asked his assistants to bring forward a hammered copper shield and a Chilkat blanket. Both originally belonged to his ancestor, Daanawaak, a Chil-

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kat chief referred to as "about sixty years old" when Aurel Krause met him in 1885 (Krause 1956[1885]:94). The name Daanawak, which passed to Mr. Hammond, is etched on the copper; the inscription reading simply "Daanawak: Chief of the Chilkas. Died Feb 12, 1904." Noting connections between the copper he was holding and the ancient Thlingit-Ahtapaskan trade in inland native copper, he stated of Daanawak's copper: "It's not going to tear down like that paper you have," adding, "My father told me, 'Pass that story on. Everyone will need it. Don't die with that story... It's got to be up to you.'"

Next, indicating Daanawak's Chilkat robe depicting the Lukax, adi sockeye salmon crest, he told its story. Some young men were paddling on the lake when their boat capsized and one disappeared in the lake. Despite his companions' best efforts to pull him back to safety, the young man was swallowed by a giant sockeye salmon woven into the blanket. "This is our paper," Mr. Hammond reminded his attentive audience, making the point that history inscribed on ceremonial objects is always present, not archived in books (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:227).

Austin Hammond was a powerful speaker, and his audience listened attentively. Even those unfamiliar with the Thlingit clan histories could understand that he was establishing visually striking ceremonial objects as authoritative points of reference for his narrators and making further parallels between those objects and material culture valued by members of the audience, specifically paper and the written word. To many, this masterful incorporation of story, visual imagery, and Thlingit language represented a high point of that year's festival. This became all the more poignant when Austin Hammond unexpectedly became ill and died one week later on July 3, 1983, making the Whitehorse festival his last public performance, his final attempt to translate precise meanings associating narrative with visual images.

At the end of Mr. Hammond's life, Richard and Nora Daunenbauer were engaged in writing biographies of Thlingit elders and their account of his experiences helps to contextualize some of the things he was saying (1994:207-250). As Lukax, adi clan leader, Austin Hammond was both custodian of his clan house and steward of clan property, called *at'oo'w* in Thlingit language and translated literally as "an owned or purchased thing or object." Above, a concept underlying all dimensions of Thlingit social and ceremonial life, refers broadly to the tangible and intangible property owned by the clan: songs, stories, artistic designs, personal names, and land (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:13-15). Daanawak's shield and robe are among the most important Lukax, adi *at'oo'w*, and the sockeye salmon crest is replicated on staffs, grave markers,

blankets, and tunics (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:229). The sockeye Chilkat robe that Austin Hammond brought to the festival encapsulates the history of the Lukax, adi clan and is understood by Thlingit people to be "a fiber deed to land along the Chilkat River from Sockeye Point on Chilkoot Lake to the beach along Lurak Inlet and from the tidelands to Mt. Ripinski (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:242, 244). In the 1981 film *Haa Shogoon*, made to discuss concepts of land ownership, Austin wore this robe and stated, "To those who come asking, 'Where is your history?', I answer, 'We wear our history.'" (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:244).

During the 1980s, Austin Hammond testified at public hearings on such issues as Native fishing rights, clear-cutting at Chilkoot Lake, and commercial development on tribal lands in Haines, Alaska. Central to his struggle to retain clan-owned lands was a concern to demonstrate clan ownership in the absence of paper deeds and titles. Key to the project of cultural translation in which he was so deeply involved is the paradox that paperwork is as alien to Thlingit tradition as clan ownership is alien to Western law (Daunenbauer and Daunenbauer 1994:241, 242, 247). Austin Hammond's final public performance was a powerful statement of the relationship between material and narrative traditions, but it was also a statement about land ownership, a point to which we return after considering three other performances.

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Connections between story and place were framed differently by Roddy and Bessie Blackback from the central Yukon Territory. As teachers of the Tutchone language at their community school, they have grown comfortable with public performance, usually to audiences familiar with their stories and competent to appreciate renditions of narratives everyone knows. Listeners growing up in homes where they hear these stories learn narrative frames and come to recognize how individual storytellers experiment with themes to reflect on their own life experiences (Cruikshank et al. 1990:339-356; McClellan 1970). On June 26, 1994, after the festival had been driven indoors by strong winds, the Blackbacks were among the first to speak in the Yukon Arts Center to a mixed audience of several hundred people, some familiar with their narratives and others hearing them for the first time.

