

Native Literatures of Alaska

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the history of Native American literature in Alaska from the written transmission of oral narratives in the nineteenth century to contemporary creative writing, as well as critical writing. It discusses the oral literary traditions of Alaska Natives such as Yupik, Inupiaq, and Tlingit. It also looks at the works of Alaska Native writers such as Mary Tallmountain and Velma Wallis.

Keywords: Native American literature, Alaska, oral narratives, creative writing, Yupik, Inupiaq, Tlingit, Mary Tallmountain, Velma Wallis

THE oral literary traditions of Alaska are rich and varied. Large and significant cultural distinctions have established unique and separate linguistic, social, and historical experiences that influence the development of each major narrative tradition. Yupik and Inupiaq narratives may share a common linguistic background, but their function and expression carry emphasis on different cultural values and develop different genres. The narrative traditions of the interior Athabaskan groups share many similar genres, themes, and social functions, yet differing village values modify the understandings of story. Although only a little can be pieced together of the Aleut literary tradition, its unique concerns and experiences delineate a series of explorations of communal values. Many Tlingit oral narratives are connected with clan history and are told as part of clan functions. Their role as sacred history and valuable cultural objects distinguishes them from other Alaska Native oral traditions.

Although many of these narratives have existed for thousands of years, the collection of them by Europeans only began in the nineteenth century. It appears that early Russian entrepreneurs collected information about the Aleuts and their stories, but most of it was of a tactical nature, and little has survived to the present day. Russian domination and subjugation of the Aleut population led to massive dislocation of villages and hunters. Disease and starvation increasingly took its toll on the Aleut population. Consequently, oral transmission and the training of new storytellers was so disrupted that many religious

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and literary traditions were completely lost. The Russian drive for furs and other resources created massive disruption as they enslaved and subjugated the Aleut population.

As the fur seal population diminished, Russian exploitation looked to the mainland and the Alutiiq and Tlingit people. They established forts in the Kodiak area (1784) and in southwest Alaska near Sitka. This second wave of control brought the Russian Orthodox religion to the mainland and the creation of Russian colonies rather than privateering vessels. In 1799, the Russian American company was created to unify and control all trade with Alaskan Natives.

In the early nineteenth century, Ivan Veniaminov notably collected much of the information that is extant about the Aleut. He also created an alphabet for the Aleut language and translated religious tracts into the Aleut language. In 1909–1910, Russian (p. 609) ethnographer Waldmar Jochelson collected a remarkable amount of Aleut material from storytellers all over the Aleutian island chain and even made cylinder recordings. After languishing for more than forty years in the New York Public Library, most of this material has been published due to the work of Norwegian Scholar Knut Bergsland and Aleut scholar Moses Dirk in a volume entitled *Unangam Ungiikangin Kayux Tunusagin*.

The Russians also collected material on Tlingit life, history, customs, and stories. However, as with the Aleut, there is not much published from the early contact era. Fortunately, the Tlingit retained a cultural continuity that allowed its oral tradition to remain strong, while repression and destruction disintegrated most Aleut narrative traditions. The Russians were never able to completely dominate the Tlingit. In 1802, the Tlingit drove the Russians out of Sitka. Although they returned with their Aleut allies, other European influences in the area counterbalanced the Russian presence, and the Tlingit were able to chart a course that allowed for a sustaining retention of land and culture. Much of Tlingit oral tradition remains strong to this day. This is partly due to the clan social structure, which placed oral materials in the hands of many members and merged art, song, and literature to constantly renew clan traditions through periodic ceremonial events.

Narrative tradition elaborates on migrations from interior Alaska to the coast. Here, the richness of the marine environment contrasted to the near starvation of the interior. Tlingit society blossomed on the coast, and clans with great houses sprung up. A large number of collected stories deal with clan ancestors who accomplished great deeds, making compacts with the animals of the coast and establishing clan traditions and creating objects such as song and art that are still treasured by the Tlingit today. Many of these stories are considered to be clan property and certain expectations surround their use. Richard and Nora Dauenhauer refer to this as “oral copyright” in *Haa Shuka’ Our Ancestors*. However, Raven stories and stories of first contact with Europeans are also common and do not belong to individual clans. The concept of oral copyright influences the structure of the narrative, as well as the conditions of its telling. Genealogical preambles and clan identifications often accompany a telling, and references to traditional clan use areas are common.

