

# Alaska Native Biographies and Autobiographies and their use in the Classroom

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## Abstract

Life stories of Alaska Natives can be engaging sources for students to understand the experiences of those in the past. I worked to find as many of these as possible to use in my classes, and a list of 123 is included. I argue that Alaska Native autobiography and biography are often the same, as both, especially in the past, were often collaborations. Therefore, it is very important to identify the author, and analyze the method of construction of the text. The common birth to death chronological narrative form of the genre is very western, yet it has been adopted by many Alaska Native authors who have absorbed the tradition through western education. Other biographical sources adhere to oral traditions. Students routinely read works by others describing Alaska Natives, as well as life stories of non-Natives in everyday reading like People magazine. Alaska Native life stories can elevate the importance of the experiences of Alaska Natives.

## Biography

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## Note

The last 2,150 words, 5 pages, are the actual bibliography of autobiographies and biographies. Developing the bibliography was a major part of the project. I sent this list out to some librarians this spring for feedback and they confirmed that such a listing had not previously been available anywhere.

## **Alaska Native Biographies and Autobiographies and their use in the Classroom**

*“I am an avid collector of anything involving the Inuit or Alaska, and I have scoured countless old book collections. It amazes me: most of the books written about Alaska have been by people aiming to glorify their personal brush with Alaska’s magnetism. Most knew almost nothing about Alaska Natives, even after spending a lifetime among us as teachers, missionaries, or bureaucrats. Many saw only the surface of our lives and never understood our inner world. Some focused on the bizarre or contradictory - on our tattoos, our eating habits, our nose-kissing, our smells, our anaktut (shamans). In most cases they did not comprehend our language.”*

*William L. Iggigruk Hensley, Fifty Miles from Tomorrow<sup>1</sup>*

Life stories of Alaska Natives can be useful and interesting sources for students to understand the experiences of those in the past. For all cultures, life story can get beyond the chronological history of major events. Life story focuses on the lived experience, how an individual navigated the changing cultural norms, the difficulties, and the choices they made, and why, and how they understand those experiences. Autobiographies as texts, and as a vehicle for understanding of the development of an individual sense of self is subject that has concerned academics. A number of scholarly works on Native American/American Indian autobiographies have addressed these works as texts, and provided some basis for analysis of the texts as products of both the Native subject and a usually western co-author, translator, and/or anthropologist. First I am going to discuss these analytical issues, then I will get to some specific

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<sup>1</sup> Bibliographic references for this and all autobiographies and biographies referenced are included in the comprehensive list of works appended.

examples. And finally address the issue of why assign a biography instead of a transcript of an oral interview?

Both H. David Brumble and Arnold Krupat have written academic works on the subject of American Indian autobiography. (Brumble includes Alaska Natives.) They provide an important analytical framework. Biography is usually thought of as the story of a real person's life written by someone other than that person. Autobiography then is “the *biography* of a person written by that person,” (Merriam-Webster). H. David Brumble, in his book *American Indian Autobiography*, defines autobiography as “first person narrative that seriously purports to describe the narrators life or episodes in that life.”<sup>2</sup> Brumble includes as-told-to, or edited works in his study, as I do. However, he draws a distinction between biography and autobiography, not based on who is named as the author, but based on the point of view of the text. “Even the most heavily edited autobiography,” he notes, “at least pretends to be told from the Indian’s point of view, and in the Indian’s own way.”<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, I suggest, and discuss further below, that in the case of Native Alaskans, there may be little difference between biography and autobiography and they should be considered together.

Life stories bring up essential questions. When dealing with this genre we have to confront the issue that a written self-story is not a traditional form for any indigenous person. The common birth to death chronological narrative form of the genre is very western. As Arnold Krupat noted, the genre of autobiography has no close parallel in indigenous cultures. “The western notion of representing the whole of any one person’s life- from childhood through adolescence to adulthood....was foreign,” to indigenous cultures.<sup>4</sup> Many Native cultures did not

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<sup>2</sup> H. David Brumble III, *American Indian Autobiography*, Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 2008. p17.