Roddy Blackback began with an excerpt from a story cycle tracing the adventures of two brother/trans-formers who made the world suitable for human habitation at the beginning of time (see also Stacey et al. 1971:39-44). Recognizing that many listeners would not know that this narrative fits within a larger cycle of

related stories, Mr. Blackback shifted to a shorter, self-contained one about Mountain Man (who inhabits a subterranean world), quipping, "And I guess that's why we should have subsurface rights!" The reference to this controversial land-claims issue was immediately apparent to everyone in the audience, even those who might not follow more subtle parts of the story. More experienced listeners may have noticed that he tells this story differently from female storytellers: women typically emphasize the intelligence and competence of Mountain Man's wife while Mr. Blackback makes Mountain Man the protagonist, relegating the wife to a minor role.<sup>11</sup> He concluded with a short story about Camp Robber and his wife that may have alarmed those members of his audience paying close attention, because it features a murder-suicide during which the husband kills his wife, whom he suspects of betrayal, and then kills himself when he realizes his error. The editing of sex and violence from narratives told to children is a convention that seems odd to some indigenous Ahtapaskan storytellers.

He then introduced his wife, Bessie Blackback, who sang four songs in Tutchone language, each expressing intimate personal connections between people, season, and place. Such songs commemorate personal experiences and are remembered and sung years later with the context always foregrounded: who "made" the song and on what occasion, where it was composed, when sung, and what the song meant to its composer. Roddy explained the context for each song in English and then briefly translated key passages.

The first, he said, was "her dad's song" about the loneliness of separation from his wife in autumn. Bessie Blackback's father had accepted a job as a lineman one spring on a riverboat and spent the summer "up in Mayo." When he saw leaves falling in autumn, he realized how much he missed his wife, so he composed a song to her: "The leaves are falling down without seeing my wife yet." Roddy translated, and then Bessie sang in a clear, powerful voice. He introduced her second song as "her grandpa's song," a farewell to a female friend. This grandfather had traveled *up'at'oo'w* Lake Laberge. Roddy Blackback explained, adding, "There were lots of good-looking girls at Lake Laberge. When he came back up north, he sang that song to her." A third song, he said, was "her grandma's song" about a trip from Little Salmon village (Támútsé Chá Dabák) to Pelly River during the dangerous time after spring breakup when rivers are swollen. "One bunch from Little Salmon went to Pelly River and just about drowned in the river. It was right after breakup. When they got home, the leaves were starting to grow so they sang a song to those leaves: 'If we [had] drowned at Pelly River, we would never see leaves again.'"

Ahtapaskan traditions of storytelling differ markedly from Thlingit narratives like Austin Hammond's. The stories Roddy Blackback told and the songs Bessie Blackback sang are not clan property, but they convey an immediate connection to place.<sup>12</sup> His narratives invoke original relationships between human and nonhuman worlds; her songs convey the experiences of *haid'ádn* ("long-ago people") transported to the present through their songs. For listeners familiar with their repertoire, both signal connection to place: Roddy's retelling of how people came to be in the Yukon at the beginning of time, Bessie's songs commemorating deep connections with place and the stubborn particularity of voices that continue to be heard in the present.

\* \* \* \* \*

A third series of connections between story and place was posed by Elizabeth Nymán, a Thlingit elder from Atlin, in northern British Columbia. She spoke June 26, 1994, following Roddy and Bessie Blackback, and told stories about the origins of landscape features on Taku River and how those stories connect her Yanyé'dí clan with those places. Born in 1915, she recently completed a bilingual book recording Yanyé'dí clan history in Thlingit and English, prepared during a 15-year collaboration with linguist Jeff Leer (Nymán and Leer 1993).<sup>13</sup>

Praising her account tactfully that day, in terms of what children (rather than her audience) need to know, she pointed to sources from which she takes guidance: the land, her elders, her clan. She began, "This is how I show what little I know," including herself with her audience as a learner without openly challenging the competence of her listeners. This inversion of the more common narrative in Canadian history in which indigenous people are assigned the role of children, needing tutelage, is worth noting (Dyck 1991).

