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The Blind Man and the Loon

Craig Mishler

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The Blind Man and the Loon

THE BLIND MAN AND THE LOON

THE STORY OF A TALE

CRAIG MISHLER

Foreword by **ROBIN RIDINGTON**

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Foreword

From a distance of miles and centuries, stories in the oral tradition seem to have an independent existence, drifting from place to place like species of animals over time and territory and gradually evolving from one form to another. Indeed, early folklorists and anthropologists sought to dissect and classify them in the same way that anatomists and taxonomists dissect and classify groups of animals. Later, Swedish folklorist Carl von Sydow (also known as the father of actor Max von Sydow) coined the term *oicotype* to describe local forms of a widely distributed folktale. His idea was that stories evolve and adapt to local conditions over time.

The Blind Man and the Loon is a remarkable work that traces a single story through Inuit and Athabaskan variations. It is clearly a labor of love. Craig Mishler has collected and told the story himself. At the same time, he also traces the contexts in which the story has been told, collected, adapted, and sometimes appropriated. While he uses the terminology of academic folklore, he does not rely exclusively on this rather hermetic language. He takes the reader on a shared journey of discovery and places himself within the narrative to do justice to the people he cites, both historical figures and ones he knows or has known personally. His comments on field technique reflect his own experience as storyteller and collector as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of the relevant literature. Knud Rasmussen comes out as exemplary. Franz Boas doesn't do as well. Mishler is also forthright on the issue of cultural appropriation and doesn't hesitate to point out the failings of the popular and often praised film *The Loon's Necklace*. He tells a cautionary tale for outsiders contemplating the use of Native American oral narratives as "children's literature."

Mishler is a self-confessed collector who early on made the switch from coins to folktales. From there it was just another step to start collecting stories about storytellers and stories about the collectors of stories. He is also a gifted storyteller in his own right. He is schooled in the traditions of distributional and typological folklore, but he is also and perhaps primarily sensitive to the poetic values of storytelling.

Not every collector has been so sensitive. Some even failed to give the names of the people from whom they heard a story. This is unfortunate and indeed disrespectful, for as the author says, “The storytellers who have performed and recorded the story of the Blind Man and the Loon are the unsung poet laureates and Nobel prize winners for literature of their times. . . . They are diverse and fascinating people who need to be honored and remembered, and what follows here is a nod to an illustrious pantheon of voices, names, and faces.”

Oral stories live only in the moment of their telling. At least before the advent of electronic communication, stories have been sustained by face-to-face personal contact. They are creatures of breath and ears and voices, and take place in settings like the ones Knud Rasmussen described for his encounters with Inuit storytellers in the 1920s. These settings have recently been vividly recreated by the Igloodik Isuma film cooperative in their feature film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Actor Pakak Inukshuk delivers a masterful rendition in Inuktitut of a story the shaman Avva told Rasmussen about acquiring his spirit helpers. His performance honors Rasmussen, his friend Avva, and the Inuit people who told him a wealth of stories, including that of the Blind Man and the Loon.

Stories span generations of living people before they jump into the realm of tradition. A story lives and is reborn each time a storyteller makes it his or her own and passes it on to an attentive audience. As Dane-zaa elder Tommy Attachie told anthropologists Robin and Jillian Ridington, “When you sing it now, just like new.” Storytellers make stories new with each telling. They assemble traits and motifs wafted to them from distant times and places and construct coherent narratives from them. Stories are cultural (what Alfred Kroeber called “superorganic”), but they are enacted as individual creations in the way that Edward Sapir, in his critique of Kroeber, said all culture is individually enacted.

As a story gradually moves from one cultural and geographic area to another through countless tellings, it evolves into distinctively adapted *oicotypes*. In his collecting adventures, Mishler has recorded versions of the Blind Man and the Loon from a variety of oral poets in several different areas. One of these is Maggie Gilbert, a Gwich’in Athabaskan elder, whom we meet in chapter 4. Unlike most versions of the story, which have come down to us as mere plot summaries or at best as

stilted prose, Maggie's story, recorded in Gwich'in, transcribed in that language, and translated into English using a line-for-line poetic form, preserves a sense of place, of context, and of voice. From the original audio document, the author has crafted a written document that does justice to the performance event.