<sup>3</sup> Brumble, p17

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Krupat *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. p3

talk about individuals, or those who had died. Most Native people would not talk about themselves in a way that might be seen as bragging. It was never the individual who counted, rather it was the individual in relation to the group.<sup>5</sup> Writing was obviously not a traditional way to preserve or communicate information, writing in English especially.

In contrast, the genre of biography started with ‘stories of great (White) men.’ Most often, the letters and writings of these men were the foundation of the biography. Extending the genre has been an ongoing project for 2,000 years. Even extending the genre to the life-stories of women was seen as path-breaking. The very gendered nature of biography is acknowledged by well-known historian Jill Lepore in her afterword to her biography of Jane Franklin, Ben’s nearly illiterate, and nearly forgotten, sister. But even Jane Franklin wrote a few letters, and there is plenty of written material in Ben’s letters to or about her.<sup>6</sup>

Autobiography and biography are classifications used in western thought. I suggest that in the case of Native Alaskans, there is only very rarely a difference. With just a few exceptions, older works were always collaborations. There are as-told- to works, ghost written works, works written by anthropologists, or written from transcribed oral histories; works based on friendships. In fact, I can think of only a few traditional biographies: that is a work written exclusively by an unrelated author with no contribution from the ‘subject.’<sup>7</sup> Just as there are few actual biographies, until quite recently there were precious few autobiographies that were not written with the assistance of a non-Native co-author. A separate but related genre is the memoir, which I would describe as a more impressionistic literary work based on a life story. For instance,

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005, p xii

<sup>6</sup> Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*. Knopf, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> One is Clara Childs Mackenzie, *Wolf-Smeller*, on John Fredson who had died some forty years before she began her research, published in 1988. Then, two works by Lael Morgan: biographies of Howard Rock, 1988, and Ray Mala, 2011. There are one or two others.

Ernestine Hayes' *Blond Indian*. And then there are family histories, like, Frances Ann Degnan's *Under the Arctic Sun*, which is about the lives of her parents, Frank and Ada Degnan of Unalakleet, but also Jan Harper Haines' *Cold River Spirits* a beautifully written more literary series of stories about her Harper family on the Yukon and Tanana Rivers.

With all these variations, and because I am disturbed by the customary terminology referring to 'author' and 'subject,' and because too many biographies have given credit and authority to the person who writes the words on the page, I am proposing the terms life-author and co-author. In all cases, the so-called 'subject' is the author of the life, the source of the material in the work, and a major participant in a project that has involved considerable thought and effort. The so-called 'author' is in most cases a kind of a translator from one cultural norm to another. Even in works classified as biographies, like *Etok*, by Hugh Gallagher, much of the text is actually quotes from Etok himself. Nevertheless, it's difficult to escape from customary terms.

So what happens when the Western genre of biography is applied to Native American stories? Both Krupat and Brumble agree that most of the autobiographies of American Indians were shaped by the conventions of genre in western literary history. That is, they focus on individual experience, begin with childhood, and proceed narratively and proceed chronologically. Both seem to agree also that this is a vast departure from Native oral tradition. In their analysis, they identify what they believe to be conventions of pre-literate indigenous story-telling: episodic, experiential, and not connected in a continuous narrative. They were often composed of not only personal stories of an individual's life, but also tribal history, and traditional or mythic stories of a distant past.

Especially because of the confusion between life author and co-author, it is very important when working with students to examine the text and ask the questions we historians

always ask of a text: Who participated in writing it and why? When was it written? What was the process? What are the different cultural backgrounds and positions of the authors? Who is the audience it is written for? In the best works, like Kenny Thomas's *Crow is my Boss* written with Craig Mishler, the authors address these questions explicitly in the introduction.