The name "Táknú," she reported, comes from the sound geese make when they rest at the mouth of the Taku River during their annual arctic migration. Two giants once battled at the mouth of the Taku River. The winner decapitated his rival, casting the loser's head across the river, where it remains as a mountain known as Lkúdasé'sk Shá'yí, and his heart and windpipe into the river, where each became an island (Nymán and Leer 1993:2-7). She spoke about Taku Glacier, which surges periodically, forming an impassable barrier across the river. During one surge, Thlingit people first discovered neighbors living across the glacier when they lost a stone adze and heard voices responding to their cries of distress. She recounted Yanyé'dí clan origins and history, telling how people traveled on that river, paying respectful attention to the glacier, and how her own father, who understood glaciers to be sentient

discussed by Fryer and Lynn (n.d.), and on Sakhalin by Grant (1995:160-169). Erich Kasren reports similar events from his ongoing research on Kamchatka (personal communication, 1994).

3. These issues are thoroughly discussed in Bauman and Sawin 1991, Dow and Luxfield 1991, Karp 1991, Lass 1989, Lanke 1990, Tuohy 1991, and Wilson 1976.

4. This connection is evident, for instance, in Darnell's investigation of Cree narrative performance (1974), in Tedlock's analysis of an emerging dialogic model in anthropology (1979, 1983), in Sarri's reflections about conversations that accompany oral storytelling processes (1993) and in Basso's close attention to relationships between storytelling and the meanings of place (1996). These issues are discussed further in Tedlock and Mannheim 1995.

5. Innis 1930, 1950:215-217, 1951. See also Stamps 1995:41-96.

6. Stordahl (1993) has discussed how an idiom of distinctive dress or music that worked effectively as identity markers for one generation of Saami now appears restrictive to younger people, who insist that Saami identity can coexist with modern dress and popular music. Dorais (1988), Hédican (1991), Levin (1993) and others document how, across northern Canada, conventionalized identity markers develop discrepant meanings.

7. An editorial in *Northern Perspectives* urges that "an effective system . . . be developed to collect and classify native knowledge, particularly with respect to northern resources, environment and culture" (Canadian Arctic Resources Committee 1992:2; emphasis added). The newsletter *TEK TALK* identifies its purpose as "to further the recognition and understanding of TEK in the decision making process, and to promote networking among those interested in TEK" (UNESCO 1992:1).

8. This problem is thoroughly discussed in Dyck 1996, Feit 1988, Keesing 1994, Morrow and Hensel 1992, and Rusforth 1992.

9. Initially, organizers described their goal as emulating storytelling festivals in Chartres, France; Jonesborough, Tennessee; and Toronto, Ontario. Retrospectively, and with growing First Nations participation on the board of directors, they attribute inspiration for the festival to Angela Sidney, an elder of Tagish and Tlingit ancestry who attended the Toronto Storytelling Festival in 1984 and returned eager to hold a similar event in the Yukon. Her role is described in a booklet published by the Yukon International Storytelling Festival and the Northern Research Institute (1994).

10. See also Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1994:209. When I visited Mr. Hammond at his home a year earlier, he showed me a framed letter written to Daanaawak in 1885 by Henry Nichols, a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, during tense negotiations with Tlingit chiefs. Following Daanaawak's example, Hammond assumed a role as an intermediary between Tlingits and non-Tlingits.

11. See, for example, Kitty Smith's version in Cruikshank 1990.

12. See Basso 1996, Cruikshank 1990:11, Karl 1956, and Tom 1987 for discussions of significance of place names to memory.

place, and the ceremonial objects associated with both become focal points by which cultural memory resists faceless bureaucracy. Land has been central to ongoing public discussions in the Yukon for more than two decades, but conceptions of place conveyed in these performances differ from the precise legal language in which they are articulated in legislation now known as Bill C-33 and Bill C-34.

