

## **Collaboration in the Translation and Interpretation of Native American Oral Traditions**

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During the summer of 1992 we sent out a call to scholars to submit work for a special issue of this journal. Our letter of invitation suggested some assumptions we brought to this project. We wrote:

We are interested in publishing a group of essays that share several features: 1) presentation of Native American text(s) with commentary, 2) joint authorship that represents collaborative research on the text(s), and 3) reflections on the way collaborative research worked (or did not) in this instance. In more general terms, we would like to publish essays that explore dimensions of perspective, discovery, and meaning which emerge when Native and non-Natives work together on Native oral texts. The scholarship we wish to publish will not be based merely on “cooperation” between working scholars and “friendly” Natives, nor, we hope, will it repeat that all-too-familiar division of labor: “you perform—we interpret.” Rather, the work we seek will question such commonplace oppositions as “scholar” and “Native,” “investigator” and “informant.” It will take up issues associated with the positions of insider and outsider—in the academic context, in Native American community settings, and perhaps even in some situations where the two overlap. We assume that when Natives and non-Natives share equally the analytic process, the possibilities for generating insight, promoting awareness of depth and complexity, and encouraging sensitivity to cultural issues increase dramatically. Moreover, we assume that collaborative work of this kind has the capacity to yield more and better information and more practically applicable knowledge from a given text—with reduced chances for ethical blunders. At the same time, we are acutely aware that the verb “collaborate” has a special resonance in the context of any Native American community which the second meaning in the following entry captures well: “1. to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort; 2. to cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one’s country” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*).

Critiques of past practice are of course needed and welcome. However, our intention with this project is to try to point a way for future work, to promote kinds of scholarship that will help to create a common

ground of good faith and understanding from which mutual respect can grow among all of us. We wouldn't mind having a little fun along the way; essays on humor are welcome!

We quote from this letter at length to make visible our plans and assumptions. We have been able to follow these plans fairly closely and in large measure our assumptions have been borne out. However, as the correspondence grew and work came in, we encountered the unexpected. We did not foresee that some topics proposed by our colleagues would become problematic. Toelken and a Navajo colleague came to a point in collaborative discussion of their text where they felt they could not continue, so they dropped the project. The Dauenhauers, paragons of patient long-term collaboration, could not resolve the issue of who owned the text they originally wanted to discuss; when they changed to another story, a death in the family prevented further work, for the story was closely related to the clan of the deceased man; their final option brought to light the unexpected account of a Russian folktale being told as a Tlingit story. We did not know we would find out about Tohono O'odham "female breathy speech." We could not have anticipated the excitement of a young Indian scholar working with an elderly anthropologist to bring her fragile field notes back to life for the benefit and renewed use of his tribe; nor did we suspect—in a work on translation—that one of our essays would deal with a story told by Native people in English. In addition, neither of us anticipated that life's dosage of operations, trips abroad, sabbaticals, and family obligations would extend the project for several years beyond its planned completion date.

Still, we believe that this project is timely, for over the past ten years or so there has been a great deal of writing and discussion about reflexivity in the relationships between scholars and "natives." Indeed, at this juncture, the names of the key works and scholars spill out in a familiar litany: James Clifford's and George W. Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986), Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), Dennis Tedlock's *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (1983), among others.

At the same time, there has been in recent years a renewed commitment in Native communities to assert much more control over the way their traditions are represented. A spark for this community-based renewal was struck by Vine Deloria, Jr., (*Custer Died for Your Sins*, 1969) in the early 1970s. It was fueled by Columbian quincennial hoopla and, most significantly, it has been carried into action by a generation of Indian leaders who were schooled in the 1960s and 1970s and who are now

beginning to take up responsibilities of local tribal governance and to contribute to the development of policy on the national level.

