LOON

Memory, Meaning, and Reality in a Northern Dene Community

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University of Nebraska Press  Lincoln and London
Dr. Timothy L. Pruett Jr.
Ms. Nancy Bolton, RN
Dr. Peter Lobo
and the entire medical
and support staff of the
University of Virginia
Multi-Organ Transplant
Program.

Dr. Fred B. Westervelt
Jefferson Nephrology Ltd.

For the dedication, knowledge, effort, and caring
it took to make the magic
work for my daughter.
IN MEMORIAM

Louise Disain
Thomas Disain
Henry O. Sharp
Victor Disain

James G. E. Smith
James W. VanStone

Scholars and friends
who are sorely missed.
But now I had to face an elemental question, as an anthropologist of course, but even more so as a person who had always been deeply involved with nature: Is there not a single reality in the natural world, an absolute and universal reality? Apparently the answer to this question is no.

Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*
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For more than thirty years The People of Mission have allowed me to come among them and have shared with me the experience of their lives. That experience has been beyond price and has shaped the course of my life. No book could encompass all they have shared with me, but I hope this one will aid those who have never experienced the North to appreciate The People and their world as it existed between 1969 and 1992.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the staff of the University of Nebraska Press. Editing is a difficult and often unappreciated task. I wish to thank the copyeditor, Maureen Creamer Bemko. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Gary Dunham for his sustained interest in this work as it evolved from a concatenation of original essays and reprinted articles into an integrated narrative ethnography.

The University of Nebraska Press arranged for two sets of reviewers for the manuscript. Of the anonymous first set, one provided an extensive and detailed review that engaged the ideas in this work and was extremely valuable to me in refining and reformulating the arguments. The other established that they did not like it, me, the topic, the working title, the writing, or much else about the work. The comments of both reviews were quite useful in developing the arguments and their presentation, although they were useful in rather different ways. The reviewers of the penultimate draft, each of whom chose not to remain anonymous, were Robert Jarvenpa (suny–Albany) and David M. Smith (University of Minnesota–Duluth). Both Bob and Dave provided insightful comments and advice, most of which I have taken.

As the manuscript has developed over the years it has benefited from the
insights and encouragement of Professors David M. Smith, Robert Jarvenpa, Edith L. Turner (University of Virginia), Roy Wagner (University of Virginia), Margaret Huber (Mary Washington College), Peter Huber (P. B. Huber Inc.), and Phillip Moore (Curtin University). Edie, Bob, Dave, and Phil have all committed the time and effort to read the entire manuscript at one stage or another of its development. I thank them for their patience, their insights, and their advice. The faults of the book are mine, but many of its virtues are theirs.

The University of Virginia is supportive of local scholars. I wish to thank it for providing, through the Department of Anthropology, e-mail, access to the Internet, and the use of its libraries.

Ethnology is still an expression of relationships between people, and so much that is of value in those relationships cannot be marked by reference to publications. Northern Athapaskanists are rare critters. Most of us are forced to live our professional lives with only intermittent contact with others who share our interest in Northern Athapaskan peoples and cultures. What contacts we do have, largely at conferences and by e-mail, are precious. The references within the text do not begin to reflect that influence. I particularly value the decades long exchange of ideas about the Chipewyan and the nature of power in Chipewyan culture that I have had with David M. Smith. The influence those exchanges have had upon my understanding of the Chipewyan is immense.

“Experience” as an analytical subject is something to which I have come but lately and only with hesitation and uncertainty. I remain to be convinced that experience is either a subject that can be successfully explored or a viable analytic category as the ascendancy of reductionism seems an almost inevitable consequence of the interpretive pursuit of experience. Yet, during the nearly fifteen years I have participated in Edie Turner’s seminar, I have been impressed by her constant search for the limits of the anthropology of experience and the range of issues she has been able to bring under anthropological examination. If I am not yet convinced of the validity of an anthropology of experience, I have become convinced that the range of otherwise unexaminnable topics demands exploration of the limits of what a focus upon experience can bring to ethnological analysis.