A story now heard in the Yukon describes a visitor invited to a primary school classroom in the early 1990s asking children what they hoped to do when they finished school. A youngster waved his hand enthusiastically. His occupational choice? "A land claims negotiator!" While usually told to illustrate the inertia accompanying a generation of negotiations, the story has a more optimistic side. The Umbrella Final Agreement is in no way a finite, bounded solution but is more like the unfinished and unfinishable projects Harold Innis once referred to as "the breath of cultural life" (CBC 1994). As the hard work of implementing land claims settlements continues, daily exchange of stories in everyday conversation allows those who feel marginalized by the process to disrupt commonsense understandings of just how "settled" such settlements are. Sites such as the Yukon storytelling festival provide locations for engaged exposure to different perspectives and opportunities to investigate how local knowledge and social action are mediated by dialogue. We cannot know the outcomes of such transactions, nor can we expect them to be tidy, but we can learn a great deal if we take seriously the social agency of the participants.

**Notes**

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1. This imagery is challenged by Balicki 1959, Brody 1987, Fienup-Riordan 1990 and 1995, and Fitzhugh and Crowell 1955.

2. For Greenland, see Hanson 1958; for northern Scandinavia, see Nordic Saami Institute 1969-92, and for the Kola Peninsula, see Hiltunen 1965. In Siberia these issues are

ways that Bakhtin might see as undermining conventional understandings. Innis as rejeuicating a temporal dimension into discussions of place, and Benjamin as providing a coherent conceptual framework.

Austin Hammond linked material culture with narrative to illustrate that an ancient copper, a fiber robe, and a story are all deeds to land. Audience members were moved to see ceremonial regalia usually separated from the world by glass in metropolitan museums transported in suitcases by car from coastal Tlingit homes to Benjamin's storyteller. This challenges the familiar museum paradigm that objects are primary and words illustrative. Spectators familiar with the Tlingit claims process during his tenure as clan leader recognize that Hammond's story documented how historical patterns repeat themselves in the alienation of Lukaxax-adi clan lands; by the Presbyterian church in the late 19th century, and by government in the early 20th century, and by forestry companies in the 1990s.

Bessie and Roddy Blackjack frame their presentation with reference to genealogy and place. Transition from Roddy's stories to Bessie's songs underscores Innis's idea that a sound-based paradigm can contribute to cultural remembrance (Stamps 1995:66). Bessie's songs anchor history to land and make place central to her understanding of the connections between present and past as she maps events on the rivers, lakes, and trails connecting the territories in which she, her parents, and her grandparents traveled.

Elizabeth Nyman uses geographical features to map family and clan histories that she learned as a child and now transmits in terms applauded by some, contested by others, and opaque to many members of her audience. Her story, told to three distinct audiences—readers of her book, listeners at the storytelling festival, and elders at their own meetings two weeks later—illustrates Benjamin's principle that narrative frames "facts" differently for different audiences.

Jessie Scarff speaks to us in more directly accessible language, but she inverts conventional categories—making a performance of performance in a way that Bakhtin would surely find carnivalesque—by posing archival research as the source of an elder's ethnographic authority, by reminding us that "First Nations" were defined not long ago as "squatters," and by challenging our preconceptions about storytelling with her hard-hitting narrative.

Using stories, regalia, place-names, and songs, each performer signals the importance of land and kinship as attachment points for memory. Following Innis, we see how annexation of territories, extraction of minerals, and layers of bureaucratic administration have exerted pressures both on land and on longstanding institutions associated with kinship. Genealogy,

13. In recording Mrs. Nyman's Inland Tlingit language, Jeff Leer devised a spelling system different from that used by the Dauenhauers for Coastal Tlingit. I follow the Dauenhauers' spellings for Austin Hammond's account and Leer's for Elizabeth Nyman's.

14. This is an ironic restatement of implicit assumptions that storytelling is an activity primarily for children. This nondominant stereotype became even more complex in a performance not discussed here, where the Kwanlin Daa First Nation invited to the 1994 festival Ellen Gabriel, a prominent Mohawk activist who played an important role during the confrontation between Mohawks, Quebec police, and the Canadian army during 1992. They advertised her appearance as one by a "children's writer and artist" but anticipated, correctly, that she would use her time to restate publicly her opposition to land claims negotiations with the Canadian state.