Admittedly, Native communities and academic communities have been trying to work together for a long time in the study of language, culture, literature, art, and dance. Yet the rapprochement has always been awkward and imbalanced in favor of the academics. The complexities of this history of interaction have received significant treatment in recent years. Roger Sanjek writes: “While professional ethnographers—usually white, mostly male—have normally assumed full authorship for their ethnographic products, the remarkable contribution of [their] assistants—mainly persons of colour—is not widely enough appreciated or understood” (1993:13). The problem Sanjek poses here has been taken up vigorously by scholars who have returned to archives to scrutinize correspondence and manuscripts as they attempt to unearth the complexities of who contributed what to early anthropological field projects. The relationship between George Hunt and Franz Boas has been subject to intense review (Murray 1991; Berman 1994), as have those of Francis LaFlesche and Alice C. Fletcher (Liberty 1978) and Black Elk and John G. Neihardt (DeMallie 1985).

Extensive archival work has enabled Douglas Parks to begin to tell a fuller story of the life and work of James R. Murie, a mixed-blood Pawnee (born 1862, died 1921) and a prolific field worker and writer. He worked with a number of anthropologists and was a key participant in what many think of as the “golden age” of American anthropology. Parks’ work with the papers that Murie left behind has yielded compelling examples of what “collaboration” meant during that time (Murie 1981). The most severe case to surface thus far in this ongoing reassessment is that of Murie’s relationship with the famed anthropologist Ralph Linton. It is now clear that Professor Linton “used Murie’s field notes deposited at [The Chicago Field Museum] in writing five papers on the Pawnee, a group he had never worked among, and without any mention of Murie” (Sanjek 1993:14). Based on cases such as this, Sanjek urges a thorough reassessment of the history of American anthropology. Moreover he suggests that anthropologists “need to revise our textbooks—and write new ones” (16) in order to reconsider and reevaluate the contributions of these early Native American collaborators.

Recent works on Native American literature have moved in the direction of engagement and involvement with Native materials on Native American scholars and commentators. Brian Swann’s *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America* (1994) is an excellent representation of the work in this area. In this major

anthology, Swann has gathered attempts to find and foreground a Native “voice” through fieldwork collaboration, involvement of Native scholars and commentators, and deep-level engagement with Native languages. Another collection, *Stories that Make the World* (Frey 1995), represents Native efforts to let other Natives “speak” through publication. Direct collaborations like *Ugiuvangmiut Quliapyuit/King Island Tales* (Seeganna and Kaplan 1988), *Yaqui Deer Songs/Maso Bwikam* (Evers and Molina 1987), and *Haa Shuká/Our Ancestors* (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1987) have demonstrated the texts and insights into the expressive systems of Native peoples that are available to those who take a collaborative approach. The essays we have gathered in this collection attempt to build on this work and to develop ways of meeting the demands of a fully collaborative approach to translation and interpretation.

Although we circulated our proposal nationwide, all of the essays that we selected for publication are from the American West. The tribal traditions they engage range from the Yupik in the Arctic to the Yaqui in the Sonoran desert—about as wide a spread as can be imagined in a relatively small collection. But while the collection offers variety, we do not want to represent it as an omnibus treatment. What we have provided here, we hope, is a benchmark of the collaborative work that is being done with Native American communities at this time.

Felipe S. Molina and Larry Evers have worked together on research and writing projects for many years. In *Yaqui Deer Songs* they wrote: “In all, we work for two goals: for the continuation of deer songs as a vital part of life in Yaqui communities and for their appreciation in all communities beyond” (Evers and Molina 1987:8).

A key point of their essay in this volume is that Native American participants need to be involved in research projects as planners and writers as well as transcribers and translators. One challenge their work poses is to the recruitment and retention practices of academic institutions. Since ethnopoetic projects usually take shape within the academic world, more, many more, Native Americans must come to occupy academic positions so that they may launch projects from that institutional base. An alternative possibility, which the essay printed here describes, is also desirable: academics must seek arenas outside the university setting in which to conduct their research agendas collaboratively with community-based Native American intellectuals. Collaboration must come to be seen as a standard dimension of research in Native American communities.