Beyond recording and researching multiple versions of the story, the author looks at himself as a collector and sees in the mirror a reflection of all the other collectors who engaged in one way or another with the story of the Blind Man and the Loon. Like the storytellers themselves, each collector "has left his or her mark on the text." While some collectors, like Franz Boas, at times failed to name the people from whom they heard a story, the names of folktale collectors are almost always known. Chapter 2 is a journey through the archives of collected versions of the Blind Man and the Loon, looking for the stories of the collectors themselves and thereby shedding light on the marks they made on the texts they produced. Written documents do not change over time, although readings and interpretations do evolve in parallel to the way stories themselves evolve. As Thomas King has said, "There is no truth; there are only stories." Mishler gives the reader a gift by recounting the truth behind the myriad versions of "The Blind Man and the Loon" that his own passion for collecting has uncovered.

Robin Ridington

Preface

This book tells the story of a tale, a folktale familiar to thousands of residents of the arctic and subarctic. To understand this book, it is important for readers to be familiar with the basic elements of the tale, even though it has been told hundreds if not thousands of different ways. The following text, collected in the early nineteenth century by Moravian Brethren missionaries in Nunatsiavut or northern Labrador, but never published until now, represents the basic story line.

The text undoubtedly comes from an oral performance in Inuttut, the Eskimo language of Labrador, but was first hand-written in German. The storyteller and the collector remain anonymous. It was eventually collected by Hinrich Rink, a Danish scholar who actively sought out and compiled traditional tales in Greenland and other Inuit areas (see Rink 1866, 1875, and appendix D).

The Blind Man and the Loon

They also tell about a man called Kimungak [Kemongak], that two common loons made him recover his eyesight. He had a sister called Inukviak. The three of them, he, his mother, and his sister, lived in a place among people with extremely long fingernails and without good thoughts.

At the time the three of them were together in the winter house, a polar bear came to the window, and then the mother in a hurry handed her blind son a bow and arrow and helped him take aim, and thus he shot the bear, which fell down. And he said to himself, "Because you hit the creature so well, it fell right down."

But instantly his mother screamed, "No, no, not the bear, only the frame beneath the window did you shoot." As soon as the bear was dead, the mother and her daughter went right to the tent and left Kimungak behind alone in the winter house. While they lived off the bear, the daughter, without her mother knowing, often brought her brother something in the winter house. Because the mother who wanted him to starve would not allow that, she [her daughter] fearing her mother, hid it inside her clothing and brought it to him in that way.

When she then told her mother something, her mother often said, “Have you already finished that big hunk of meat I gave you?”

“I just don’t economize” was her usual answer.

While now Kimungak always stayed alone in the house and often heard the cries of the common loon, he often exclaimed with great urgency, “Would that they, who so often cry, come to me and restore my eyesight.”

And see, soon afterward, at night, two common loons came to him and talked to him with a human voice, and they brought him along to a pond, leading him by his arms. And there they ducked him into the water several times, asking him if he was about to be suffocated.

The first time they made him breathe they asked if he saw anything, and he faintly saw the glimmer of something. Once again they dove together with him, and when again they let him breathe, they asked, “What do you see now?” Looking around, he said, “I see [the] land.”

Again they ducked him under the water and when again they let him breathe, they asked him if his sight was still unchanged. At that point he saw mouse holes on the other brink of the bay and the stretched skin of the bear he had killed in his blindness.

Thereupon he went home, and because his relatives did not know he had come back, he, feigning blindness, crawled into the house [on hands and knees]. His mother, they say, did not give him anything to eat before she found out that he could see.

When now they left the house and went to the shore and came to a place with a lot of belugas, Kimungak used his mother as a hunting float when he harpooned a beluga. “Which one do you want me to harpoon?” her son asked. The mother answered, “Now, now, now, the dark one” [because the dark ones are not so strong]. And he harpooned that one.

Being now [dragged] in the sea, she said, “Why did my son make me into a float-luk [voice of the beluga]? I, the only one who nursed him. Please let me get out, back up on smooth and dry ground-luk luma.” These were her last words and thus she became completely transformed into a beluga. In the North she can still be seen from time to time.