15. As examples, see Berger 1977, Nuttall 1982, and Paine 1982.

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with the implementation phase; the remaining 12 were still preparing to do so. Claims made by adjacent First Nations inevitably overlap, forcing communities into competition with one another. Kwanlin Dän members, engulfed by an urban community, see themselves as particularly disadvantaged because waterfront lands they might otherwise select have been alienated by territorial, municipal, and industrial interests, and also because their urban setting draws a membership from throughout the Yukon, giving them a less-cohesive constituency than some other First Nations. Now that an overall agreement has been finalized, the urgency for governments to settle claims with individual communities is decreasing and Kwanlin Dän members have expressed concerns that as one of the most complex claims, theirs may receive low priority. Mrs. Scarff's comments underscore these widening material disparities among Yukon First Nations.

The Kwanlin Dän tactic startled its audience but achieved its intended effect, conveying a clear message that the land claims process does not satisfy everyone. In the following days, newspaper and radio coverage, though not necessarily supporting their position, featured presentations by Kwanlin Dän members about their claims to waterfront lands. A cartoon in a local newspaper showed a child being dragged into the storytelling festival by a mother urging, "Come on, it will be fun!" (*Whitehorse Star*, June 30, 1994:10).<sup>14</sup> Yet Mrs. Scarff's message was not so different from the more oblique storytelling strategies used by Austin Hammond, Roddy and Bessie Blackjack, and Elizabeth Nyman: it just fit more clearly within dominant paradigms and hence violated shared perceptions of some audience members about the kind of storytelling appropriate at a cultural festival.

### Discussion: The Social Life of Stories

Questions about the social power of storytelling have intrigued students of human behavior for generations, just as they now animate social action from the Arctic to the South Pacific. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, with some urgency Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Innis independently imagined the power of oral tradition to destabilize commonsense categories, to promote non-confrontational ways of reevaluating hegemonic concepts, to encourage dialogue rather than monologue. Drawing on classical and medieval texts, they were concerned primarily with what they saw as the diminishing power of oral dialogue in human affairs. But at the end of the 20th century, there is growing evidence that orality remains a powerful force in the world, and its consequences are open to investigation. The November 1995 execution of Nigerian writer and activist

The Star congratulates Indian Superintendent Hawksley on his wisdom in moving Indians, houses, tents, bags and baggage from the swamp above the town to a point below town on the left limit of the river. Ever since the Indians founded a village above the river three years ago this paper has waged a campaign to have them removed but it never received a word of encouragement either from the authorities or from the citizens. Now that the Indians are gone it is hoped any further move to establish a village so near town will promptly be nipped in the bud. It is better for the Indians that they should be away by themselves and it is certainly better for the town that they not be camped so close to the water supply. [*Whitehorse Star*, October 22, 1913]

The third letter, reminding audiences that this was no mere episode from ancient history, was written by a former Yukon Commissioner to the Whitehorse mayor on February 21, 1962:

Commencing immediately, the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources and the Government of the Yukon Territory will be removing buildings located on Crown land in Whiskey Flats, Moccasin Flats, Sleepy Hollow, West of Eighth Avenue and on Two Mile Hill. At present we will be moving only those buildings which are not being used for residential purposes. Later in the season, when the cold weather moderates, we will undertake the removal of buildings which are occupied as residences.

Yours sincerely,  
F. H. Collins, Commissioner

The tone of her presentation was clear, didactic, and uncompromising: these removals had affected her, her family, and her friends. "What we have got, we like to share, but we don't like to be stepped on." While the audience response was tepidly polite following her performance, some people could be overheard expressing discomfort or even hostility as they left. The clear consensus of several non-Native visitors with whom I spoke casually afterward was that "politics" had no place at a storytelling festival. Indigenous members of the audience, more divided in assessments of her performance, formulated their appraisals with reference to contested views about the validity of Kwanlin Dän's claims.

What was the larger context for Jessie Scarff's comments? They emerge from discussions among members of the Kwanlin Dän First Nation about lands claimed in ongoing negotiations with the federal government. While Yukon-wide land claims and self-government agreements were virtually in place by summer 1994, awaiting ratification by the government of Canada, those agreements now require individual communities to negotiate the details of specific claims directly with federal negotiators. At the time of this festival, only four Yukon First Nations had actually completed the specific negotiations that will allow them to proceed

Superficially, a fourth example departs strikingly from the indirect storytelling styles discussed above. In 1994, the Kwanlin Dän First Nation, whose territories fall within the municipality of Whitehorse, volunteered to cosponsor the storytelling festival. From their perspective, the festival offers untested ground to publicly challenge the formal Yukon land claims negotiation process. They encouraged their elders to speak about their memories of the waterfront, now in the downtown city center.