Few collaborative teams have worked together so long, so well, and so productively as Nora and Richard Dauenhauer. Scholar and Native, husband and wife, poet and critic, teacher and student are some of the roles

that they have reshaped during their unique collaborative work. In their essay, they pursue a traditional historical-geographical approach as they describe a continuing search for variants of “Yuwan Gageets,” the first and only European story they have encountered to date in their very extensive research on Tlingit oral tradition. The Dauenhauers find that the story, a variant of a well-known Russian folktale about a young nobleman who marries a Frog Princess, is “Tlingitized in some obvious ways” but, finally, occupies a precarious place in Tlingit oral tradition. They suggest that one reason for this is that the story “does not fit into the Tlingit social structure in terms of origin or content.” Furthermore, they believe that “the rarity of European stories in the Tlingit repertoire suggests a connection between ownership and lack of widespread borrowing from groups with whom the Tlingit had not established a meaningful pattern of exchange.” They feel that the relatively minimal European influence on Tlingit oral tradition is especially striking when considered in comparison to the “widespread exchange of songs, stories, and motifs among the Indians of the Northwest Coast.”

The Dauenhauers have written on aspects of their collaborative research in several of their previous publications (*Haa Shuká* 1987; *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís* 1990). In the essay published here, they add a dimension that has previously remained unremarked. They explain that they were motivated to turn to this particular story as an illustration of their collaborative approach only after they had taken up two other topics that they were unable to pursue to publication at this time because of cultural considerations. This in itself is an example of how culturally sensitive collaborative projects are significantly shaped by the authors’ awareness of—and attentiveness to—cultural values in the planning stage.

Toby Langen and Marya Moses present a new transcription and translation of a traditional Snohomish story about Crow’s search for a husband, a journey that gives Crow the opportunity to reject a dizzying succession of suitors before finally choosing one named Whyaliwa, Prized Shell. The story was originally recorded by Leon Metcalf from Martha Lamont in the early 1950s, and is restorative in that it recovers important work by Metcalf and Lamont that is in danger of being lost. Working with tape recordings, Langen and Moses create a new translation that is careful and accurate but at the same time a translation that is not afraid to be bold in providing coherent interpretive direction. An especially valuable aspect of their discussion is that they make available, insofar as they are able, the exact nature of the interaction and the labor of each of the collaborators/authors.

Three findings of their essay seem very important to us: first, great tension exists between the way traditional marriage customs and women's behavior are depicted in traditional narrative and the way the same customs and behavior have functioned and have been experienced in the lives of Snohomish women; second, the Lushootseed language text and the English language text exist for different purposes, hence the decision to use the Lushootseed transcription to emphasize "acoustic features" and the English language translation to emphasize "structural features";<sup>1</sup> and third, the and third, the tension between what the Native commentator and the non-Native commentator value is made available to us in the discussion of those powerful Native expectations about what is "acceptable" and "safe" discourse in various settings. Marya Moses comments, "I'm very careful, because they'll take your words and change them around and maybe make fun of you." Langen offers a hopeful perspective on the challenge this tension poses: "My students come to value their own way of speaking English when they see in it reflections of the rhetoric of a traditional storyteller whose language, though 'foreign,' turns out to be familiar too."

The Wasson and Toelken essay centers on a story about Coyote from the Coquelle tradition of George Wasson. Though the Coquelles' language was lost during the last century, their stories continue to be told in English. In this one, Coyote has a series of misadventures in several very specific places along the shoreline near Coos Bay, Oregon. An important question raised by Wasson and Toelken is, "Why retain a story like this in a cultural world that is falling apart?" One answer is that the story gives continuing significance to a landscape more and more out of the control of the Coquelle peoples who were originally responsible for it.