### **In the beginning**

As a historian I confess I am wedded to chronology, dates. It is just the style of narrative that I personally find closest to the way I understand the world. I often find myself reading for specific information, a date or place, which I can then put into historical context. I confess this is probably the wrong approach. Biographies and autobiographies should be read as narrative. Each author makes choices about what to emphasize, what to include or not include. And in the case of these life histories, we often have two authors. The life author makes choices about what to disclose. The co-author often makes choices about what parts of the story to include, and in particular, in what order. Despite often claiming that they are not editing, or that they are faithfully sharing the words of the life author, the co-author inevitably makes choices and edits material.<sup>8</sup>

Alaska Native life histories follow in the tradition of American Indian autobiographies. After a very few colonial works, the first indigenous biographies were those of Indian warriors who had become well-known in the period of the Indian Wars, men like Black Hawk, and Geronimo. The earliest life histories of Alaska Natives are ghost-written or 'as told to' works telling colorful stories shaped to fit stereotypes of the exotic Native, and were written primarily

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<sup>8</sup> One example of this is not an Alaska Native biography but a work that left Alaska Natives out of the story altogether: The. *Recollections of Leroy N. McQuesten of Life in the Yukon, 1871-1885*. (Dawson City, 1952) Published as an autobiography, it is really a biographical essay by Pioneer George Snow that did not even bother to mention that he married Russian-Athabascan Kate, and fathered nine children with her.

for a non-Native audience.<sup>9</sup> The earliest published life histories of an Alaska Native that I could find were Simeon Oliver's *Son of the Smoky Sea*, 1941, and his sequel, *Back to the Smoky Sea*, 1946; Jimmy Huntington's *On the Edge of Nowhere*, written with Lawrence Elliott 1965; Chester Asakak Seveck's *Longest Reindeer Herder*, 1973; and Etok, *A Story of Eskimo Power (Biography of Charles Edwardsen Jr.)*, written with Hugh Gallagher published in 1974.

Simeon Oliver, and Charlie Edwardsen were had come to the attention of their non-Native co-authors while outside of Alaska. Oliver, born in Chignik to a Norwegian father and Inupiat mother, was raised from the age of two in the original Jesse Lee Home in Unalaska and before attending college in Illinois. A professional pianist, he was actually on a speaking tour of missionary societies and churches when he met Alden Hatch. He was thus, really completely assimilated, and in fact felt closer to the culture of the Aleutians where he was raised than his mother's Inupiat culture. Nevertheless, *Son of the Smoky Sea* focuses on Oliver's summers working as a whaler, and fisherman, emphasizing the theme of exoticism and adventure. Oliver tells us that when he arrived in Illinois for the first time, he struggled with being an object of curiosity: "the Eskimo."

Hugh Gregory Gallagher was a staff assistant for Alaska Senator Bob Bartlett in 1964 when he met first Charlie Edwardsen, Etok, in Washington, D.C. testifying on Land Claims issues. Gallagher saw Etok as 'the Eskimo' in almost the same exotic terms that Simeon Oliver had experienced nearly thirty years before. While Gallagher is credited as the author, this book is obviously a collaboration; much of the book appears as quotes from Edwardsen. While author Hugh Gallagher obviously has a lot of respect for Etok, in his own way he exoticises Edwardsen

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<sup>9</sup> H. David. Brumble, published *An Annotated Bibliography of American, Indian and Eskimo Autobiographies*. In 1981, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) but while he includes some Alaska Native works in his discussion and later in his monograph, these are mostly works that are produced with an academic co-author. He leaves out many popular works like those by Oliver, and Jimmy and Sidney Huntington.

as the “crazy Eskimo,” portraying him as a fish out of water, a person out of place in Washington. Gallagher must have travelled to the North Slope and Barrow, because he writes about the geography and the town. He also attempts to recreate what Barrow was like in the 1940s, when Edwardsen was a boy. The fact that he feels he needs to explain Iñupiat culture and subsistence lifeways indicates that to Gallagher, at least, the audience was his own educated, non-Native peers on the East Coast. He makes a lot out of the idea that Edwardsen descends from a line of Iñupiat Shamans, and feels the need to explain shamanism. It is all part of his attempt to explain just what drives Edwardsen to take on his mission in winning the battle for the Land Claims of his Iñupiat people. Yet Gallagher sees Barrow as desolate, and ignored, and the shaman connection emphasizes the exoticism. He sees and portrays Barrow as a place in need of assistance, thus contradicting Edwardsen’s own central position, which was that the land claims were not about welfare, but about Inupiat rights to the land.