Source: Hinrich Rink Collection, NKS 2488, III, 4^o: No. 303, Danish Royal Library, Copenhagen. Translated from the German by Birgitte Sonne

Acknowledgments

Over a forty-year project, there are many folks to thank for assistance. I should begin rather than end with my wife, Barbara, who has patiently encouraged my work throughout, never complaining when I came home from the library and announced that I'd found still another version of the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon, though she heard this repeated dozens if not hundreds of times over the years. My research and writing have benefited enormously and continuously from her engagement and interest and her ever-loving smile.

My efforts have also benefited enormously from the assistance of international colleagues and consultants. Just as folktales are linked by oral transmissions between storytellers, so too are scholarly adventures linked socially. Here is part of the trail. My fascination with the published Greenlandic variants of Hinrich Rink led me to look for his papers in Denmark. After locating them online in the Danish Royal Library archives in 2001, I began to look for a Danish folklorist who might be familiar with Greenlandic traditions and with the Danish documents.

In 2007, during a chance conversation, my colleague Owen Mason, former editor of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology*, happened to mention his recent fruitful trip to Copenhagen, where he conferred with the Danish archaeologist Hans Christian Gulløv. Owen shared Gulløv's email address, and Gulløv duly referred me to two other Danish scholars, one of whom was Kirsten Thisted. Thisted in turn referred me to Birgitte Sonne, which quickly led to a most productive fruitful correspondence and friendship. I hope someday to shake the hand of Hans Christian Gulløv, who also recently led me to the Erik Holtved photo portrait of Amaunalik, the lively Greenlandic storyteller, which appears in chapter 3.

Since providing his original lead, Owen has provided important comments on my discussion of the Blind Man and the Loon's connection with the archaeological record and the development of Thule culture, so I am greatly indebted and grateful to him on two fronts. He is a fellow detective of the first magnitude. Claire Alix is another archaeologist who thoughtfully commented on chapter 1 of the manuscript, helping me to understand the prehistoric development of bow and arrow technology.

Most especially, I thank Birgitte Sonne, in Denmark, who steered me to and through her Sonnesbase to find additional Greenlandic variants of the tale and make sense of them. This text database, compiled in Danish, is freely available for downloading on the Web. Each Greenlandic tale text or tale summary has a unique number, assigned by the askSam viewer. Whenever referring to these Sonnesbase numbers, I employ the abbreviated prefix SB.

One text not in the database (because it comes from Labrador rather than Greenland) was most graciously translated by Birgitte and appears here in the preface. Birgitte also pointed me toward the unpublished papers of Knud Rasmussen and also kindly invited me and my wife to visit her by train at her home near Glumsø, where she gave us a daylong drive through a part of the Danish countryside we would never have discovered on our own. We truly enjoyed her hospitality and that of her husband, the distinguished poet Jørgen Sonne. Without Birgitte's expert assistance, the scope and shape of this book would have been vastly different.

Through Birgitte I was able to contact Lucy Ellis, a student at the University of Copenhagen, who translated numerous Sonnesbase documents from Danish to English, and Liv Trudsø, who skillfully guided me through the archives at the Danish Royal Library (DRL) in 2007. An additional nod goes to Ivan Boserup, head archivist at the DRL, for granting permission to photograph and reproduce the image of Wittus Frederick Steenholdt's historic manuscript. Arnaq Grove, whom we also met at the Arktisk Institut in Copenhagen, dutifully referred me to Birgitte Jacobsen, who in turn referred me to Karolina Platou Jeremiasen in Nuuk. Finding time between her university studies and her young children, Karolina has provided new transcriptions and translations of three unpublished Greenlandic texts collected by Knud Rasmussen as well as the 1827 Wittus Frederick Steenholdt text, the oldest known variant of the tale (see appendixes C and D).

My interview with Maggie Gilbert, the blind Gwich'in storyteller, which forms the centerpiece of chapter 4, was made possible by the ad hoc translation skills of Ernest Erick of Venetie, who took a keen interest in traditional storytelling way back in 1973. Ernest did not translate the story itself but helped me elicit it. His grandmother, Myra Roberts of Venetie, was another one of my favorite storytellers.