Although the story is now traditionally told in English, it is so packed with cultural significance that it still requires translation, for—as the narrator illustrates by constant interruptive explanation—the most meaningful aspects of the story reside in tableau scenes of culturally constructed actions that are not immediately apparent to the outsider (a category that today may include young people of Coquelle lineage who have not grown up hearing the stories). Thus, Toelken points out that it is important to recognize that some questions about such traditions "can come only from the questing outsider," because only the outsider is puzzled, and has the temerity to ask about something which is "there" but remains unarticulated in the text itself. To Wasson's proposition that "Coyote represents the dramatic embodiment of cultural values," Toelken asks,

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<sup>1</sup>Ease of reference between the two is achieved by the use of line numbers without forcing an absolute typographic correspondence between them.

“Then, what exactly is it that is being dramatized in this story?” and finds that the clusters of action seem to focus on concepts of behavior in connection with lightning, sacred or powerful trees, sharing of food, self-destructive actions, misuse of natural objects or disrupting of natural processes, bragging, treatment of relatives, disruption of ritual processes, and cheating others of their ability to see clearly—just a few of the Coquelle cultural issues that are considered important today.

The story Darryl Wilson and Susan B. Park tell about their collaboration is a familiar one in many respects. An eager young student travels out from a university campus to assist a neglected elder in the preservation of traditional stories. The elder has worked for years to keep an endangered group of stories alive but has received little support. The elder welcomes the fresh energy, enthusiasm, and new technologies the university student brings. The elder and the university student decide to work together to publish the stories the elder has preserved.

But what is decidedly unfamiliar about the story Wilson and Park tell are the roles each plays. Rather than a young Euro-American university student going out to work with a Native American elder, we encounter the reverse. Darryl Wilson, a Native American university student, seeks out Susan B. Park, a Euro-American elder, to assist her with preservation and publication of the traditional stories that she recorded from his own tribal elders years before.

Such a reversal realizes a promise long explicit in the work of early field workers in Native American communities: that they were recording material not only for their own “scientific” purposes but also “for future generations of Native American peoples.” Too frequently, however, this promise seems to have been forgotten as cartons of field notes and recordings languish on metal storage shelves in the archives of various research institutions, as well as among the private papers of individual scholars. The work of Darryl Wilson, and of other university educated Native Americans of his generation, holds enormous promise in this regard.

Says Wilson, “My goal is to bring Susan Park’s materials into publication and in doing so to bring them back to my tribal people and to the society at large” (1992:88). Wilson and Park characterize their work as restorative and foundational. They “mend baskets” that they hope to return for use to the community from which they were originally taken. This restoration of a significant body of Atsuge-wi stories creates a foundation upon which a multitude of issues, concerns, and questions may rise within the Atsuge-wi community and beyond.

Ofelia Zepeda and Jane Hill demonstrate their collaboration by weaving stories of how their academic careers brought them together in the

early 1990s to work on a dialect study of Tohono O'odham. We learn that the O'odham language exhibits significant regional variation and supports some unusual traditional speech patterns, one of which is the tendency of O'odham women to use a "pulmonary ingressive air stream" in certain situations. "The speaker breathes in, not out, while talking," Hill explains. This "female breathy speech" provides the oral traditional "texts" for Zepeda and Hill's discussion.

Ofelia Zepeda emphasizes the perils and challenges that face Native scholars who choose to work as academics in the communities from which they have come. She observes that research work done in the university context where she was trained (and became a Ph.D. in linguistics), when viewed from a position as a worker in the community, is research work conducted in "what is seemingly a vacuum." Those who think that being a Native American and being a fluent speaker of a Native language automatically grant an "insider" status have likely fallen into the polarizing and essentializing distinction between a "native" anthropologist and a "real" anthropologist (Narayan 1995:677). Zepeda's discussion brings many complexities of the perceived "insider" position forcefully into the discussion. Her self-reflections on her role in the collaborative O'odham dialect study stand as a powerful statement of the dilemmas faced by American Indian scholars who choose to do "fieldwork" in their own communities. Similarly Hill's frank discussion of her own position in the collaboration—"I needed protective coloration, both as a collaborator with a member of the O'odham community, and, not least, as a 'linguist' instead of as an 'anthropologist'"—is exemplary.