Anthropology has a limited interest to nonacademics, so I especially
thank Kelvin McDaniel, Roman Locke, Harold Burton, John Wilkinson, Ed Thomas, Robert Hall, Gilbert Gough, Frances Winegar, Jack Messina, Patti Vineyard, and Jeff Peck for coping with my attempts to explain the arguments advanced in the book while I was trying to formulate them. Kelvin and Roman especially deserve my thanks for their patient willingness to listen to the abstractness of anthropology when we were supposed to be working on other things.

I owe particular thanks to the people of Mission. I cannot name them all here, but I wish to thank all of them for their kindness, tolerance, and patience. I especially wish to thank Thomas and Louise Disain, Louie and Mary Louise Disain, Boniface and Mary Disain, Joe Bigeye, Alphonse Disain, Irene Maynard, Mary MacDonald, Victor Disain, Johnny and Florence Mercredi, Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Artchie, Bernadette Disain-Sharp, Campet Medal, Pierre Robillard, Noel Bouvier, Napoleon MacKenzie, Peter Disain, Simon Robillard, Lena Carter, Mr. and Mrs. Willie Broussie, Germane Dadzene, John Laban, Jimmy Laban, Toby Laban, Louie Toutsaint, Fred Toutsaint, Louis Ditheda, Pierre Catholic, Ben Toutsaint, William Bouvier, Oliver Bouvier, Martin Robillard, Mary Yooya, Artchie Disain, Moise Yooya, Mary Jane Yooya, Mr. and Mrs. Mike MacKenzie, Alex Black Lake, Edwin Mercredi, Gilbert Mercredi, Boniface Mercredi, Modest Bigeye, John Louie Bigeye, Moise and Victoria Eckodh, Billy Sandypoint, John Sayazie, and Ben Adam.

Because the world of white Northerners is so small and each individual is so readily identifiable with a particular place and time, I have chosen not to name any of the white population of Mission or Discha. Many of them were helpful and supportive during my fieldwork, especially during my first few months at Mission. The presence of an American student committed to living entirely within the confines of the First Nation community was pernecissing—and sometimes disquieting—to a white Canadian population facing uncertainty about its own future. Inevitably, my presence became an issue in local white politics and social relationships, yet even those who found my presence most disconcerting were consistently polite and helpful.

At some point ethnography has an obligation to provide privacy to the people who are its subjects. The names of all persons, other than anthropologists whose assistance or work is being acknowledged, are pseudonyms. The individual names that appear in this work are consistent with those that
I have used in other writings over the last fifteen years. Place names near Mission are disguised, usually by using a local name for them, but I have generally used the real names of places within the region unless I am following an author who has used a pseudonym for a place name.

I should especially like to thank my aunt and uncle, Paul Miller and Jacquie Miller, for their sustained caring, encouragement, and interest in my daughters’ lives and dreams.

Writing is a time-consuming process. Thinking about the data and experience to formulate what is to be written can usually be accomplished—except for capricious moments of intense concentration—while engaged in other activities. The writing itself means hour after hour at the keyboard to the neglect of other obligations and duties. Both my daughters had left home by the time I began intensive work on the manuscript, but I wish to thank my children, Karyn and Catherine, and my mother, Catharine M. Sharp, for their patience and their toleration of the neglect the writing of this book has caused.
ON WORDS

The Chipewyan of Mission refer to themselves as Dene, Chipewyan, or “The People of Mission.” “The People” is another translation of the word Dene. I use them interchangeably. The word Chipewyan is not Dene in origin and is one of those words that, to the disgust of every proofreader (and the occasional manuscript reviewer) I have ever dealt with, does not take a plural form. Chipewyan is Chipewyan. I have never heard the plural form used by any Chipewyan or by any of the local white population. Only in written English is this usage sometimes ignored.

I use the word “white” to refer to the non-Indian Canadian (and sometimes American) society—past and present—and its members. Within the context of Mission, white refers to a group defined by culture, values, and social position rather than by skin color. The Dene recognize as well as anyone else the differences in skin color and physical characteristics whites use to categorize individuals into races. They categorize members of other Native American cultures as Indian, but they conceive of African-American tourist fishermen or Canadians of non-European extraction as white because of their values, behavior, and social position. Theirs is a sensible position, and I have chosen to follow it here.