Son of the Smokey Sea, while credited to Oliver, also has telltale signs of narrative and emplotment characteristic of western autobiographies. After three years in Illinois, he made a trip north, spending a month in Point Hope. In a plot point seemingly scripted by Hatch, he ultimately ‘decides’ to return to Chicago, the girl he had fallen in love with, and a budding music career.

In both the Simeon Oliver work, and that of Etok, the non-Native co-author is writing in admiration of his subject, but attempting to explain Eskimo culture to a non-Native audience. I am not sure of the motivation of the subjects. I think Etok cooperated because while he wanted to write a book, and while he was great at writing polemical speeches, he did not have the skill to create a coherent narrative of that length. At the time, a coherent, connected narrative was seen as the only choice of how to write a biography, and the conventions of the form were certainly

known to both Hatch and Gallagher. There is no question that Gallagher truly admired Edwardson, and created a very readable narrative that humanizes Edwardson for a general audience outside of Alaska. I am sure that people in Alaska have decidedly mixed feelings and opinions especially about how Gallagher portrays Etok's role in the Land Claims battle. Like Hatch, Gallagher had written one book before this biography, but was to go on to a career as an activist for disability rights, and to write more books. The idea of this Eskimo lobbying for land rights grabbed him, and motivated him to write about a subject that was otherwise not the focus of his interests.<sup>10</sup>

### **Jimmy Huntington *On the Edge of Nowhere***

Jimmy Huntington's story, *On the Edge of Nowhere*, 'as told to' Lawrence Elliott was originally published in 1966 and was tremendously influential. By the time it was published Huntington had gained fame as the winner of the major dog races of his day. Unlike the Oliver books which are difficult to find, Jimmy Huntington's book was a best seller in Alaska when it was published, won best book of the year from the Alaska Press Club, and is still in print through numerous editions

While the story is Huntington's, from the first page the descriptive narrative style is clearly Elliott's. As Krupat and Brumble both note, an ironic effect of the as-told-to autobiographies is that they are perceived as portrayals of authentic Indian life, and as great stories, exactly because the non-Native writer has shaped the narrative to meet the expectations of the audience about what a Native life should be about. The book begins with the story of how Huntington's Koyukon mother Anna walked from Nome back to her home on the Koyukuk River long before Huntington, himself was born. It is told in the style of a classic fable of

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<sup>10</sup> Etok is really a collaboration; I don't know whether it was Gallagher who made the decision to put only his name on the book as author, or if it was publisher's decision.

Athabascan survival, much in the tradition Velma Wallace was to employ later in *Two Old Women*. Because it reads so much like a fable, I have to confess that I thought it was mostly Elliott's writing, and that it was Elliott who exaggerated for dramatic effect. "No hunter, let alone a frail girl had ever crossed the great reaches of that strange land to the North." No Koyukon, he says, had ever been to Nome, and "all the thousand miles in between [were] a blizzard ridden unknown full of devilish Eskimos and constant danger." [p.33]

I admit I was surprised to discover that Huntington conceived of writing and publishing a memoir, and that he actually completed a hundred-page manuscript.<sup>11</sup> In a review, the *Tundra Times* said that Huntington was "believed to be Alaska's first Native born writer."<sup>12</sup> When the *Tundra Times* asked how he first got the idea for a book, he responded that when he read Edna Ferber's *Ice Palace* (a well-known popular novel about Alaska by a non-Native author) "I figured if someone could write a book like that I could write a book."<sup>13</sup>