Here in Alaska I also wish to thank my Gwich'in collaborators. Fanny Gemmill transcribed a first draft of Maggie Gilbert's variant, reproduced in chapter 4; this draft was subsequently proofread and refined by Maggie's grandchildren, Lincoln Tritt and Caroline Frank, and Caroline's husband, Kenneth Frank (Drizhuu).

Kenneth, especially, showed great patience in helping me match up the Gwich'in and English translation, line for line, with numerous annotations on Maggie's performance and style. He is the truest of friends and a close partner in the preservation of Gwich'in language and culture. Also, a tip of the hat to Maggie's daughters, Naomi Tritt and Florence Newman, and Maggie's son, Trimble Gilbert, whose blessing made it possible for me to include their mother's story in this book. I treasure their friendship over the years.

Ingrid Kritsch of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute has been most diligent in sending me published materials and assisting in the procurement and processing of digital recordings in the Northwest Territories. She also introduced me to the art of Carla Rae Gilday, included in chapter 5. The eminent linguist Michael Krauss, an old-time friend and fellow collector of the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon, was especially helpful in guiding my thinking about the antiquity and precise wording of the tale.

For the portrait photos that accompany chapter 3, I profusely thank Amy Carney and Patricia Linville of the Seward (Alaska) Community Library, the staff at the British Columbia Archives, Bent Nielsen of the Arktisk Institut in Copenhagen, M. Scott Moon of the *Peninsula Clarion* newspaper, Leon Unruh of the Alaska Native Language Center, and Todd Paris of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

For permission to reproduce the wonderful art illustrations that accompany chapter 5, I am most grateful to the artists Germaine Arnaktauyak, Toonoo Sharky, Carla Rae Gilday, and Robert Sebastian. Their work has given me a heightened appreciation of the tale and its importance to Native people. And I am especially grateful to Jacques and Mary Regat, of Anchorage, who allowed me to interview them about their two elegant sculptures, one in wood and one in bronze, and how they see the story. A quick wink goes to my cousin Clark for his excellent photo of the Regats' wood bas-relief hanging in the Fairbanks North Star Borough Public Library.

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I have benefited greatly from the free use of several archives, notably the British Columbia Provincial Archives in Victoria, the Glenbow Museum Archives in Calgary, the Alaskan and Polar Regions archive in the Rasmussen Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the Danish Royal Library and National Archives in Copenhagen, and the Northwest Territory Archives in Yellowknife. I am grateful for staff assistance at each repository. The international dimensions of “The Blind Man and the Loon” have encouraged me to travel and see more of this magnificent, exciting world. I have followed the story to many places, and it has become an essential part of my life.

Introduction

The Story of a Tale

Although there is almost no district which is completely devoid of folklore or stripped of it, nevertheless, it is provincial towns rather than big cities; and villages rather than provincial towns; and among the villages, the ones which are most of all quiet and impassable, located in the forests or in the mountains, it is these which are most endowed and blessed with folklore.

— JACOB GRIMM, 1815

Of the many thousands of stories recorded in Native North America by folklorists, linguists, ethnographers, and amateur enthusiasts, perhaps none have received as much attention as Raven Brings Daylight (Oosten and Laugrand 2006) or the Star Husband Tale, the latter now well-known through the classic studies made by Gladys Reichard (1921) and Stith Thompson (1953). The most recent study of a single tale known across the arctic is Kira Van Deusen's *Kiviuq* (2009), written from the perspective of a professional storyteller. Still, there are other widely diffused oral narratives or “diasporic folktales” (Haring 2003) actively circulating in oral tradition begging for scholarly attention.

Most notable among these is “The Blind Man and the Loon,” also well-known under such titles as “The Blind Boy and the Loon,” “The Lumaq Story,” “The Origin of the Narwhal,” or “The Loon’s Necklace.” Permutations of this intriguing paleo-tale have circulated in small villages over a very large part of Greenland, Canada, and the United States in the form of at least ninety-four published oral variants, sixteen unpublished archival manuscripts, three unpublished archival recordings, twenty or more literary and semi-literary renderings, a ballet, a theatrical concert, three films, three audio compact discs, an LP vinyl record, numerous works of folk art, and a myriad of virtual texts floating about on the Internet, including two on the official government web site Nunavut.com. These formal reincarnations and pathways demonstrate how the story continues to renew and reproduce itself. Despite its ancient roots, it is very much a living thing.