Phyllis Morrow and Elsie Mather have worked together for years on the translation and interpretation of Yupik texts. Here, they offer an unusual solution to the problem of audience in connection with what is appropriately discussed outside of the in-group community contexts, by considering a story told in the Inuit language over the radio by a skilled narrator who knew that his performance would be broadcast. Even though the radio has become a daily medium of communication for the widely dispersed "Eskimo" populations in Alaska, it has not replaced the close cultural contexts in which stories and conversations usually take place: at home or on a hunt, when people integrate their performances with the dynamics of everyday life. So finely interwoven are the stories and the life processes, that the stories are perceived not as discrete texts, but as personal experiences within culturally meaningful settings. So obvious are the understood "meanings" of these experiences that Elsie Mather hesitates to interpret them for others; so delicate are the nuances that Phyllis Morrow insists they *need* to be discussed and interpreted. Because the story on the

radio was purposely performed for a large and open audience, the collaborators knew that they were not intruding. Their longstanding friendship and mutual respect allow Mather and Morrow to approach the story interactively in a way that enriches the text for the non-Yupik while preserving the validity of the Yupik view that the text's "meaning" should remain open to the experiences of the listeners.

## Collaboration

Several issues concerning collaboration and interpretation raised in the essays invite retrospective comment. First of all, the familiar divisions between "scholar" and "Native" are just too easy and need to be complicated by attention to particular cases. Most obviously, "Natives" can be—and often are—scholars too. And in terms of intellectual achievement and engagement over the past 100 or so years, it has usually been the Native "source" or "informant" who was bilingual and who brought cultural depth into the enterprise. In the introduction to his brilliant book, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (1977), Gary Witherspoon writes of his exciting engagement with Navajo intellectuals and philosophers, and quite properly claims, "These people are the Navajo Aristotles, Freuds, Webers, and Darwins" (8), yet in the typical fashion of that era (the 1970s), the title page of the book bears only Witherspoon's name. George Hunt, Franz Boas' prolific Tlingit "informant," contributed most of what we now know of the Kwakiutls over a period of forty-five years (from 1888 to 1933), but in Boas' extensive bibliography on that subject, two items out of fourteen are shown as co-authored (Berman 1994:483, 512-13). In Brian Swann's more recent collection, *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* (1992), which even features the bothersome question, "Who benefits by translation?" in its introduction (xvii), none of the twenty-four prominent essayists is identified as a Native American, although all the complications discussed would clearly have benefitted from direct Native involvement. This is not to fault Swann's anthology so much as to note that—in spite of several years now of championing the dialogic view—we are not very much closer to its promises than we were one hundred years ago. One reason, no doubt, is that even in the best of collaborations, the tone and agenda may still be set by the more powerful partner, and the realities of academic publication are driven by powerful gears indeed.

Another important consideration is that "collaboration" means different things to different people, and in a very significant way each of the seven collaborations reported here is unique. In "Beyond the Lonely

Anthropologist: Collaboration in Research and Writing,” Alma Gottlieb surveys collaborative efforts in anthropology. “The point here,” she writes, “is that collaboration may exhibit infinite variations, each posing its own range of problems” (1995:23). She calls for “long and continuing conversation” about these variations. Coming out of these conversations will be a renewed understanding of the centrality of collaborative efforts: “The more we read of such collaborative tales, I suspect, the more we will come collectively to realize how our discipline overall is characterized to a great extent by a pervasive structure of cooperation in one form or another” (23). This is a realization that, as the essays published here suggest, we must change not only our intellectual understanding of collaboration, but also the practical and political ways we acknowledge authorship, assess responsibility, and bestow rewards.