Blood plays a series of roles as metaphors of family and kinship among the Chipewyan, but Indian status in Canada is determined by inclusion on a treaty list prepared by each recognized band rather than by ideas of blood. The rules for inclusion or exclusion change through time, but the actual number of First Nation individuals always exceeds the number on the treaty list. Customary practice in anthropological writing calls for the use of the term “status” to designate those individuals recognized as belonging to a First Nations group. I have followed the lead of the English-speaking popu-
lation at Mission—white and First Nations—that uses the word “treaty” to make this distinction. The word “status” is presumed to be less offensive than the word “treaty,” but the only people I have ever encountered who found the term offensive were white male anthropologists.

In common with many First Nations cultures, the Mission Chipewyan refer to animals in the singular. This usage often seems glaringly incorrect in English, but wolf is wolf, not the wolf, the wolves, a wolf, or wolves. The reasons for this are explored in chapter 9. I have tried to follow this usage whenever the issue of number is relevant in the use of the name of an animal or would lead to a statement that I regard as less than accurate.

There are places in the text where I capitalize whole words, for example, dog, woman, or man for the specific purpose of indicating that the word refers to a category. I prefer capitalization to indicate precisely that I am referring to a category and to eliminate the possibility of confusing the category designator with a proper noun.

At places the word “know” is capitalized. This word refers specifically to having power/knowledge (inkoze) and is capitalized to prevent any chance of error in its meaning.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police are customarily called the RCMP (each initial spoken individually). This practice is followed in Mission, in all the parts of Saskatchewan where I have spent any time, and in British Columbia, where I lived for eleven years. I follow that usage here.

Mission is a small place of recent origin. The name is used to provide some degree of privacy to its inhabitants, but it is one of the names the Dene themselves use to refer to their home. Chipewyan culture varies considerably from place to place, and I presume this book to refer specifically to the Mission Chipewyan.

There are a number of places in the text where words are given meanings that deviate from their customary usage. Sometimes this simply reflects local usage at Mission. In other cases, where I have not been able to find an effective substitute, quotation marks have been placed around them to alert the reader that the ordinary English usage of the word may convey meanings not applicable to the specific case of the Chipewyan. This is reasonably obvious in the case of words like “spirit” or “soul.” Sometimes it is necessary to use a word in a special sense (“event” is the most obvious case) before the reader has been exposed to a later argument about its meaning. The quotation marks serve no purpose other than to alert the reader to interpret the word judiciously because of a following argument.
INTRODUCTION

The Central Canadian Subarctic home of the Chipewyan is a place of perpetual enigma. Within it, human life is constructed by the discord between beauty, seclusion, abundance, and scarcity. It is framed by the extremes of a climate given to sheer brutality. The People themselves are marvelously enigmatic, yet their understanding of themselves, their land, and their relationships to it and its other inhabitants expresses a subtle and penetrating wisdom.

There comes a point after living among them, trying hard to understand them by paying careful attention to what they do and what they say, that it is possible to explain in familiar terms almost everything they do and say. On rare occasions there occur circumstances whose explanation defies the familiar reality of Western thought. This work is focused upon a few of those unusual circumstances that I have found to be critical to understanding the Chipewyan and appreciating the differences between them and ourselves.

Northern Athapaskan ethnography has always been a bit out of phase with the ethnography of the rest of Native North America. Since the publication of Cornelius Osgood’s Winter in 1953, there have always been a few good books on Northern Athapaskan cultures that have transcended regional ethnography. Joel Savishinsky’s The Trail of the Hare (1974) and Bob Jarvenpa’s excellent Northern Apprenticeship (1998) are good examples of works on Central Canadian Subarctic cultures that have broad appeal. This is true for Northern Athapaskan cultures in other areas, as Richard Nelson’s somewhat controversial Make Prayers to the Raven (1983) illustrates. A few, nota-
bly Hugh Brody’s Maps and Dreams (1983), are widely read and have been influential outside anthropology. Some very few, like Julie Cruikshank's Life Lived Like a Story (1990), have altogether transcended specialized ethnography and have had a substantial influence on a wide range of academic disciplines.