Reflexivity

My own involvement with this tale is that of a collector, but I also see myself to some extent as its curator, biographer, interpreter, and friend. Sometimes I have been asked or have volunteered to perform the tale, especially to audiences who are interested in my research but who are unfamiliar with Native American oral tradition. This has led to open conversations about its significance, its distinction as a repository of values and beliefs, its dissemination, and its totally remarkable life history.

In my own field work I have collected three oral variants in Alaska—a Gwich'in version told to me in 1973 by Maggie Gilbert, a blind woman in Arctic Village; an English version told by Abraham Luke of Dot Lake on July 10, 1983; and a videotaped performance in English from Kenny Thomas Sr. of Tanacross on October 30, 2000. Maggie Gilbert's variant is published here for the first time ever (chapter 4). The other two have already been published elsewhere (Mishler 1986; Thomas 2005). The compelling voices of these performers remain in my head. Hearing and telling the tale has allowed me the luxury to live inside of it. I am part of its habitat, especially now that my own eyesight is weakening.

My father, Clayton Mishler, was a tremendous storyteller, and as a child I was regaled with tales of his many adventures as a young man and as a sailor in the U.S. Navy. He was shipped off to China for three years during World War II and never forgot a single moment of it. My father's brother, Edward Mishler, was another great influence. Uncle Ed was a superb joke teller and always had us bent over in stitches. He worked for many years at Great Lakes Steel in Detroit, which must have been a joke factory as well as a steel plant. During holiday get-togethers and other Sunday afternoons, there was nonstop storytelling, joking, and magic tricks between my father and Uncle Ed.

One of my boyhood hobbies was coin collecting. I recall spending hundreds of hours going through rolls of coins from the bank to find nickels from every mint and every year, which I then carefully inserted into a handsome folder. After three or four years I managed to collect every American nickel except two. My bubble burst when I went to a coin show in Detroit and was told by a dealer that without those missing two nickels my collection was basically worthless. I soon got rid of the nickels.

This same impulse, I suppose, led to my professional interest in collecting songs and stories. I now have folders bulging with printed copies of the Blind Man and the Loon story. I also have cases and cases of original field recordings on cassette tape, most of them stories told by Alaska Natives. Nevertheless, the analogy between collecting nickels and collecting folktales or folk songs is not a good one. It is not necessary to collect all the variants of a tale or a song to gain a good understanding of it or to appreciate its true value. Two missing variants of a story, unlike two nickels missing from a coin collection, will not substantially affect our grasp of its beauty and its power. For every variant collected, there are probably hundreds or thousands more that are transmitted orally without documentation.

For forty years, while collecting and studying this story, I have been in my reverie. But the psychology of collecting folklore is a bit hard to understand. Perhaps it is the same impulse that prompts wealthy people to collect rare paintings, or compels celebrities such as Jay Leno and Chuck Berry to collect vintage cars. The popularity of antique stores, auctions, garage sales, and television programs such as *The Antiques Roadshow* and *American Pickers* illustrates the fundamental appeal of collecting material culture. As Wikipedia says, "Collecting includes seeking, locating, acquiring, organizing, cataloging, displaying, storing, and maintaining whatever items are of interest to the individual collector." To this list of gerunds I should hasten to add "interpreting" and "sharing."

But do we become what we collect? Will we be remembered for what we collect? In the process of collecting do we become larger than ourselves? Certainly we expand our experience and find a lifetime of adventure by doing so. The annual meeting of the American Folklore Society essentially brings together collectors of folklore so that they may compare, admire, and critique each other's findings.

