Quiet in my Arms

Scholars find ways to respectfully preserve oral traditions

BY LESLIE HSU OH
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

Beneath a lullaby of waves crashing upon a shore, Haida Yaghu Jaanas Raven clan Elder Mary Swanson's voice anchors me at the end of a long day: "They used to tell the stories all the time, almost every day, sometimes twice a day. If your great auntie invited you, or your uncle invited you, we had to circle around by them and hear the stories like the bear and the octopus, raven stories ..."

I am listening to her five years after she recorded these words for the Haida Heritage and Repatriation Society. University of Alaska Anchorage Professor Jeanie Breinig posted this recording on Blackboard, a collaborative online course meeting tool, and asked us to discuss: How do you enter the stories? What lessons do you take from them to apply to your own life?

On my lap, my 5-year-old and 2-year-old squabble over my iPhone. In front of us, a radio button not larger than an eraser head snails its way across one of a dozen browser windows open on my laptop.

Swanson's voice fades into a whale's song intertwined with the masculine lyrical voice of an Elder speaking in Xaad Kil, the Old Massett dialect. By the time the raven chimes in with gurgling croaks, the audio recording has miraculously outcompeted all the distractions of our modern times.

Eyes glued to that radio button, we gasp when giant fins circle around the five brave but reckless brothers in "Sgaan lihlaanjada Gyaahlaangaay Killer Whale Man." My daughter wrinkles her nose when Yaanii K'uuka (The Wild Forest Woman) kidnaps a spoiled child and traps her in a dark, damp pit and feeds her bugs. When the recording ends, she leaps off my lap and says, "Better go drink my milk. I don't want Yaanii K'uuka to get me."

My son tickles my ear with soft kisses and whispers, "Again. Again. Again."

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Professor Jeanie Breinig, an anthropologist who has lived in Alaska since 1971 specializing in language and curriculum design, helped update "Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators." PHOTO BY LOREN HOLMES / FOR FIRST ALASKANS

Oral to Written Narrative

In 2010, I took Breinig's online course out of frustration that my e-saturated-TV-dependent-city-bound children were growing up without roots in oral traditions.

Originally from Kasaan village on Prince of Wales Island and a member of the Táas Láanas clan (Sand beach people), a Raven and Brown Bear, Breinig grew up without a telephone or television, listening to her "Chinna (grandfather), tell stories of half-human, half-land otter creature, and of mysterious transformations of animals who might be human, and humans who might be animals.

Her Haida name is T'áaw xíwa (Copper Ribs), which she explains to me in a story: "Our people were traveling along the coast and the canoe began leaking badly, so they plugged the hole with their copper shields and the people were able to travel safely home. I like to think of my name and the story as a reminder to use my blessings and my treasures for the benefit of something bigger than myself – for the protection and strength of our communities."

True to her namesake, Breinig, along with Ronald Spatz, editor of the Alaska Quarterly Review; and Patricia Partnow, an anthropologist who has lived in Alaska since 1971 specializing in language and curriculum design; updated AQR's "Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators" originally published in 1986. This expanded edition, published in 1999, includes cultural and historical commentary on featured texts, building upon a Teacher's Guide that Partnow wrote soon after the original edition was adopted in the Anchorage School District.

Spatz explains that the expanded edition is still relevant today because it was built upon the strong foundation that was conceived when he created the original edition with American Book Award winners and poets Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Richard Dauenhauer, and Gary Holthaus, the first director of the Alaska Humanities Forum.

They prove that it is possible to translate oral tradition into written narrative as long as you try your best to address some of the problems associated with doing so.

First, the text must point out and address what is lost in translation from oral to narrative as Partnow writes in "Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators."

"Orally communicated verbal art depends on an immediate sense of audience, the use of formulaic sayings, repetition, verses or songs imbedded in the narrative, the use of the voice to express information, a relative sparseness of description, variation from performance to performance, and a specific attitude about authorship and originality."

Pulitzer Prize winning author Scott Momaday states that "Words are rare and therefore dear. They are jealously preserved in the ear and in the mind. Words are spoken with great care, and they are heard. They matter, and they must not be taken for granted; they must be taken seriously and they must be remembered. Thus in the oral tradition, language bears the burden of the sacred, the burden of belief."

Second, acknowledgements should be made regarding who owns the stories and the privilege readers are being offered to experience the power of the spoken word in this form. Breinig reminds us that "not all oral stories should be put in written form — that's just one way."

The Dauenhauers handle this in their series "Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature" as such: "Some Elders are reluctant to pass material on in written form, and many fear its leaving the community. Some have elected to die with their knowledge rather than to risk seeing it subject to ridicule or desecration. In this and in all aspects of our work we accept the values and standards of the Tlingit community regarding ownership of at.óow (spiritual and cultural concept of an owned or purchased thing which is passed down to descendants), including oral literature."