After completing his own manuscript, Huntington sent a query letter to an agent whose name he had gotten from Grant Pearson, who had just written and gotten published his own memoir about his life as a ranger, and then the Superintendent of Mt. McKinley National Park.<sup>14</sup> The agent turned to Lawrence Elliott, at the time the Alaska correspondent for *Reader's Digest* to help shape the manuscript. A condensed version of the book was published by *Reader's Digest* prior to the publication of the hard cover book by Crown books in 1966. Jimmy immediately rocketed to local fame with appearances on TV and radio.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James Huntington Publication Correspondence, 1963-1967, donated by Greg Cook and Larry Elliott ASL-MS283 [http://library.alaska.gov/hist/hist\\_docs/docs/asl\\_ms283.pdf](http://library.alaska.gov/hist/hist_docs/docs/asl_ms283.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> "Jimmy Huntington Writes Book about Life on Yukon" *Tundra Times*, Dec. 9, 1966 <http://ttip.tuzzy.org/collect/times/index/assoc/HASH0185.dir/doc28.pdf#xml=http://ttip.tuzzy.org:80/cgi-bin/times.exe?a=pdfh&pdfxml=1&qbare=Huntington&d=HASH0185f74be6de63aa2ee439cc.5.3>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Grant Pearson, *My Life of High Adventure*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> James Huntington Publication Correspondence, *ibid*.

I still think the book was substantially rewritten by Elliott. However, I think some of the hyperbole and exaggerations belong to Huntington himself. Huntington's mother died when he was about five, he then went to missionary boarding school in Anvik for six or seven years, before joining his father and Old Charlie Swanson on a remote trapline.<sup>16</sup> Both were old-time white men who had absorbed from the Indian people many aspects of living off the land.<sup>17</sup> Over the long winters they spent trapping, Jimmy must have absorbed the rich narrative story telling traditions of these old men. By contrast, he had spent little time in the traditional Alaska Native family life of his Koyukon mother's family. So Jimmy's own storytelling had roots in the storytelling tradition of his father. He heard his mother's story from his father when he was about fifteen, and, he says in his letter to the agent that he has spent a lot of time listening to and telling stories.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Jimmy Huntington is a product of a rich oral tradition of storytelling, but not necessarily the oral traditions of his Koyukon heritage. An interesting test of this thesis is comparing Jimmy Huntington's book with the book by his brother Sidney Huntington written with Jim Reardon. Elements of these stories are nearly identical in each book. To me this indicates that these stories were often told by their father, to the point that there the story came to take a 'standard' form that each of the men repeated for his own book.

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<sup>16</sup> The story of how Jimmy and his brother Sidney survived for two weeks in June, 1920 after their mother died of food poisoning is well known, but is told differently in each book. "In Jimmy's book, the ages of the children are given as 7, 5 and "not quite 2," but ""The editors chose not to print our real ages," Sidney wrote with Reardon in his 1993 book, "claiming that readers wouldn't believe the story. To set, the record straight," Sidney writes, "I was born on May 10, 1915, and was 5; Jimmy, born Aug. 14, 1916, was 3; and Marion, born Dec. 2, 1918, was a year-and-a-half." "Dermot Cole on Sidney Huntington," Alaska Dispatch News, Dec. 12, 2015, <http://www.adn.com/commentary/article/huntington/2015/12/12/>

<sup>17</sup> For the concept of "old-whites" see Bill Simeone, *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads: Identity, History, and the Northern Athapaskan Potlatch*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. p. 84

<sup>18</sup> JH to Miss Toni Strassman, May 24, 1963, James Huntington Publication Correspondence.

### **Chester Asakak Seveck Longest Reindeer Herder, 1973**

Chester Asakak Seveck's forty-eight-page booklet, *Longest Reindeer Herder: A Fascinating True Life Story of an Alaskan Eskimo Covering the Period from 1890 to 1973*, is was adapted from a long running journal that Seveck kept during the period of his life spent as a reindeer herder and it is mostly in Seveck's own words. His non-Native publication consultant, Frank Whaley, who got to know Seveck as a bush pilot in NW Alaska. Whaley admits that he sees Seveck in the model of the most "Unforgettable Character" he has known (his capitalization) a popular trope during the period. Whaley claims that he prodded Seveck to write the story of his life, and made the choice to preserve Seveck's colloquial speaking style in the book. "To make any changes in his English would take away part of the charm and credibility, so it is printed just the way he wrote it," Whaley writes in his introduction.

