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## Telling about Culture: Changing Traditions in Subarctic Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

JULIE CRUIKSHANK

*Where do these people come from? Outside?  
You tell different stories from us people.  
You people talk from paper.  
Me, I want to talk from Grandpa.  
Mrs. Annie Ned, Takhini Crossing?*

One of the liveliest areas of discussion in contemporary anthropology centres on how to convey authentically, in words, the experience of another culture. Anthropology's claims to provide authoritative interpretations of cultural experience are being challenged from both inside and outside the discipline (Rabinow 1977, Said 1979, Rosaldo 1980, Clifford 1983, Ellen 1984, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fisher 1986). The issue of how culture can be "told" is also a subject of considerable discussion in the communities where ethnographers have done their research. In fact, the development of a critical and articulate local audience for ethnographic writing is changing the shape and direction of ethnographic research and writing, particularly in northern Canada and Alaska.

The cultural context of fieldwork is changing in ways that may seem disconcerting to some researchers who worked in the North a generation ago. Organizers of a symposium on subarctic research at the 1986 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, for example, expressed concern about a diminishing contribution of Arctic and subarctic ethnography to cultural anthropology in recent years, suggesting that northern studies have been consigned to "oblivion" (Balicki and Myers 1987). Yet from the perspective of researchers based in the North during the 1970s and 1980s, there has actually been a recent explosion of critical local interest in ethnographic research in the North, generating a new audience for ethnographic writing and lively discussion about research questions and methods. There are a number of reasons for this—

the weight attributed to ethnographic evidence in land claims negotiations, concern by Native peoples about language loss, attempts to introduce cultural history and oral literature into northern classrooms.

At the same time, there is growing tension between goals of university-based anthropology and local stipulations for fieldworkers. This is particularly noticeable because the Arctic and subarctic were viewed as a ready-made "laboratory" for so long. Anthropologists no longer have the power to unilaterally decide where and how they will do fieldwork. Instead, research strategies negotiated locally and based on a model of *collaboration* are replacing more conventional models of university-initiated research. Increasing numbers of anthropologists and linguists are choosing to spend a significant portion of their professional careers based in northern Canada or Alaska. While the demands of working in a local context may preclude publication in academic journals, much of this collaborative research does fall within long-established traditions in subarctic ethnography.

My own perspective comes from living in the Yukon Territory and in Alaska during ten of the last eighteen years, much of that time working with a locally-based project, the Yukon Native Language Centre. During those years, specific changes seem to have occurred in the kinds of questions ethnographers are asking, the methods they use and the writing genres they select to present their work. In each case this can be illustrated most clearly by examples of locally-based collaborative projects.

### *Research Questions*

The history of ethnographic research in the Arctic and subarctic seems always to have reflected an interplay between detailed ethnographic documentation and general questions posed far from the North. What we are seeing in the 1980s seems to be an intensification of that process.

During the 1950s and 1960s northern societies were seen primarily as providing evidence for or against specific hypotheses about social organization. Julian Steward, for example, based his formulations about band organization at least in part on observations by Speck (1915) and Osgood (1936), and set terms of a debate carried on by Leacock (1954), Helm (1965), Knight (1965) and others over the years. In fact, questions about band organization

continue to provide the unifying theme of the recently-published *Subarctic Handbook* (ed. Helm 1981).

But as ethnographers began to see Athapaskan and Algonkian studies as research focus rather than just as evidence for more general theory, they were confronted with individual differences. Firm definitions of band society seemed to evaporate. Every attempt to produce a normative account generated further questions. People in northern communities did not always agree with one another, offering thoughtful but seemingly idiosyncratic responses. Following conferences on hunter-gatherers in the 1960s (Damas 1969, Lee and Devore 1968), efforts to document the *variety* of possible options available for social organization replaced some of the earlier determination to define general principles that would be broadly applicable to northern hunter-gatherers. By the 1960s a general post-war interest in acculturation models reached the subarctic. Murphy and Steward's influential paper (1956) on tappers and trappers used an acculturation model to predict inevitable assimilation of band societies into national industrial economies. So entrenched was this model by the 1960s that a whole series of Arctic and subarctic studies, many of them sponsored by the Canadian government, took acculturation as their main theme (Balicki 1963; Chance 1963; Honigmann 1966; Hoseley 1966; Vanstone 1965).

By the 1970s, Native northerners were becoming politically vocal about their own views of their society. In the mid-1970s hundreds of Dene addressed the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, and Yukon Indians spoke to the Alaska Highway Pipeline Inquiry protesting that they were not societies in transition but strongly committed to continuing their traditional way of life in the present (Berger 1977, Lysyk 1977, Asch 1982). Across the North, attention to land claims has sparked a corresponding interest in documenting "cultural persistence" (Felt 1982): a notion that ultimately has strong roots in archeology and field ethnology.

There seems to be an unresolved conflict between models of stability and models of change in Arctic and subarctic anthropology (see also Ray 1986). Native northerners have been quick to draw attention to shifting fashions by pointing to studies they find misleading; for example, acculturation studies of the sixties have come under intense criticism.<sup>3</sup> They are suggesting that if anthropologists want to work in their communities, local people should have a role in defining some of the questions for research.