Third, Partnow says "you have to remember what seems strange about these stories to other

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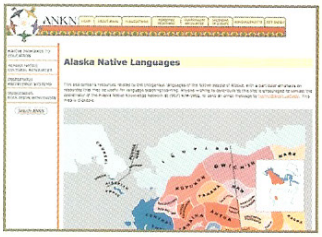
Oral Literature Online

Get online and learn more

Visit the following websites to learn more about oral literature. Readers will find interative maps of Alaska and it's languages, dictionaries and phrase books, and more. Also find audio recordings of stories, songs and narratives.

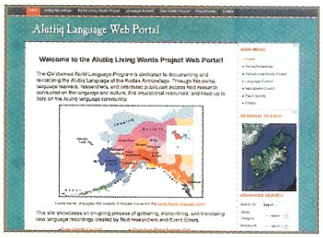


Alaska Native Languages

Alaska Native Knowledge Network

Sponsored by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, this site has an interactive Alaska Native Language map as a point of entry to a compilation of oral tradition translations going on around the state.

ankn.uaf.edu/NPE/anl.html

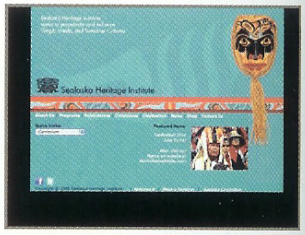


Alutiiq Language Web Portal

Alutiiq Museum & Archaeological Repository

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the Alutiiq Museum posts interviews, songs and speeches delivered in the Alutiiq Language of the Kodiak Archipelago accompanied by transcripts and subtitles in English.

alutiiqmuseum.org/portal



Language Resources and Curriculum

Sealaska Heritage Institute

Sealaska Heritage Institute offers language dictionaries, phrase books and downloadable curriculum with audio accompaniment of elders telling stories in Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian.

www.sealaskaheritage.org

people," especially teachers. She shows me a story from "Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators" that looks like it is arranged in poetic form but actually reflects the rhythm of the oral telling, when the storyteller paused and how fast she talked.

Partnow also recommends that teachers focus on how to "hear" these stories and be clear that your comments about that story are what you got out of it from your perspective and age: "I come from a tradition of analysis where we read a book and analyze what was good about it. And that is a very foreign and in some ways inappropriate activity among some Alaska Native cultures. For one thing, every person interacts with a story in his or her own way. They don't want an 'expert' to come in and say what this story is about because it's about meaning something different to every person."

Finally, Spatz emphasizes that you "must be meticulous, respectful and accurate. You have to have the right people working with you. You have to have experts who deeply understand the culture."

Spatz relied upon the expertise of Breinig and Partnow, who worked closely with translators in each Alaska Native language. They combed through each region and carefully considered what was missing from the original edition. Their greatest challenge was selecting only one story from each culture.

> **"My first words were in Inupiaq and many of the first stories I heard were in Inupiaq. I think this framed my conception of language."**

Today, there are new voices to consider as well, such as the award-winning poet Joan Naviyuk Kane, who was raised by one of the last fully bilingual speakers of the King Island dialect.

"My first words were in Inupiaq and many of the first stories I heard were in Inupiaq," Kane said. "I think this framed my conception of language. Although I've been trained to feel more comfortable with the diversity and nuance afforded by writing in English, I've begun to work in translation from and to the King Island and Kawerak dialects of Inupiaq.

"I am interested in the syncopated rhythms and unexpected cadences that make the songs of King Island people world-renowned, lending complex structure and phrasing to lines. Of course our songs are part of an oral narrative. I hope my work is transformative while honoring this narrative. I make poetry with a focus on dense sonics, unconventional syntax and evocative images while engaging the questions of audience, adaption and resilience. My work originates with my lineage, but refers outward."

Oral to New Media

Many of the Haida audio recordings that my children love are now accompanied by stop animation video in Xaad Kil with English subtitles. New media is constantly advancing the translation of oral traditions beyond the written form. This can be a double-edged sword, as Spatz warns that new

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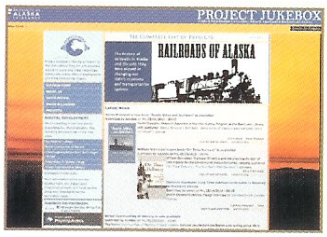
Digital Archives Partnership

LitSite Alaska

LitSite Alaska celebrates oral tradition narratives in many places on the site and also partnered with Alaska's Digital Archives to pair written narratives and links to historical photographs, oral histories, moving images, maps, documents and physical objects.