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In 1898, Edward Nelson published *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*. As the first major book about Alaska Natives, it initiated an interest by Americans in northern peoples. Nelson's book and the anthropological reports that followed echoed the name Eskimo for what are the Inupiat people of the north slope and the Yupik people of central western Alaska. The two people are socially quite different, but they have some similar elements in their narrative traditions. Both have traditional tales that use stock characters and explain the origins of places, human customs, and celestial forces. They are not considered to be the property of any particular storyteller, and the characters are seldom named. In the Inupiat, this genre is referred to as *unikparaq* and in the Yupik, it is often referred to as *quliraq*. A complementary narrative genre tells of more recent stories that are associated with named individuals and might include known places or a specific time. No extended clan or genealogical contexts were required, as with Tlingit narratives. Although storytellers might tell the tales for entertainment or instruction on long (p. 610) dark winter nights, they could be told at any time of the year. Some accounts mention a tradition of having two storytellers tell the story, the second acting as a witness who could amend the performance or pick it up where the first left off. Often, the stories were told in the men's house as a form of instruction, but they were sometimes told at public dance performances. The body of narrative tradition was considered to be educational, and young people, especially males, were expected to learn it. Both genres were recounted as information about genealogy, hunting, warfare, and land use that might prove as useful as the wisdom of traditional narratives. Other genres might include insult songs, young girl's stories illustrated in the snow or mud, string game stories, and rhymes.

Many Inupiaq stories were set in a village away from other villages or in a household away from a village. In the Yupik tradition, there were many stories about a Grandmother, an orphaned child (having no parents), and a great hunter. These settings provided enough freedom from constraint to develop a story while satisfying genre expectations. Songs were often an integral part of the narrative.

Some of the characteristics of Yupik and Inupiaq oral tradition were also present in Athabaskan oral literature. Athabaskan groups made a genre distinction between distant time stories and those with a more historical/personal origin. Distant time stories were mostly told during the winter and in small intimate settings. Some researchers have noted the existence of two storytelling styles: one very monotone and the other that uses a wide variety of verbal effects. Many storytellers remember hearing the tales told in what is referred to as "high language." This elaborate way of speaking included many highly metaphoric phrases and archaic words. This language was also used for the popular Athabaskan tradition of riddling.

In the 1870s, Archdeacon Robert McDonald began working with the Gwichin language, and his publications established the first literary tradition among the Athabaskan villages. Twenty years later, Jesuit missionary Jules Jette was beginning his collection of linguistic, narrative, and cultural observations among the interior Athabaskans, most particularly with the Koyukon people. Although not widely known until recent time, his work documents a rich narrative and cultural history. Reverend John Chapman also made some

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initial collections of Deg Hitan Athabaskan narratives. And in 1899, the Harriman Alaska Expedition brought a boat load of scientists and naturalists, including John Muir, to Alaska to record the Native cultures of Alaska and the environment in which they lived. Much useful material was collected, especially along the Alaskan coast.

Of course, these clergymen and officials like Nelson were precursors of Boasian-trained anthropologists who followed in the early twentieth century. These new professionals began to arrive in Alaska and take over the academic study of Alaska Native oral tradition. With the influence of Franz Boas, they began to collect linguistic and narrative materials to document Native traditions. Robert McKennan and Cornelius Osgood began their life-long studies of Athabaskan peoples and narratives. John Swanton began work on Tlingit and Haida texts, and Boas himself worked on Tsimshian texts. Margaret Lantis and a number of other anthropologists began to collect (p. 611) and publish information as the documentation of Native traditions by non-Natives continued. Many early efforts by Alaska Natives to work with non-Natives in the collection and documentation of Native languages were bypassed by more highly visible academic efforts. John Fredson worked with Edward Sapir on the Gwich'in language, and Louis Shotridge worked with Franz Boas on the Tlingit language.