### *Fieldwork Models*

If research questions are being re-evaluated, so are the methods anthropology uses to derive its data. Since the 1920s, participant-observation has been the cultural activity that defined anthropology. The inherent contradiction posed by simultaneously participating in the life of a community and dispassionately observing daily events has long been recognized by fieldworkers; however, as long as the demands of the academic institution were stronger than the demands of the community, observation was the component most valued. Increasingly, aboriginal people have their own ideas about the kind of relationship they want to establish with an anthropologist. Their expectations include considerably more sustained participation from the ethnographer than was the norm in the past. While this is certainly a contentious issue, it has to be addressed by every ethnographer working in the North.

The model being negotiated in some northern communities is one based on collaboration between participants rather than research "by" the anthropologist "on" the community. Such collaboration has local people and the ethnographer jointly specify terms under which research will be conducted and a final report produced. While the resulting demands may be extremely time-consuming and long term for the ethnographer, such work does provide perspectives on questions central to anthropology. One of the more interesting questions may be how "subjective" and "objective" realities become blurred in such research, and how the personal reaction of the investigator to collaboration affects the kinds of questions asked.

### *Ethnographic Writing*

Writing is the other side of fieldwork. Readership of classic northern ethnographies is shifting from an academic audience to a politically astute Native audience, particularly as land claims negotiations in the North begin to attribute unexpected weight to ethnographic evidence. However, the contradiction between the strict limitations imposed by any fieldwork situation, and the model of authority that written ethnographies are expected to emulate means that books with titles like "the Han Indians" (Osgood 1971) or "the Kaska Indians" (Honigsmann 1954) or "the Upper Tanana Indians" (McKenna 1959) have a tendency to disappoint this new readership.

Attention to various ways of writing about cultural experience has generated a good deal of experimentation in recent years (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In the North, issues of authorship, ownership and copyright are all being redefined and a range of ideas is being tried. One possibility involves working with local people to prepare their own version of a research report under their own authorship. Another option, particularly appropriate for documenting language and oral tradition, involves assigning copyright to the narrator and producing publications under that narrator's authorship. However, such strategies do not bring northern research into the academic mainstream.

### *Collaborative Research*

A framework of collaboration imposes specific structural requirements on research. Collaboration necessarily involves more than one conscious investigator. Instead of a social scientist asking questions in order to acquire raw data, the design and implementation of such research inevitably requires a great deal of attention to "insider" interpretations. Collaborative research, in fact, moves us away from questions about social structure and social behaviour and toward questions of symbol and meaning.

Much of the research now ongoing in the western subarctic seems consistent with a growing interest in communication and language in anthropology — in the ways individuals mobilize symbolic resources to talk about their experience. This is a reflection of several factors: a continuing scholarly tradition of attention to northern Athapaskan world views by linguists and ethnographers like Sapir (1949), McClellan (1975), Ridington (1986) and others; the concentrated focus on documentation of language and narrative texts at centres based in Alaska and Canada; and the increasing attention paid by Northern Athapaskans to documenting their own history and culture during the last decade.

A growing number of northern researchers have benefited from both this long tradition of scholarship and from a perspective on local research goals gained from living in the North. Some brief examples of locally-based collaborative research in the Yukon may illustrate its overall continuity with traditions of subarctic ethnography.

The most striking change during the last decade has been the growing interest of both elders and younger people in documenting

their own culture in their own voices. Initially, such documentation involved production of booklets of stories, place names and genealogies as they were recorded with specific elder storytellers (Sidney and others 1977; Sidney 1980, 1982, 1983; Smith 1982; Ned 1984). Their interest in this work at least partly reflects their understanding of how instructional techniques have changed during the last decade. Each of these elders received her education either from her own direct experience or from verbal descriptions or instructions from others. An ultimate value of oral tradition was the ability to recreate a situation for someone who had not experienced it so that the listener could benefit directly from the narrator's experience (see McClellan (1975:66-7) and Ridington (1982) for a discussion of this). Elders' faith in oral tradition has to do both with their own experience of its effectiveness and with the direct relationship of teacher and listener. But they understand that in contemporary educational institutions power rests with the written word, and they want to devise ways of translating their knowledge into other forms of presentation.

More recently, Native researchers interested in and trained to do their own cultural documentation have done so in a variety of genres. Gertie Tom, for example, is a Tutchone language specialist who has worked with linguists and anthropologists to produce a bilingual booklet about tanning moosehides (Tom 1981) and an extensive study of place names in the eastern Yukon Territory as well as narratives associated with those toponyms (Tom 1987). Daniel Tlen, a Southern Tutchone linguist, undertook a Yukon-wide survey of Native language programmes and produced a comprehensive assessment of future programme requirements (Tlen 1986). Mary Easterson, a Southern Tutchone woman who combined anthropology and education courses for her university degree, has regularly written articles about culture history in the North (for example, Easterson 1987). Carol Geddes, an accomplished film director of Tlingit and Tutchone ancestry, has received national recognition for her work (Geddes 1987) and has recently directed a film documenting storytelling traditions in the Yukon (Geddes 1986). Louise Profeit LeBlanc is making an ongoing contribution to the revival of storytelling by younger Yukon women. Lu Johns-Penikett worked with a broadly-based group to organize a potlatch conference in the southern Yukon and has documented the variety of potlatch traditions discussed at that conference (Penikett 1986). These are only a few of the Athapaskan

and Tlingit men and women actively involved in such documentation, and in many cases their work has been part of collaborative research made possible through locally-based associations like the Council for Yukon Indians, the Yukon Native Language Centre or the Yukon Historical and Museums Association.