Seveck started working for the Wien Airlines greeting visitors to Kotzebue in 1953 as a kind of Iñupiat ambassador. After his first wife died, Seveck married Helen, from Point Barrow, in 1959, and it was with Helen that he did most of his tourist greeting and promotions in Kotzebue, and as they traveled the world. Thus Seveck was probably more aware than most of the image of the Eskimo that was being presented to those outside the Arctic, and which tourists came to expect. While he enjoyed the travel and opportunities, I wonder if he felt trapped in the stereotypical expectations.<sup>19</sup>

*"We be many times talk on radio show and many times also TV. Helen and I Eskimo dance and sing on the show Steve Allen and also Art Linkletter. One time on Groucho Marx TV show, he ask me this: "Chester, do Eskimo people loan or trade their wives?" I think about this and then say, "Yes, I think about all same Hollywood." Many people laugh long time when I answer Groucho this."*

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<sup>19</sup> Seveck's growing fame as a tour guide also led to the adoption of his image as a logo for Alaska Airlines.

While Whaley obviously did some shaping and narrativizing of the text, the hallmarks of a traditional text are also obvious in the inclusion of traditional stories.

### **Ticasuk, 1974, and Poldine Carlo, 1978**

The work of Ticasuk, Emily Ivanoff Brown, demonstrates the tremendous independence of spirit and persistence it took for Alaska Native woman to write her own life story. Ticasuk, born in Unalakleet in 1904, attended Chemawa for nine years, until she got her teaching certificate. She was subject to the same pressures as all the students to assimilate and give up her Native language. Yet she somehow retained her fluency, and went on to devote her career as a teacher in Kotzebue, Unalakleet, and Shaktoolik to a pioneering effort trying to bring back Native languages in the schools at a time when they were outlawed. Her granddaughter stated at the celebration for the naming of the UAF Nome campus Student Resource Center for Ticasuk, “My grandmother, Emily, fought to have such laws changed while also encouraging her students to speak their language anyway. As a result, she was fired from her teaching post. The local communities demanded she be reinstated.”<sup>20</sup>

Brown began her continuing education at UAF, at the age of fifty. She began her first book, *Grandfather of Unalakleet, the lineage of Alluyagnak* as her master’s thesis in 1974. It was later republished as *The Roots of Ticasuk: An Eskimo Woman's Family Story*, in 1981.<sup>21</sup> There was no model for the work Ticasuk chose to write. Ticasuk maintained a deep respect for her Iñupiat traditions, and wrote in the Native tradition of seeing her own story principally as that of her people, her culture, and her forbearers. Thus her original title “Grandfather of Unalakleet”

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<sup>20</sup> Ticasuk’s granddaughter Elaine Chukan Brown is a noted wine reviewer, she published this in her blog. <http://wakawawinereviews.com/2014/03/31/celebration-of-heritage-in-commemoration-of-my-grandmother-ticasuk/>

<sup>21</sup> Rozzell, Kristin Lynn. *Reinventing the Self Native American Women's Autobiographies*. Phd dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington 2007.

honors her family stories, as opposed to the retitled publication, as “Roots of Ticasuk” which puts the focus on her as an individual.

Poldine Demoski Carlo’s *Nulato: An Indian Life on the Yukon* was published a few years later, in 1978. While it is deeply influenced by work going on in the Alaska Native Language center at UAF at the time, it is really Poldine’s own life story, yet again, within the paradigm of an individual story as part of a collective experience. The purposes of both Ticasuk and Carlo are to recount and preserve the history of the village of Unalakleet, and that of Nulato respectively, mostly aimed at their own people, not outsiders.