One elder who spoke on the same day as the Blackjacks and Mrs. Nyman was Jessie Scarff, a long-term resident of Whitehorse and an astute observer of Native-white relations, with lengthy experience interacting with people from all sectors of the community. She used her performance time to outline the forcible removal of indigenous people from the Yukon River waterfront between 1915 and the mid-1960s. She began by stating where she was born and when she had moved to Whitehorse, pointing out that her first Whitehorse home had been very close to the present storytelling festival site. She told us that she had recently been "doing research in the archives" (an ironic pronouncement from an elder in her seventies) and had come upon some documents she wanted to read to us. She went on to talk about how indigenous people living on the waterfront had been classified as "squatters"—a pointed contrast with the contemporary convention of referring to "First Nations"—and then read from documents that had been duplicated on a pamphlet being distributed to festivalgoers at that very moment.

The first was a letter written to the Department of Indian Affairs, on October 14, 1915, by an Indian agent, John Hawksley. She read:

Sir  
The White Pass & Yukon Transportation Co. have ordered the Indians at Whitehorse to move from their land where they are now squatted. While at Whitehorse, in company with Inspector Bell of the R.N.W.M.P. (Royal Northwest Mounted Police) and two of the White Pass Officials I have selected a piece of land (10 acres) at the city hills (north of the town for an Indian Reserve. It is situated on the bank of the river, there is good water and woods supply. I hereby apply to you for permission to have these two pieces of land surveyed and duly recorded as Indian Reserves.

John Hawksley  
Indian Superintendent

The second recorded the response from the local newspaper, the *Whitehorse Star*, a week later, reminding the by-now-awkward audience of the history of racism in the town. She read:

beings, used to remind the Taku Glacier, "We don't want trouble. We want to go [travel] back and forth [on the river]." She emphasized her need to reconfirm, through her words, Yanyédi claims to the Taku River:

I'm glad to see everyone understands it, understands every word we say. When I see they don't believe it, I think they should believe it, like my dad, like my stepmother. Now it is my turn to tell. The Tákhu River hears me, and if I say anything bad, he hears me.

Giving only the slightest hint that what she was saying might be contested by others, she continued:

The new generation think we want to claim Tákhu, but we don't. We just want people to respect it, like the old generation. It's not that I want to take Taku River and pack it around!

As she spoke that day, she conveyed the impression of a quiet, gracious elder patiently recounting universal history as a way of publicly restating her clan's connection to place, echoing the style used by Austin Hammond a year earlier. The complexity of her speech became more apparent two weeks later, on July 9, when she addressed a group of Tlingit elders among whom Yanyédi claims are contested, at Brooks Brook, 90 miles south of Whitehorse. There, she began by acknowledging that she faced challenges about her right to prepare her book. "People say I wrote that book because I want to make a name for myself. That's not true. I did it so I could tell them our history." But as she retold her Yanyédi history, this time speaking in Tlingit, translated to English for the benefit of younger people, it became clear that her audience included many who support a competing version of clan history: one that challenges specific Yanyédi claims. Such claims are not simply part of past history; they continue to play a critical role in contemporary politics because each version has implications for the implementation of land claims agreements. Recording clan histories does not freeze them in a static state, as some might argue: on the contrary, it generates fresh debates about conflicting and competing versions (see Cohen 1989).

At the storytelling festival with its mixed audience, such controversy was masked as Mrs. Nyman restated that her primary purpose in telling clan history is to bequeath this legacy to her descendants in a form they can understand clearly (Nyman and Leer 1993:xxii). As she phrased it in her book:

I will not live forever.  
But those who come after you will read it.  
If only you were taken by boat along the Taku River.  
You could write down the whole story in a book.

(Nyman and Leer 1993:23)

Ken Saro-Wiwa reminds us how deeply threatening autocratic regimes still find the spoken words of storytellers.

Bakhtin, with his energetic appreciation of the destabilizing possibilities of folk humor, struggled in 1930s Russia to imagine subversion in totalitarian states. Any adequate reading of contemporary culture, in his view, required an understanding of how ordinary people have used oral communication strategies to resist arbitrary power. Bakhtin's reference point was Russian peasant culture and his target the increasingly authoritarian Soviet state in which he lived. He drew his examples from how medieval French peasants used ribald, satirical humor to challenge authority through carnivals (Bakhtin 1984).