Notwithstanding the broad appeal of a few works, the heart of Northern Athapaskan ethnography has always been the journal article and the technical monograph. Developing the ethnography of Northern Athapaskans through technical publications directed first to specialists and only secondarily to other interested souls has had its benefits. If few of anthropology’s hot issues are resolved through the use of Northern Athapaskan material, distance from that more heated world of disciplinary passion has allowed the development of a literature rich in ethnographic detail and generally quite thorough in its appreciation of theoretical issues.

It has also produced a literature seemingly quite civilized in its conduct. It is rare for Northern Athapaskanists to call each other names or directly challenge each other. The polemics of even the most fractious debates among us pale before those in areas that attract greater attention. This is partly due to the different ways Northern Athapaskan cultures seem to be seen by those who actively conduct fieldwork among them and by those who deal with them through the literature. The latter seem to see Northern Athapaskans as more uniform than do fieldworkers, and it is my experience that they are far more willing to make comparisons between cultures.

Chipewyan culture varies quite significantly from village to village. Most Northern Athapaskan ethnography—this work included—is very much directed inward toward a single group of people in a particular set of circumstances at a specified time and place. This characteristic is marked by a lack of comparison between cultures and a lack of reference to the work of ethnographers dealing with other Northern Athapaskan cultures. It is not that we do not read each other’s work but that we are acutely aware of the differences between the cultures and are intensely suspicious of comparisons between peoples often living many hundreds of miles apart who are separated from each other by intervening languages and cultures and who exist in different historical, ecological, and social circumstances. Comparison is a deeply desired goal in Northern Athapaskan ethnography, but I think most of us feel that the depth of the existing ethnography is not yet sufficient to allow very much of it. That time will come, but for the present Jean-Guy
Goulet’s *Ways of Knowing* (1998) (on the Dene Tha) is about the only ethnography that strikes me as effectively using comparison in the analysis of a Northern Athapaskan culture. Yet even there I think the differences between the Dene Tha and the Chipewyan are underdrawn.

This does not mean Northern Athapaskan ethnography is bland or without conflict. Rather, much as among the peoples themselves, conflict is indirect and subtle. Over the years I have taken to reading Northern Athapaskan ethnography much as I would go about trying to uncover the social context of a medicine fight. Many of the most important statements in the Northern Athapaskan literature are made through acts of omission rather than through acts of commission. Disagreement or lack of confidence in the work of others is not expressed directly but is shown through odd juxtapositions of sources and references, strangely elliptical footnotes or comments, or lack of reliance upon apparently obvious sources.

At a time when uncontextualized snippets of tape-recorded speech have too often become substitutes for sustained fieldwork, I have based this work on the traditional methodology of ethnographic analysis: participant observation. For an anthropologist of my generation, this meant living among the people and, as much as I could, dressing as they did, obtaining my food as they did, and going hungry when they did. This approach to ethnology demands total immersion in Dene life: day after day, week after week, month after month, field trip after field trip. In the field and out of the field, the data—the notes, the experiences, the emotions, the photographs, the memories—are continuously examined and reexamined, interpreted and reinterpreted. My emerging understandings of The People were carried back among them to be checked and rechecked, examined and reexamined, tested and retested, in what has become a continuous process of seeking the meaning(s) of my experiences in order to increase my understanding of the Dene.

I quickly learned that the Chipewyan would not tolerate questioning or formal interviews. The People did not intend to teach me (see Goulet 1998: 3–8 for the manner in which the Dene Tha controlled his education among them); instead they expected me to learn from participation. They did not mind my taking and keeping notes as long as I took them in private. They would not accept my taking them in the course of interaction with them. They did not tolerate tape recordings but were quite fond of photographs.

Since Jean-Guy Goulet has raised the issue of methodology in Northern