Introduction: Changing Traditions in Northern Ethnography

JULIE CRUIKSHANK

On a windy Friday evening in late June, 1994, hundreds of people crowded into three large tents erected in a Whitehorse park bordering the Yukon River. We were there to participate in the opening of the seventh annual Yukon International Storytelling Festival. One of the first speakers that evening was Mrs. Violet Storer, a Kwanlin Dun First Nation elder from Whitehorse. Daniel Tlen, Master of Ceremonies, introduced Mrs. Storer as a lay anthropologist and referred to her ongoing work documenting the recent history of life along the river. As Mrs. Storer began to speak, she wove her own memories of a childhood growing up on the Yukon River with stories she heard from *her* elders in the course of her work. Mrs. Storer also spoke the following day, and again she was introduced to the audience as a lay anthropologist. When I visited with her at home a few days later, she told me in more detail about the research that has engaged her for the last few years—interviewing, recording and translating accounts from elders and documenting her own memories.

Three months earlier, Mrs. Storer was one of several Yukoners who travelled to Juneau, Alaska, to attend a very different kind of gathering—the annual conference of the Alaska Anthropology Association. Held at a downtown Juneau hotel, it featured three days of formal papers presented by anthropologists whose work focuses on northwestern North America. Five First Nations students, including Marilyn Jensen, Ingrid Johnson, and Alice Carlick from the Yukon, Pam Brown from Waglisla (Bella Bella) British Columbia and Miranda Wright from Alaska each presented research papers at that conference.[1]

These two events contribute to an ongoing history of anthropology in the North. They show how anthropological objectives and paradigms are being re-evaluated as elders and younger people from indigenous communities address concerns about cultural representation at public festivals, in popular and academic writings, in museum and gallery exhibits and in the media. Anthropology has long described itself as a comparative study trying, as Edward Said now rephrases it ". . . to get a perspective beyond one's own nation, to see some sort of whole instead of the defensive little patch offered by one's own culture, literature, and history" (Said 1994: 43). This is a laudable aim, Said would agree, but his recent book *Culture and Imperialism* is a testimony to how that vision has failed, how western values have continued to permeate historical, ethnographic and literary works. Said's critique rests with the methods of the comparativists, and one of his objectives is to raise more fundamental questions about how we can actually engage with and comprehend other societies, traditions and histories. One place to begin, he suggests, is to listen as indigenous peoples intervene in the academic discourse about themselves in ways that challenge ideas about established truth.

For those of us who have lived and worked in northern Canada and Alaska, some of the most stimulating developments now occurring in research relating to social sciences and humanities come from First Nations students who are incorporating formal training in anthropology, linguistics, and historical methods with their own bank of cultural knowledge (see McClellan 1981: 41). During the last two decades, there have been energetic and heated debates within each of these disciplines about how questions, assumptions, paradigms and practices are changing. One of the most productive and far-reaching critiques of anthropology, for instance, concerns the objectivist paradigm that dominated the discipline until recently—the idea that it is possible to write about the real world without locating one's position in that world. It is now widely acknowledged that in any research situation, the interviewer will inevitably be the one who makes the interpretation intelligible in his or her own terms, and such interpretations will depend how the interviewer is historically, culturally, politically and morally positioned (see, for example, Limon 1991, Linden 1993, and Narayan 1993).

Anthropologists are being forced to re-evaluate how we can investigate, write about and teach in a contemporary world that is becoming increasingly complex—how we can create an anthropology of the present (Fox 1991). Those of us who do research with First Nations communities in northwestern North America and who teach students from these communities in our classrooms discuss this issue daily. Michael Kew, for instance, speaking of a lifetime of research and teaching at the University of British Columbia, reminds us how conventions of ethnographic authority have changed:

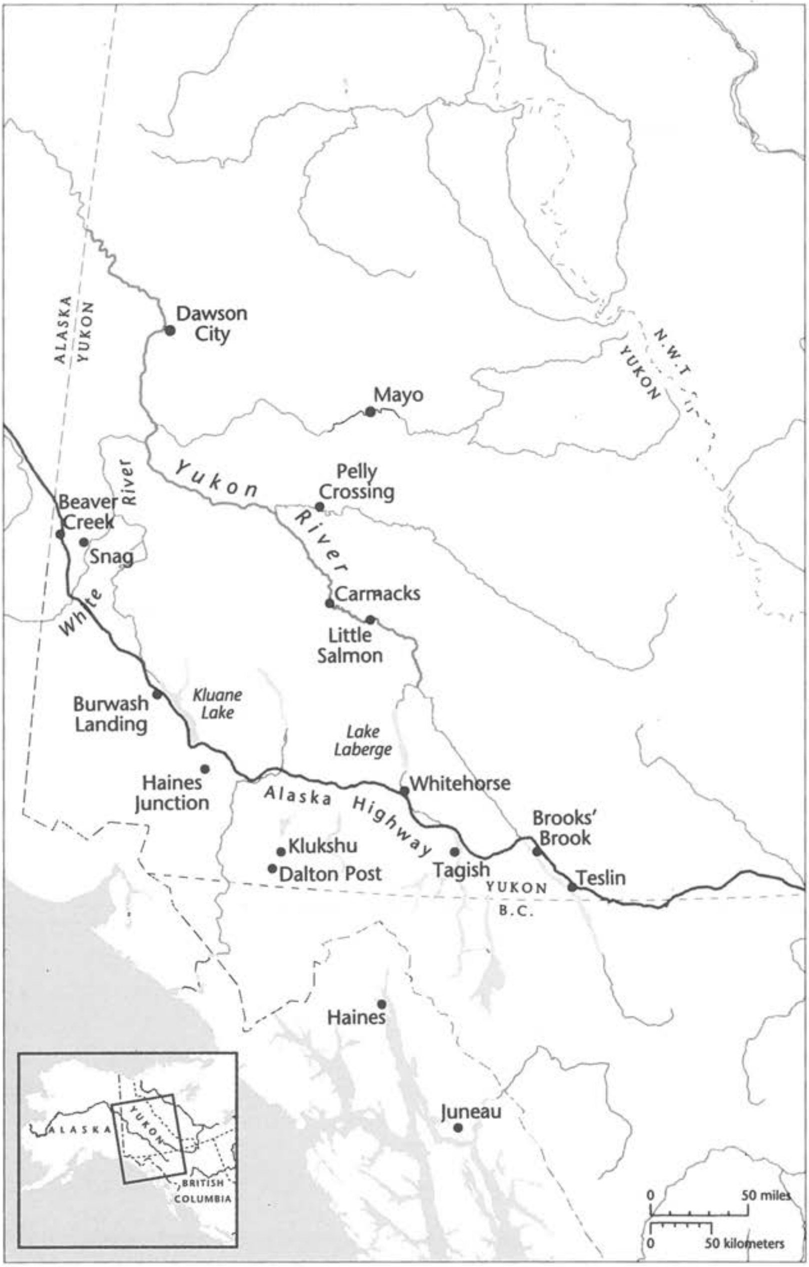
> The most sobering questions which an anthropology teacher may face at the conclusion of a lecture about indigenous Canadian cultures will come

> from First Nations students who ask: How do you know that? Why do you say that? What gives you the right to say that about us? . . . Such simple and ancient questions are at the root of challenges to our conventional ways of thinking in anthropology, which in recent decades have ushered in the era of reflexive approaches to ethnography—accounting for oneself, the observer, in a critical way when presenting a descriptive account. We are much more likely now not to accept any account as it stands but first to search out the conceptual models and methods which underlie and shape it. In fact, if we are honest and reflective we are asking of ourselves those same questions which we hear from First Nations people. These heavily critical approaches within anthropology and the demanding questions from the subjects of research are connected. They are both related to the changing world scene in which colonial empires are crumbling and independence movements shaking old ways (Kew 1993-94: 83-4).

It was because we are fundamentally concerned with these issues and because we feel implicated in the history of anthropology in northwestern North America that Phyllis Morrow and I organized a session "Changing Traditions: Anthropology in Northwestern North America" at the Alaska Anthropology Association Meetings, March 31-April 2, 1994 in Juneau. We each developed our interest in anthropology working in community-based cultural documentation projects—Phyllis in Alaska, and me in the southern Yukon Territory. When we returned to university as mature students, we each brought to our studies an intense interest in problems we heard raised in those communities. We now work with students from some of these same communities who bring *their* questions, experiences, and critical approaches to their anthropological training. Each of the five women from Yukon, Alaska and British Columbia who presented papers in this session has gone on to prepare a written version of her presentation for this special feature of *The Northern Review.*

Marilyn Jensen, a young woman of Tagish and Tlingit ancestry from the Yukon Territory, received her B.A. in anthropology from the University of Alaska, Anchorage, in 1992. Just as she graduated, the Council for Yukon Indians [now Council for Yukon First Nations] learned that they had received federal funding to undertake an oral history project, the "Elders' Documentation Project" and Marilyn was immediately hired as a member of the research team. For more than a year and a half, she and her colleagues have conducted and transcribed detailed interviews with elders in different Yukon Communities.