LitSite.org

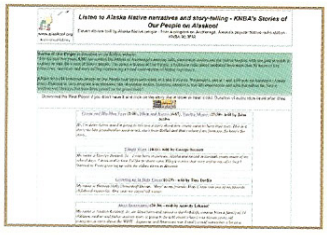


Project Jukebox

University of Alaska Fairbanks

The digital branch of the Oral History Program has more than 35 projects spread across the state of Alaska, some of which are available online.

jukebox.uaf.edu/site/

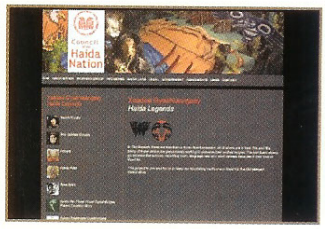


Stories of Our People on Alaskool

UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research

Besides offering a wealth of language and curriculum tools including a new interactive Alaska Native Language map, Alaskool features KNBA 90.5 FM's audio recordings of creation stories, and historical narratives told live in speeches and interviews across Anchorage.

alaskool.org/resources/audiovisual/storiesofourpeople.intro.htm



Xaadee Gyaahlaangaay, Haida Legends

Council of the Haida Nation

The Haida Heritage and Repatriation Society delivers dramatized audio recordings told in Xaad Kil, the old Massett dialect and English. Some of the stories now have a stop motion animated movie in Xaad Kil with English subtitles.

haidanation.ca/Pages/Haida_Legends/Haida_Legends.html

technologies can also "dilute and harm things as quickly as it can help them." As long as these projects follow the same principles of respect and meticulous care outlined above, the possibilities are exponential, especially for our youth.

At my living room table two years after I complete Breinig's course, Judith Ramos (Daxootsu) of the Yéil Naa (Raven Moiety), K'ineix Ǩwáan (people of the Copper River Clan) from the Tsisk'w Hít (Owl House) whips out her Flip video camera, which she keeps in her purse at all times, and plays her daughter's recent speaking engagement.

Maka Monture (Átch.qwé) is only 18, but you would never know from the way she commands the attention of her audience. In a striking dance cape which she designed herself, Monture illustrates her story with a performer's grace; each hand and body movement accented by a modern owl crest she painted in red, black, and turquoise acrylic that comes alive on white elk.

"There was a time long ago," she begins, rippling the arctic fox fur around her neck as she sweeps her left hand across the audience. Like Swanson, her voice is soft, but measured. Each word reeling you in until soon you surrender to the care of the storyteller.

Ramos raised her children the way I am struggling to raise mine. She told them stories by lamplight about Raven, while using stuffed animals and McDonald toys as props. She moved the family closer to her parents, Elaine Abraham and George Ramos, so that they could understand the meaning behind the stories, how crests came to certain clans or why landmarks are the way they are. After each oration, Ramos would ask them to tell it back to her in order to ensure that they remembered and comprehended the story.

Now Ramos beams with pride as she holds the video cam and watches the three of us swoon to her daughter's words. According to Monture, "If a story is within the mind, when it is orally recounted, it will be brought to life with emotion; the storyteller will transform their hands into the wings of Raven, or the sun rising in the east. Within their eyes you may witness a glint of the humanity of the characters, or even catch a glimpse of the slyness of Raven flash upon their lips. If you close your eyes you will be able to hear how their voice moves as if it were dancing upon the notes of the sheet music of a symphony."

My kids, now nearly 7 and 4, turn away from the television and jostle for space before the 2-inch screen where Monture tells the story of a Little Rabbit who sings and dances no matter how the other animals try to silence him.

"Is Rabbit OK?" my son asks when Bear plucks off one of Little Rabbit's arms.

My daughter screams when Wolf pulls off Little Rabbit's other arm. A smile spreads across their worried faces as Monture stomps a beat with one leg, imitating Little Rabbit without arms and a leg. By the time Eagle swoops down and snatches Little Rabbit's head, they are quiet in my arms, so still that I can hear their hearts beat.

Monture has their full attention as she says, "He didn't need his arms, or his leg, or his head to sing. The song was within him. His heartbeat became the beat of the drum. If you have something that truly means something to you, keep it in your heart and no one can take that away from you. The sound of your heart is your path in life. People you meet on your path might try to slow you down and push you down a different path. People might tell you you can't succeed. But as long as you maintain your strong heartbeat, that can be your driving force to lead you in life."

Days later as I'm driving my daughter home from school, she yells from the backseat, "Mommy, you'll be proud of me. I was like Little Rabbit today."

Leslie Hsu Oh (lesliehsuoh.com) is a frequent contributor. Her essay "Between the Lines" was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays 2010. She may be reached at lhsu@post.harvard.edu.

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