As early as the 1950s, Emily Ivanoff Brown (Ticasuk) had collected legends and family histories from northwest Alaska and published them locally. In 1981, larger publishers brought out *The Roots of Ticasuk: An Eskimo Woman's Family Story* and *The Longest Story Ever Told: Qayaq, the Magical Man*. Later, Ticasuk published *Tales of Ticasuk: Eskimo Legends and Stories* (1987). Ticasuk was a much beloved writer and educator whose work inspired other Native writers.

Also in the 1950s, Lela Oman was also collecting oral narratives, and, in 1956, the Nome Publishing Company printed her collection *Eskimo Legends: Authentic Tales of Suspense and Excitement*. She continued to work with oral narratives, and, in 1975, *Eskimo Legends* was republished by Alaska Methodist University Press. In 1967, she published *The Ghost of Kingikty and Other Eskimo Legends*, and, in 1995, *The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told By My People* was issued. Both Oman and Ticasuk helped demonstrate that there was an interest in Alaska Native voices and that there was a place for successful authors.

Alaska Native writing and publication grew as the work that came to be known as the Native American Renaissance began to influence writers here. Public visits and workshops by Native American writers such as Joy Harjo, Geary Hobson, Wendy Rose, Joe Bruchac, and others encouraged Alaska Native writers. Leslie Silko even briefly lived in Ketchikan. In the 1970s, as the nation's interest grew in all things Indian, publishers, editors, and writers sensed a rising interest in the voices of Alaska Natives. In 1971, the Indian Historian Press published Joseph Senungetuk's *Give or Take a Century: An Eskimo Chronicle*. Senungetuk's personal memoir of life in the Nome area resonates with larger questions of historical witness and cross-cultural contemplations.

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In 1974, Fred Bigjim collected a series of letters he wrote for the “Tundra Times” on the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) and published them in a book, *Letters to Howard: An Interpretation of the Alaska Native Land Claims*. Bigjim’s fusion of humor and political commentary placed him squarely in the tradition of American dialectical humor. Later, in 1983, Fred Bigjim began a long and fruitful publishing career with the publication of a book of poems entitled *Sinrock*. Much of his poetry contrasts traditional life with contemporary experience. He broadened his range with *We Talk You Yawn: A Discourse on Education in Alaska* (1985) and returned to more literary forms with *Walk the Wind* (1988), *Plants: A Novel* (2000), and *Echoes from the Tundra* (2000).

The 1980s saw much interest in writing coming from southeast Alaska. Andrew Hope began editing and publishing, and his volume *Raven’s Bones* came out in 1982. Later, his Raven’s Bones Press published a powerful book of poems by Robert Davis entitled *Soulcatcher* (1986). Davis merged Tlingit life and myth with poems about change and growth. Moreover, in 1982, the field of Alaska Native writing grew when Sister Goodwin published a book of poems with I. Reed Press in California.

(p. 612) Nora Marks Dauenhauer has worked for years with her husband Richard to collect, document, and archive Tlingit narratives and language. Her publications are many, but she has authored two literary books. A book of poetry, *The Droning Shaman*, came out in 1988, and, in 2000, she published *Life Woven with Song*, a collection of poetry, fiction, and plays that present her cultural heritage and unique vision. Also from the southeast came one of the few novels published by an Alaskan Native writer: *When Raven Cries: A Novel* (1994) was written by Kadashan and later republished in 1997. Although all these publications drew on oral tradition, they also established a contemporary literary tradition that extended and enlarged the audience as it developed its own vitality.