**ANLC and Yukon Koyukuk School District,  
Oral historians, linguists and anthropologists**

The 1970s and ‘80s brought a flowering of life writing through the Alaska Native Language Center at UAF, UA Press, and the Yukon Koyukuk School District. New life histories were completed by Native Alaskans who wanted to preserve their heritage and stories for their own people. For assistance they turned to anthropologists, oral historians, ethnologists, linguists, and community historians. The ANLC published a number of works completed from transcribed oral interviews, with a focus on direct translation for the most part. Some, but not all feature a line by line translation. One of the first is *Shandaa (In My Lifetime)* by Belle Herbert, translated by Katherine Peter. Another is *Kusiq: An Eskimo Life History from the Arctic Coast of Alaska*. These are not narrativized, and mix recollections of a historic nature with traditional stories. They pay close attention to individual recollections and to context.

Beginning around the same time, Yvonne Yarborough and Curt Madison completed a series of nearly twenty biographies written from oral interviews for the Yukon Koyukuk School District, published between 1979 and 1988. These include works on Altona Brown of Ruby, Roger Dayton of Koyukuk, Andrew Isaac of Tanacross, and Walter Northway of Northway,

among others. These are wonderful works, printed with large type for an audience of local school children and include many photographs. They are well researched, sensitively written, illustrated, and accessible. They do a wonderful job of placing the life-author within his or her culture and village, and avoiding the western stereotypes that would focus only on achievements and accomplishments.<sup>22</sup>

Since the 1970s and '80s there have been a number of biographies written by anthropologists and ethno-historians based on oral interviews. Margaret Blackman's work with *Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman* (living in Haida Gwaii, in Canada) is a classic example, billed as, "... One of the first full length biographies of a Native woman in the new tradition of Ethnohistory." While the anthropologists/ethnohistorians finally focused on the lives of individuals within their cultural context, in the earliest of these works the narrative flow was still usually shaped by the anthropologist/author. Margaret Blackman herself recognized this and reconsidered her approach in a preface to the tenth anniversary edition of her work on Florence Edenshaw Davidson. She later wrote a biography of Sadie Neokuk Brower. Both women, whose lives were clearly centered within their cultural traditions, could also be said to have had achievements in a western sense.

Julie Cruikshank *Life Lived Like a Story* completely changed the paradigm in 1992, when she published work done with three First Nations women in the Yukon: Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. Cruikshank and the three women had worked together on oral history research for many, many years. In the tradition of life story research Cruikshank had been attempting to elicit material that would fit into a chronological life story: childhood memories, early life, and mature life. Her "informants" continued to interrupt this narrative flow by telling

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<sup>22</sup> Yarber collaborated again with the North Slope Borough School District on a series called *Point Lay Biographies* published in 2012.

traditional stories. Cruikshank finally realized that the stories told conveyed each of these women's conceptual understanding of her own life. The book that Cruikshank eventually wrote included the stories told, and more conventional biographical information in a masterful *mélange*. Of course, Cruikshank's revelation itself can be seen as a problem of cultural interpretation and translation. The three women understood *Life Lived as a Story* already, as, I am sure did their own relatives and kin. It was only Cruikshank, the outsider the anthropologist who didn't get it.

### **Life Histories and Narrative**

Krupat and Brumble both saw life histories as falling along a continuum between those that adhere to a western narrative construct, and those that stick more closely to an experiential, episodic, pattern associated with oral history focusing on story. As Brumble notes, from N. Scott Momaday, the hallmarks of this style are the inclusion of story, myth, tribal or group history, all along with and as part of individual history.<sup>23</sup> I suggest we need to think of it as two different kinds of intelligences, just like we think of students as having different learning styles. It is a western enlightenment tendency to want to narrativize experience, to connect events together in a linear way, one thing leading to another. Westerners sometimes call it rational thought, subtly implying that irrational thought is somehow not thinking at all.