A decade later, Walter Benjamin grappled with similar issues engulfing Europe during the early years of Hitler's ascendancy. He noted the insidious consequences of deteriorating dialogue in modern society, attributing this at least partly to the diminishing role of the storyteller. As communications technology proliferates, he argued, information becomes fragmented and detached from the moral philosophical guidance we think of as knowledge and might once even have called wisdom. The power of narrative storytelling lies in its capacity to interweave such elements by combining drama and practical experience with moral content. Storytelling, in his view, is open-ended rather than didactic, allowing listeners to draw independent conclusions. Medieval storytellers recounted events without imposing interpretation, and their practice had equally important consequences for the arts of telling and the arts of listening. By the very act of telling stories, narrators explore how their meanings work: by listening, audiences can think about how those meanings apply to their own lives. Stories allow listeners to embellish events, to reinterpret them, to mull over what they hear, and to learn something new each time, providing raw material for developing philosophy. (Benjamin 1983: Stamps 1995:23-40). Once interactive storytelling is replaced by mechanical communication, he alleged, human experience becomes devalued.

Writing from Canada, Harold Innis proposed that Arctic and subarctic regions provide a visual template for the modernist tendency to conceptualize time as spatially laid out, mechanically segmented, and linear. Colonial projects, he observed, move forward by devising and reinforcing categories—objectivity, subjectivity, space, time—that encourage the annexation of territories and the subjugation of former inhabitants (Innis 1986:12-14). Gradually, those at the center monopolize what comes to be considered rational discourse and marginalize those who speak in a different idiom. Innis admitted the structural characteristics of oral tradition and saw it as having potential to balance spatial with

temporal concepts by reinjecting an appreciation for the importance of qualitative time in human affairs. Oral tradition permits continuous revision of history by actively reinterpreting events and then incorporating such constructions into the next generation of narrative. Its flexibility allows a gifted storyteller to adapt a given narrative to make sense of a confusing situation. Like Benjamin, he believed that orally transmitted narratives develop in their hearers a capacity to listen, a detecting skill in an age of ever-fragmenting information (Innis 1980:64-100, 215-217; Stamps 1995:48-51, 65-96).

Such questions have also stimulated conversations between ethnographers and oral storytellers with whom they work. For instance, Paul Radin with Crash-In Thunder in 1920 (Radin 1928), Marcel Griaule with Ogotemmeli in 1948 (Griaule 1985), and Kevin Dwyer with Fagir Muhammad during the early 1970s (Dwyer 1982). Dell Hymes foregrounds the work of storytellers who, despite concerns that their work may be in vain, persist in trying to communicate with their listeners (1981). Keith Basso's Apache colleagues situate their stories in named places as a way to influence listeners who ignore messages at their peril (1996). Greg Sarris draws on Mabel Mackey's stories to underscore his conviction that storytelling should build bridges and expand communication rather than close it down (1993; see also Marantao 1990:9). Such work reminds us that this transmission project is situated in a long ethnographic tradition that pays increasing attention to dialogue. As Dennis Tedlock insists, "The speaking storyteller is not merely addressing a hypothetical future audience . . . The world evidenced by the audible text, considered in its entirety, includes not only the world projected by the story proper but the world of the performer and audience" (1983:10).

This concept of storytelling as communication-based social action seems particularly germane in the contemporary Yukon. During a generation of hard claims negotiations, indigenous Yukoners have become increasingly attentive to international perspectives on their political struggles. The global stage on which their settlement is now evaluated seems strikingly different from the village meetings that led to slow, steady consensus building during the early 1970s. Since then, opportunities to attend international workshops, conferences, and meetings have allowed them to compare experiences with other indigenous peoples and to bring back narratives about what they have learned. Simultaneously, the larger world has become increasingly aware of northern peoples. If the first wave of enthusiasm for Arctic and subarctic territories was generated by demands for resources—furs, gold, minerals, oil, gas, hydroelectric power—the second focuses on addressing the social and ecological crises caused by

casual extraction procedures. But interest groups embedded in these debates seem unable to devise unambiguous models to evaluate competing urban demands for hydroelectric power, requirements of tundra ecosystems, or indigenous peoples' claims to rights of self-determination. With increasing numbers of qualitative variables, the translation process grows confrontational.