The Native American coauthors of these essays (Nora Dauenhauer, Elsie Mather, Felipe Molina, Marya Moses, George Wasson, Darryl Wilson, and Ofelia Zepeda) draw on large, generally unstated, interpretive contexts provided by their tribal backgrounds and their own personal intellectual consideration of those cultural matrices. Their interpretive work on this project has provided a depth we could never have achieved otherwise, and their contributions go far beyond the basic question of what a story, or phrase, or style has meant in its cultural milieu over the years. For in their sustained engagement in these essays, they have also shared with us their insights and interests in what the “texts” tell us about living as an Atsuge-wi or Coquelle or Yoeme or Yupik or Tlingit or Snohomish person today. One aspect of this phenomenon—beyond the impetus of personal commitment—is, as Ohnuki-Tierney points out, that “Native” perspectives frequently provide “emotive dimensions” to the study which might otherwise be elusive or even imperceptible to the outsider” (1984:584). Add to that the “Native’s” competence at culturally constructed metaphor, knowledge about ritual and performance proprieties, assumptions about season and occasion, familiarity with context—all of which are directly and not peripherally related to meaning—and we can see what an indispensable role our Native coauthors have played. Moreover, they make it quite clear that they are interested in far more than clarity of text; they want to be sure that the stories may be translated into living, dynamic constellations of cultural meaning which can be told, read, and responded to as organic parts of real ongoing cultures, and not as fossils on a university workbench.

It is clear that if we are going to include American Indians in all aspects of collaboration, including interpretation, then we will need an approach and a set of critical attitudes something very much like what Tedlock has called a “dialogical method.” In distinguishing analogical

anthropology from dialogical anthropology, he observes that a “law” of analogical anthropology seems to be “that the ethnographer and the native must never be articulate between the same two covers” (Tedlock 1983:324). Approaches such as those included in our collection provide opportunities for ethnographers and “Natives” to speak to one another through dialogic analysis, and virtually require that the process continue onward through publication. A key point here is that collaborators are given the status of writers, not just “independent enunciators” (Clifford 1988:51).

But of course many other challenges remain. As Elaine Lawless pushed to make her own fieldwork dialogical, she discovered that the hard part of a “dialogical method” is not its implementation, but rather “writing about it in such a way that the reciprocal aspects of the ethnography are evident in the presentation of the material” (1992:312). A related consideration is raised by Alma Gottlieb: “when we read a coauthored work, it is rarely clear which scholar did what” (1995:22), and this is of course potentially true of coauthored works in a single culture, let alone collaborations between distinctly different cultures where the aspect of clarity and “fit” may indeed be rare and difficult to attain. And even when everything works smoothly and reciprocally between intercultural partners, subsequent discussion and dialectic over a longer term may continue to turn up problematic issues and discrepancies not envisioned by either participant, as Toelken’s forty-year work with the stories of Yellowman illustrates (Toelken and Scott 1981; Toelken 1996).

In trying to maintain a dialogical model in these essays, contributors have made clear what contributions have come from which participants in the collaboration by separating and alternating voices of the participants with the presentation constructed under the editorial hand of both. The method seems to have worked well, if very differently, for each of the collaborations published here. Still we are wary of any idealization of particular form for presentation or narrating the collaboration because it may suggest that what the collaboration is about can be fully represented, even contained, within this particular textualization.

Even so, it is true—as Gottlieb writes—that “collaborative projects often contain hidden sources of discomfort, accommodation, and compromise that may keep them at least distantly allied to . . . problematic political terrain” (1995:23). And as Lawless points out, in any case we need to acknowledge the effect our “cultural baggage” has on what we see, hear, and understand on both sides of the cultural interface (1992). Collaboration will always be an interactive standoff in one sense, with practitioners on each side obligated to take their own cultural constructions as well as those of their partners into consideration—with the realization

that in many cases there will be no middle ground for sweet agreement. In this spirit, we feel that what we have accomplished with this collection is not in the realm of the impossible; rather, we have tried to do the possible, the plausible, the necessary, and we have tried to do it in the appropriate and responsible ways available to us. It remains for us, and for our many colleagues engaged in the study of Native American oral traditions, to continue opening up the mutually responsive, mutually responsible, dialogues that will bring forth the hundreds of other tribal literatures and languages of America. And it remains for all of us to learn how to hold them properly in our hands.

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