The late Mary TallMountain was one of the most famous Alaska Native writers. She lived in Nulato as a child before she was adopted and spent most of her life outside Alaska. In 1981, she published *There Is No Word for Goodbye*. This began the publication of a series of chapbooks that centered on her connections to Alaska: *Green March Moons* (1987), *Continuum: Poems* (1988), *Matrilineal Cycle* (1990), *The Light on the Tent Wall: A Bridging* (1990), *A Quick Brush of Wings* (1991), and *Listen to the Night: Poems for the Animal Spirits of Mother Earth* (1995). Her papers are archived at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. That same area of Alaska is given narrative treatment in a book that Poldine Carlo wrote about her experience in interior Alaska: *Nulato: An Indian life on the Yukon* was published in 1978.

Interestingly, Anna Jacobson published a novel in Yup’ik, *Elnqug* (1990), one of the few works of fiction written in an Alaska Native language.

Perhaps the best-known contemporary Alaska Native writer is Velma Wallis. Her first two books were oral narratives that she heard from her mother, in which she fleshed out the characters to create a form of fiction somewhere between documenting oral narratives and Western notions of fiction. *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival* (1993) was an international hit. She followed with *Bird Girl and the Man*

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Who Followed the Sun: An Athabaskan legend from Alaska (1996) and *Raising Ourselves: A Gwich'in Coming of Age Story from the Yukon River* (2002). When Wallis started writing down the stories that her mother told her, she wanted to preserve the stories because "they validated who I am," but she also believed in their revitalizing effect for cultural continuity. She felt the Gwich'in culture had been overpowered. She thought the stories would remind her community that "We were once a strong people. We actually have a history" (Yost 13).

The new century promises a growth in Alaska Native writing. In 2000, Jan Harper-Haines brought out, *Cold River Sprits: The Legacy of an Athabaskan-Irish Family from Alaska's Yukon River*. Well-known writer, actor, and activist Diane Benson published a book of poetry, *Witness to the Stolen* (2002). And Loretta Outwater Cox reworked stories she heard into a fictional format and published two books, *A Winter Walk: A Century-Old Survival Story from the Arctic* (2003) and *The Storytellers' Club: The Picture-Writing Women of the Arctic* (2005). Although it is clear that oral tradition will continue to inspire Native writers, some are striking out into new genres. Mary Tony published a thriller, *Terror at Black Rapids* (2004), under the pen name Aurora Hardy.

(p. 613) There have been a few anthologies that surveyed the field. In 1986, the *Alaska Quarterly Review* published a special issue titled *Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators*. It was later expanded and reprinted in 1999. Joseph Bruchac from Greenfield Review Press collected material from Alaska Native writers for his 1991 anthology, *Raven Tells Stories: A Collection of Alaska Native Writing*. Later that decade, Susan Andrews and John Creed from Kotzebue published a collection of student writing called *Authentic Alaska: Voices of Its Native Writers* (1998).