Marilyn's paper discusses some of the issues she has faced doing anthropological research in her own community, and she assesses both the advantages and difficulties that community membership brings. She traces her growing awareness that the topics elders want to discuss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may change over time. When she and her colleagues began their interviews, they anticipated that they would be making a record of "the old ways." Instead they found elderly men and women more interested in talking about the changes that had occurred in their own lifetimes, especially the social transformation accompanying and following the construction of the Alaska Highway during the 1940s. She explains how she and the other interviewers were reminded that different generations of elders have had very different experiences, that stories about the past are also structured by contemporary relationships among people, and that documentation of cultural change is an ongoing process.

Ingrid Johnson comes from the Inland Tlingit community of Teslin, in the southern Yukon Territory. She began her studies in anthropology at Yukon College in Whitehorse and completed her B.A. in anthropology at University of British Columbia in spring 1993. Following graduation, she received funding from the Northern Research Institute at Yukon College to work with the staff of MacBride Museum in Whitehorse, making an inventory of Tlingit beaded work in the museum's collection and interviewing elders to learn about women's artistic traditions.

She brings to her research both the personal experience of growing up in a community where women engaged in artistic beadwork, and a longstanding interest in the relationship between material culture and oral tradition. As part of her project, she brought beaded work from the museum to women in southern Yukon communities, hoping to learn about the individual artists who had made each piece as well as details about beadwork techniques. Instead, she learned stories about people and places and ceremonies, and she heard songs women recalled as they examined, for example, a beaded wall pocket. She is continuing to investigate how women's artistic work intersects with domestic economy, matrilineal kinship, trade, and contemporary ideas about cultural heritage. Her paper focuses on issues arising from this project. In autumn, 1994, Ingrid began graduate studies in anthropology at University of British Columbia.

Alice Carlick comes from Kluane Lake, Yukon, where she has been active for many years in community education programs. She received a B.A. in English from University of British Columbia in spring of 1993. Then she, like Ingrid, received summer funding from the Northern Research Institute in the Yukon to help prepare curriculum materials for elementary schools, drawing on oral traditions from her own community. She went on to do a year of intensive teacher training and, in Fall 1994, she began teaching in the community of Upper Liard, in northern British Columbia.

Her paper at this conference focused on one of many narratives she learned as a child, "The Girl and the Grizzly." She is particularly interested in how her own cultural experience of hearing and learning from this story over many years adds a different perspective to the approaches she learned from anthropology and literature during her years in university. As a teacher in a small northern community, she is especially interested in how oral tradition can be integrated into school curricula and classroom experiences for children.

Pam Brown, a Heiltsuk woman from Waglisla (Bella Bella), British Columbia, has a Master's degree in anthropology from University of British Columbia and is currently a Curator of Ethnology at the university's Museum of Anthropology. She writes about an exhibit she curated at that museum as part of her Master's thesis in anthropology, entitled "Cannery Days: A Chapter in the Lives of the Heiltsuk." The exhibit grew out of her discomfort with how the relationship between First Nations and fisheries has conventionally been represented in academic literature. The literature, she argues, presents the relationship of Northwest Coast peoples and fish in terms that sometimes seem mechanical. Ecological models and Marxist models, she suggests, mask the more complex relationships between humans and fish. This is especially evident in writings about the period when canneries were operating in communities along the Pacific coast, writings that portray Aboriginal participants as an exploited labour force. Her interviews with members of her own community (Waglisla) and her personal memories of working in the Namu cannery generate a different perspective, which she has been able to convey in the exhibit she curated celebrating the work of women at Namu cannery.

Pam speaks about how different kinds of knowledge contributed to her preparation of the exhibit—her knowledge of the traditional fisheries, her experience as a Heiltsuk woman working in the fish-processing industry, her training in anthropology. She situates the messages from her exhibit in the context of two related discussions currently of great importance to First Nations in British Columbia: land claims negotiations emerging as part of the British Columbia Treaty Commission, and negotiations about access to West Coast fish stocks now occurring among Aboriginal organizations, the commercial fishing industry and government agencies. She suggests that museum exhibits provide an alternative medium for communicating information about indigenous perspectives to a broader audience than written texts, both to indigenous communities and to a larger public.

Miranda Wright, from the Koyukon Athapaskan community of Nulato, Alaska, received her B.A. in anthropology in 1992 from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She has most likely completed her current research and requirements for her Masters degree from that university. She is actively involved with both Doyan Foundation and Keepers of the Treasure-Alaska, two non-profit Native cultural organizations and also serves as a liaison between various museums and Native communities, dealing with issues of cultural education and interpretation.