Given the range of ongoing policy decisions being made about northern land claims local government, industrial expansion, and Arctic militarization, the issue of how depictions of culture translate across cultural boundaries becomes critical from the perspective of indigenous people (Flaherty 1995). One current avenue for claiming legitimacy in liberal democracies is through demonstration of distinctive culture. Yet this creates new problems for indigenous people if the larger world essentializes indigenous voice, expecting all people from one community to say the same thing. The stakes for effective translation, often by diverse performers for heterogeneous audiences, become higher in a world where culture is a marker of authenticity in political negotiations and where conflicting folk models of culture operate simultaneously. A stereotype-filled setting such as the Yukon International Storytelling Festival provides an ideal location to investigate public, intercultural transactions as serious forms of social action.

Following Benjamin and Innis, a model of social action foregrounding communication makes listeners central to performance. Audiences participate by inscribing meaning on what they see and hear. Contemporary studies of cultural performance too often belittle the role of audiences, criticizing the power of the spectators' gaze to transform performers into victims of subjectivity or implying that audiences are vulnerable to duplicitous intentions and incapable of understanding what they see (Myers 1984:693). Performers at this festival take their audiences extremely seriously as witnesses. Broad endorsement of First Nations' claims is critical and speakers are aware that audiences at the festival, like those for land claims, include both distant and local supporters and critics (Brenniss 1987).

Minimally, performers at this festival are addressing four audiences, none of them homogeneous. First, there are international visitors, mostly indigenous guests from other northern countries who come to meet Yukoners and to compare personal, political, and artistic experiences. Second, tourists visiting the Yukon for summer sojourn attend the festival to experience an event that seems to typify local culture. Third are non-Native Yukoners, some who know performers personally and others whose experience of indigenous people comes largely through the rhetoric of land claims negotiations that have dominated formal interactions be-

tween Natives and newcomers for more than two decades. Fourth, indigenous Yukoners come as appreciative and critical listeners to applaud family and friends, to compare local stories with those told by visitors, and to evaluate the impact of Yukon storytelling on this very mixed audience.

The contemporary explosion of cultural festivals adds ideological freight—expectations of pedagogical instruction or aesthetic experience, nostalgia for lost spirituality and search for sacred tradition, or pure entertainment. Identities, as Jonathan Friedman (1992:837) notes, are carved out not in a vacuum but in a world already defined. Despite broad agreement about hearing perspectives on controversial issues directly from those directly affected rather than through intermediaries, nonindigenous audiences historically demonstrate preference for varying characteristics of voice. In the 1970s, the role of spokesperson was usually claimed by political activists involved in such processes as the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in northwestern Canada. Saami protests surrounding the Kautokeino-Alto Dam in northern Norway, settlement of Alaska land claims in the face of oil development, and the formulation of home rule in Greenland.<sup>19</sup> But the paradigm that indigenous peoples should portray their own cultures to a larger world has come to prominence within a pronounced global ideological shift to conservative values. Increasingly, it is Native artists who are now invited to speak to non-Native audiences. Ironically, indigenous people are once again indexed by artistic production, reviving the legacy discussed at the outset by objectifying culture through objects, photographs, and ethnographic film (Karp 1991; Myers 1994). Currently, we are more likely to hear indigenous political leaders described in the popular press as "out of touch" and visual artists, writers, and storytellers (especially when they deal with environmental themes) identified as providing more "authentic" projections of indigenous voice. When nonindigenous audiences understand Austin Hammond, Bessie Blackjack, and Elizabeth Nyman as performing authentic artistic tradition and Jessie Scarff as talking about politics, that inscription of meaning comes from audiences rather than from performers. Local indigenous audiences are more able to recognize all these performances as pushing home messages about self-determination and land rights.

Performances by these storytellers make it clear that they do not necessarily speak with one voice, that they do not consider themselves victims, and that their traditions—while actively mobilized in intercultural transactions—are not invented except insofar as cultural understandings are always creatively reinterpreted. They resolutely persist in connecting large issues to local contexts. They also connect categories in