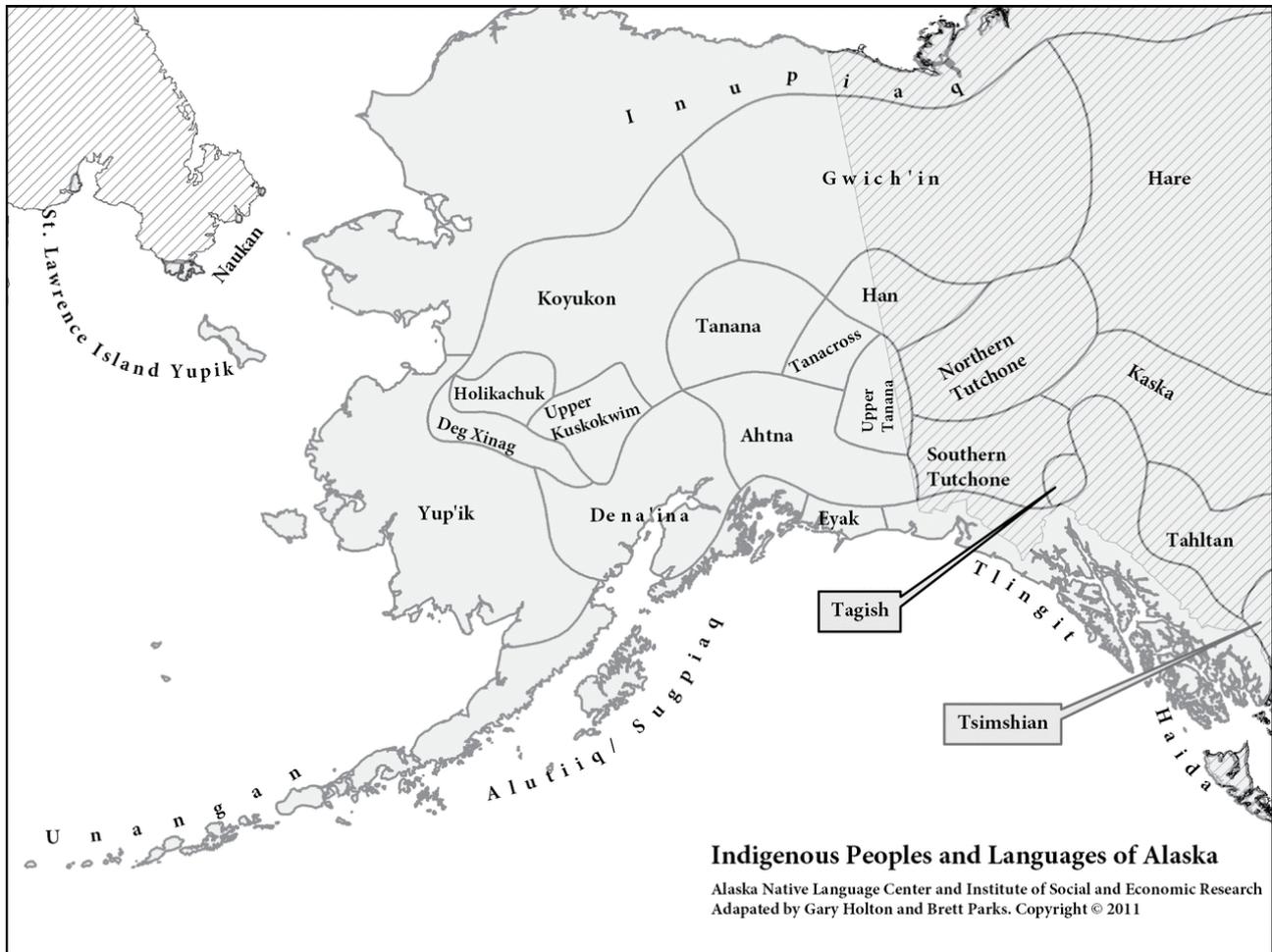
Alaska Native writers face the somewhat paradoxical task of crying warnings and singing celebrations at the same time. Although the signs of change are all around, the land, the animals, and the spirit of Alaska remain the same. Many of the contemporary writers see that it is humanity's perception, humanity's imagination of its role that has changed and continues to change; and it is this change that leads to political, economic, and social changes. Perceptions of the dynamic between the human world and the natural world continue to provide a source for social commentary, cultural continuance, personal renewal, and spiritual redefinition.

Undoubtedly, there are many writers, storytellers and collectors of narrative that I have not mentioned. Many have written autobiographical, historical, or scholarly works. Many writers have published literature in periodicals and newspapers. I apologize to those I have left out. With the development of an audience, both Native and non-Native, and a small group of dedicated publishers, Alaska Native literature has grown into a vibrant and exciting body of work. Alaska Native writers are contributing to contemporary literature, but, more importantly, they are helping to mold Alaska's future. Fred Bigjim once explained, "By making vivid what is at stake to both Native and non-Native, our common American culture will be enriched, our sense of Nativeness will be enhanced, and the val-

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ues of our society will be reshaped to accommodate positive action and change” (Poet 48).

(p. 614) Appendix



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