Some of the very detailed documentation of place names occurring throughout the North (Muller-Wille 1984; Ritter, ongoing; Karl 1982; Sidney 1980; Cruikshank 1981) originated from collaborative efforts among elders, linguists, ethnographers and geographers to document Native land use. However, this research has generated interest in the ways people *use* place names to talk about the past. Renato Rosaldo's work on place names in the Philippines (1980a), Keith Basso's research on Apache place names (1984) and Frances Harwood's research in the Trobriands (1976) all suggest that place names are complex mnemonic devices. Research involving Athapaskan speakers in the subarctic indicates that they, too, use named landscape features to talk about the passage of time.

There is also considerable local interest in reconstructing genealogies in the Yukon. The major reason Athapaskan people give for initiating this work is their desire to assemble a pool of personal family names which may be given to children appropriately. Much of this seems related to notions of "self," whereby individuals share qualities with others who have been given the same names. In the course of compiling extensive genealogies, considerable information is becoming available about movement and marriage patterns within and across local groups, and about ways people manipulate their genealogies to claim membership in different groups at different times. This local initiative may contribute to our understanding of the nature and composition of local groups (Sidney 1983; Tom 1987).

Text collection, translation and analysis have particular importance for studies of symbol and meaning. The detailed narrative texts already recorded at the Alaska Native Language Center and the Yukon Native Language Centre by Athapaskan speakers trained to write their own languages offer insights into the workings of Athapaskan language. They also illustrate the ways narrative, and metaphors derived from narrative, are used to talk about everyday life. The relationship between stories and social life is not a simple one: stories with a range of plots and outcomes provide narrators with a way to use the traditional dimension of culture to discuss troubling contemporary issues—the relationship of an

individual to his or her social group, the ambiguities involved in a marriage to a distant group, the efforts to retain strong family ties. They also provide narrators with ways to talk about and interpret their own actions on various occasions in the past; a striking example of this is the way women narrators may have acted with autonomy at critical points in their lives but use oral tradition to characterize their innovations as essentially conservative, stressing that they were really behaving in an "old-fashioned" way.

Collaborative research may actually alter the direction of specific research projects, blurring any clear line between investigator and the person being interviewed. One of my continuing interests during the years I have lived in the North has been recording life histories with elderly Athapaskan women whom I have known for more than a decade. A central feature of their accounts has been the women's insistence on including long passages of traditional narrative to explain certain aspects of their lives. When I asked them to talk about events that I knew had affected them, they would begin by doing so, then shift to a traditional narrative they wanted me to record. While these accounts initially seemed archaic and closer to our definition of "myth" than to personal accounts of a "life," I came to see them as embodying a culturally-distinct interpretation of everyday events. They also provide the necessary context for understanding the metaphors narrators use to reflect on their lives (Cruikshank 1987). These collaborative accounts bring two different perspectives to the documentation of personal experience and may, in turn, make some contribution to anthropological studies of life history.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, then, from a northern perspective, ethnographic research is continuing as intensely as ever in the Arctic and subarctic, though under different circumstances. If that work seems consigned to oblivion, it may be because there are very few mechanisms to connect individuals living and working in the North with universities having northern research interests. It also says more about the ways knowledge is circulated within the profession of anthropology than it does about the quantity or quality of work occurring in the North. The challenge remains one of bridging diverging streams so that locally-based projects can

achieve some visibility within anthropology and so that anthropology can provide some ethnographic guidance to groups and individuals documenting languages and cultural history in the North.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1986 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, in the session "The Oblivion of an Ethnographic Area: Hunter-Gatherer Studies in the Arctic and Subarctic" organized by Fred Myers and Asen Balikci.
- <sup>2</sup> In 1982, the Yukon Historical and Museums Association sponsored a small conference in the community of Haines Junction, in the southwest Yukon. The laudable aim of the conference was to have archaeologists from across Canada and local elders exchange ideas about Yukon prehistory in a relatively informal setting. Not surprisingly, academics did most of the talking. Mrs. Ned, already in her nineties, sat all day listening patiently while one archeologist after another presented papers describing current research. Finally, late in the day, she stood up and made this comment.
- <sup>3</sup> A full-page article in a major Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, Aug. 23, 1986, featured a sustained attack by people from Snowdrift, NWT on an anthropological study done in their community in the late 1960s; this book was considered a classic when I was an undergraduate twenty years ago. Resentment of anthropologists is not uncommon in the North, but this article was singular for the outrage expressed by the local people (and for the rather simple way in which it was reported in the paper).

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