My earliest educational training at the University of Michigan was in English and American literature, although I started out as a wide-eyed astronomy major. At Michigan I also became intrigued in anthropology by taking lecture courses from Marshall Sahlins and Leslie White. After stints at the University of Colorado and Washington State University, I immigrated to Alaska as a Vista Volunteer in 1969, to work with Native youth from broken families and with recovering alcoholics in Fairbanks. The next year I met my wife Barbara and started a family. I began my

first fieldwork working with the Gwich'in, Koyukon, and Han Athabaskans in the early 1970s, while I was teaching at Anchorage Community College, now part of the University of Alaska.

After five years of college teaching, I returned to graduate school in 1976 to study folklore and folkloristics at the University of Texas at Austin. There I learned many of my analytical skills from the late Américo Paredes, my dissertation supervisor. I also studied under the beneficial tutelage of Roger deV. Renwick, Richard Bauman, Marcia Herndon, Annette Weiner, and Joel Sherzer.

Following graduate school I found employment as a historian with the Alaska Division of Geological Surveys and the Alaska Division of Parks and worked side by side with field archaeologists. Then, in my ten-year stint with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, I was fortunate to work with coastal Alutiiqs, especially on Kodiak Island, and with the Aleuts in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. However, as often as I asked, I never found the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon circulating among elders in these culture areas.

The emphasis during my studies at Texas was always on folklore as performance and as verbal art. With additional studies in cultural anthropology, I have augmented this approach with a concentration on ethnography and ethnohistory. My inclination has never been toward grand theoretical matters as much as fieldwork and field methods. With humanistic motives, my first goal has been to honor and recognize the people I study and learn from.

Some readers will be aware that there are two major traditions of folklore scholarship, both of which began in northern Europe. Ethnopoetics, which comes from the Finnish philological tradition, is a modern form of literary criticism, where "The Text is the Thing" (Wilgus 1973). In chapter 4, I adopt this approach to a great extent in my analysis of Maggie Gilbert's Gwich'in language variant. I cast her transcribed Gwich'in language oral performance in lines, as poetry rather than prose paragraphs, and my analysis dwells on the relation of individual lines to one another and to the overall dramatic structure of the tale. I owe this exercise to the pioneering work of Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock.

The other major tradition in folktale method and analysis, represented in chapters 1, 2, 3, and 7, is grounded in ethnography and areal studies

and was first championed by the Swedish scholar Carl Wilhelm von Sydow. From this perspective, folklore gets its power and meaning from our understanding of its many contexts and uses, including the identity of the storyteller and the social dynamics of his or her community.

Archaeologists repeatedly tell us that artifacts must be understood in situ. Artifacts have certain intrinsic properties, which need to be delineated, but their fuller significance is discovered by learning their location and relationship to other artifacts and to the soils in which they are embedded. The same is true for stories. Stories are embedded in people, in repertoires, in performance and discourse, in media, in cultures, and in history.

Each of these scholarly traditions is well-founded and carries great merit, and this book demonstrates the benefits to be gained from combining them. As Linda Dégh wrote so perceptively in her book *Folktales and Society*, “We can hope to advance only if we succeed in uniting the two directions, in putting the textual analyses on the right socio-cultural basis” (Dégh 1969, 46).

The more I have studied the corpus of the Blind Man and the Loon, the more my sense of wonderment over its creation and replication has grown. In a very real way, it embodies the history and anthropology of the entire western arctic, a history reflected in its wide geographic distribution across two continents, an anthropology that involves nearly every major scholar who has ever worked there.

One of my methods has been to examine the table of contents of every available published anthology of North American Indian folk tales to look for texts and translations of the Blind Man and the Loon. To do this I browsed through countless libraries and used bookstores and spent many hundreds of hours doing various keyword searches on the Internet. Much of this effort, to be sure, proved fruitless, but sometimes newly found texts have emerged from misleading titles. I did not compile variants that I did not see with my own eyes, even if they were referenced online or in print. The result of these decades of searching is the Annotated Bibliography of Variants in appendix B.

A key argument in this volume is that the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon is not only found in many archives, it is in itself an archive of late prehistoric and early historic Indian and Eskimo cultures, packed tightly with a commonwealth of ethnographic data, world views, beliefs, early

technologies, and values. It is a grand repository for the knowledge and wisdom of antiquity. The Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn (1999, 45) said it well when he wrote, “And just as little of our culture is derived from a single nation, from a single race, so, similarly, few folktales come from the creative genius of a single people, be they Indian or Egyptian; they are, rather, common property, achieved by a joint effort of the entire world, more or less civilized, and are thus a part of international science.”