In her paper, she outlines some of the difficulties she finds working across two cultures: her own community of Nulato to which she feels her primary attachment, and her chosen profession of anthropology in which she is intellectually immersed. Echoing the frustration Native peoples have often expressed about being compared with other cultural communities, she discussed her goal of mastering two distinct systems of knowledge—community-based oral tradition and academic social science—and ultimately being able to translate from one set of understandings to the other. She points out, though, how complex is the seemingly straightforward admonition from her elders to "learn both ways." Her paper alludes to barriers posed at the outset, simply because each system of knowledge has reservations about the language of the other. Her father, for example, tells her a story to convey his concern that her understanding of the most basic truths from her childhood may have been clouded by an acquired academic language. Her academic colleagues, on the other hand, are quick to remind her that she should not romanticize the past. She discusses how she hopes to negotiate both sets of concerns in the ethnohistorical work she is currently undertaking as she writes her Master's thesis.

All five papers, then, deal with the communication of cultural understandings through oral tradition and material culture, through spoken words and material objects, through museum exhibits and written texts. At the core of each paper is a discussion about how such work provides indigenous anthropologists with ways of socially connecting themselves with familiar people, with place, and with the past—and how this, in turn, creates feelings of ownership of history.

The papers also pose a contradiction of particular concern to anthropology: customarily students of anthropology learn most from immersion in radically unfamiliar cultural experiences. Each of the writers in this volume takes an opposite approach. Any one of them could argue convincingly that her immersion in a radically different culture occurred during her years in an urban university and that her goal now is to work in a situation that is intensely familiar, trying to see and describe it in ways that makes it communicable to others who do not share that experience. Marilyn, for instance, comments on the awkwardness of having to stand back from taken-for-granted experience (as she was taught in anthropology classes) when this requires her to ask questions that may appear naive to elders who expect her to know the answers. Ingrid speaks about the ambiguities for an indigenous researcher who may vacillate about how much weight to give to ethnographic monographs by outsiders and how much weight to give to the cultural knowledge she brings to her study from her own experience. Miranda alludes to the contradictions inherent in being expected to take an authoritative position about Native culture in university classrooms and to speak on behalf of anthropology in her own community. Pam talks about her concern that established social science paradigms may pay insufficient attention to how perceptions differ across cultural boundaries. Alice is now testing the applicability of what she has learned at university in the day-to-day challenges of a small northern school. It is the ability to reflect on such questions that makes the production of good ethnography possible.

Increasingly, issues of concern to anthropology continue to be debated not just in university classrooms but in First Nations communities. In July, 1994, an Elders' Festival was held at a traditional camping spot on Teslin Lake, at a place known as Brooks' Brook. It was organized by the Elders' Documentation project, described in Marilyn Jensen's paper, and the organizers' purpose was to give elders an opportunity to voice their views and concerns about cultural documentation. One of the many topics that came up that weekend was that of *how* oral history should be transcribed—whether it was more appropriate to use the words of elders directly, even when English is their second language, or whether their words should be edited into standard English. At issue was a recent publication from an Elder's conference that had made use of verbatim transcripts. The discussion was of great interest to the festival organizers as they considered how best to transcribe the tapes from the present meeting. The consensus expressed at this meeting was that elders' words should be transcribed as they were spoken. As Percy Henry said, "How could we have somebody change the words? You put words in my mouth, you change the meaning. It starts from the elder, from the grass roots. I've never seen a house built from the top yet." The broad participation in the discussion suggests that these issues will continue to be discussed and debated and that different solutions may be appropriate at different times and in different situations.

As more First Nations students choose anthropology as a profession, the boundary between personal narrative and scholarly argument may become more permeable. When we remain close to the situations we study, we have to work from a point of reference grounded in talk, in interactive relationships rather than observing from a distance (Sarris 1993). We are more likely to make our points (as Mrs. Angela Sidney, whose work is cited in Alice's paper, always insisted) through stories that extend communication rather than close it down. In that process, Marilyn Jensen, Ingrid Johnson, Pam Brown, Miranda Wright and Alice Carlick and the students who follow them will have an important role to play.

Julie Cruikshank is an advisory editor of *The Northern Review* and a professor of Anthropology at University of British Columbia.

Notes

1. The five papers in this issue of *The Northern Review* were all presented at the annual Alaska Anthropology Conference, March 31-April 2, 1994. They were delivered in a session organized by anthropologist Phyllis Morrow and me, entitled "Changing Traditions: Anthropology in Northwestern North America." Participation of Pam Brown, Alice Carlick, Marilyn Jensen, Ingrid Johnson and myself at this conference was made possible by my research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and we gratefully acknowledge their assistance.
2. Mrs. Storer's main reason for travelling to Juneau was to hear presentations made by these women, although she and some friends also stopped en route at Klukwan, Alaska, to discuss common research interests with Tlingit people there. Familiar faces of people who had come so far by road and ferry to hear their papers were especially encouraging for the Yukon women as each stood to speak.

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