The works of Moses Cruikshank's *The Life I've Been Living*, and Howard Luke's *My Own Trail* are two good examples of this contrast. These men are both Athabascan, close to the same age, and from close to the same area: Moses Cruikshank was born in Gwich'in country, and spent his first years in Ft. Yukon and Circle City. Howard was from the Lower Tanana. Moses Cruikshank finished eighth grade at St. Marks Mission in Nenana, and then completed

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<sup>23</sup> Brumble, 2008, 168

high school at Mt. Hermann School in Massachusetts. He had a thoroughly western education, and was trained in the narrative tradition. So he tells his story to Bill Schneider in a more or less western narrative style. Howard Luke attended the same mission school in Nenana as Moses Cruikshank, but only for a very few years, which was the end of his formal education. So Moses Cruikshank narrativizes almost instinctively, even while including experiences like hunting with his father, while Howard's book is repetitively experiential. Most, but not all, western co-authors attempt to narrativize Native experience. Howard Luke is not 'more Native' than Moses Cruikshank, but they have different ways of telling their stories. Likewise, some students will be drawn to one style, some to the other.

Kenny Thomas' *Crow is My Boss*, with co-author ethno-historian Craig Mishler, is an example of a work moving toward a richer and more complex understanding of this idea: Mishler let Thomas have control over the shape of the narrative. And he did not edit out repetitions in the text. Ernestine Hayes in her memoir, *Blond Indian*, tries to describe how she came to understand the difference between the western, and the "Native" or "Indian" way of thinking. She describes learning to read from Dick and Jane when she was a first grader living with her grandmother in the Tlingit village in Juneau. When they were divided into reading groups all of the little girls in the highest group, the Bluebirds, looked like they came out of the Dick and Jane books, with their clean clothes, and neatly combed hair. So even as she learned to read, she knew she would never be a Bluebird.

If there is a traditional "Native" or "Indian" way of thinking, it encompasses the inclusion of myth, tribal, and personal history, "the mythical, the historical and the immediate," in Momaday's phrase, as one story, while letting go of the idea that there must be a coherent

narrative which seeks to tie everything together with a neat narrative bow.<sup>24</sup> “Mytho-poetic,” is another way of putting it, thinking in terms of stories as Julie Cruikshank discovered for herself in her own revelation. Too often western thought has treated ways of Native understanding as less intelligent, or subjective, with labels like myth and story and folklore. Now that most modern Native American and Native Alaskan authors have had a western education, I prefer to think of it as an expression of different styles. Whereas, most oral histories are developed around experiences and story, and not narrativized, some students will appreciate the more narrativized biographies

In the end, why read biographies and autobiographies? Alaska Native students today are steeped in the western narrative tradition. They are used to reading biography from traditional books to *People Magazine*. A biography elevates a person and his or her life and life experiences, their personal choices and values, marking it as important, something worthy of note and study. I think this is what students take from biographies and autobiographies.

The book I use in my Alaska History course, is Willie Hensley’s *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*. Hensley manages to pull together the Alaska Native experience from the period when many Native people were still living off the land to the modern era of Alaska Native corporations in a way that really grabs students. The two poles of experience which seem so distant turn out to have occurred with the lifetime of someone who is still quite young. Both Native and non-Native students connect with the very personal way he relates his story. “I enjoyed this memoir as it truly explained first hand experiences of an Alaska Native himself,” wrote one non-Native student, while another commented, “As I read *Fifty Miles From Tomorrow* I felt as if I had learned more about Native Alaska life than in any of my other studies.” And for a Native student,

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<sup>24</sup> Momaday’s phrase from Brumble, 2008, 168.

“I really enjoyed Hensley’s memoir, as I’m finding myself more and more trying to connect myself with a larger part of Alaska’s past that I am a part of.”

In a Native Studies class, I let students choose a biography or autobiography, often one from their own region, village or culture. I have had students discover they are related to almost everyone in *Roots of Ticasuk*. And I have had students who have never had the opportunity to read by and about someone from their own culture. Students interested in religion and spirituality have read *The Gospel of Peter John*, or selections from Oscar Kawagley. Non-Native students have often had little exposure to Native experience.

In the western culture in which we all live, a biography conveys stature, putting Native autobiographers, leaders, and elders into the world of celebrities and political leaders with their own publication.

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