I have long had an interest in plotting the distribution of this international tale type and in comparing its manifold morphemic variations region by region and trait by trait, evidenced by an unpublished paper I first presented at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1988. This paper was called, “The Loon’s Necklace: A Native American Tale Type.” However, today I am more eager to understand its significance to the people who tell it. To do this it is important to know the storytellers as well as the story. For non-Natives, this significance is lost not so much in the mistranslation of texts, but in the non-translation of contexts, especially its *in situ* oral performances. One of the goals of this book is to reopen the story to its many ethnographic, linguistic, and biographical contexts.

The motif that seems to endear non-Natives to the tale is the way the blind man rewards the loon for restoring his eyesight by decorating him with his dentalium necklace, an artistic touch of reciprocity and respect, bonding man with nature. Unfortunately, this element is absent from about 95 percent of the published oral variants, including almost all of the Eskimo variants collected from oral tradition, so I am extremely skeptical that the power and longevity of the story lies in telling us how the loon got its distinctive and beautiful white markings. However heartwarming, this is simply a regional trait found only in a handful of British Columbian and Alaskan variants belonging to the Indian subtype. Still, it gets a lot of attention because this single regional trait has been framed and highlighted and then popularized in children’s literature, music, and film.

Book Overview

In chapter 1, “The History and Geography of the Tale,” I have defined the paradigms of thirteen selected traits (see appendix A) found within the

tale's two major subtypes. For simplicity's sake I call these the Eskimo or Inuit subtype and the Indian subtype. They are like the ventral and dorsal sides of a fish or the proximal and distal ends of a bone, two views of the same thing. These major subtypes are cognates and are logically subdivided into eight regional groups called oicotypes, and the eight oicotypes are in turn subdivided into individual oral variants. A map of places where the tale has been recorded displays its huge territorial range and regional distribution (see map 1, p. 9).

Or, to draw an analogy, the variants of the Blind Man and the Loon story are spread out and grouped like Darwin's finches, each species with a peculiar bill adapted to a different Galapagos island environment. However, this book is not intended to be a detailed, technical study of all the variants or of all the subspecies of the tale. Nor is it a search for origins or ur-forms. Rather, it looks broadly at the genera, the grouping of regional oicotypes, moving fluidly across the continents of North America and Greenland like gigantic herds of caribou.

In chapter 2, "The Writing of the Tale," I look at its dissemination and replication in various Native and European languages, including Danish and English, during historic time. Judging from its wide geographic distribution and the relative isolation of the peoples among whom it was found during the nineteenth century, it seems safe to presume that the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon traveled orally across two major continents via what Alaskans affectionately call "the mukluk telegraph."

The story's written texts, as documented in numerous Eskimo and northern Dene languages, are almost certainly descendants of those told orally in much earlier times, even though no oral recordings emerge until the 1930s, when the Danish scholar Erik Holtved began using an early disc recorder in Greenland. Since the early documentation of oral texts, the written record has also produced many semi-literary works, imaginative recreations, and abridged retellings targeted at children. There has been a great deal of interplay between oral and written tradition; they are closely entwined, especially in the new digital age.

Chapter 3, "The Tale Behind the Tale," tells the story of the storytellers and the collectors of the Blind Man and the Loon. The rock star singer and guitarist John Mayer has said, "When you hear a great song, you trace it back to who the singer is." The same thing is true with a great story. It has a thousand faces. Although visibly missing from so many

recorded variants, the lives and personalities of some of the collectors and performers of the Blind Man and the Loon have occasionally been documented, and they are fascinating in themselves.

In chapter 3 I have included a few biographical sketches and anecdotes about the storytellers, and have sought to add their photo portraits. There are also some references to their published biographies, where known, in appendix B, the Annotated Bibliography of Variants. In this appendix I have listed the storytellers rather than the collectors of the tale as the primary “authors,” although in fact it was nearly always the result of a close collaboration. Where the storytellers were left anonymous or where multiple storytellers were recorded by a single scholar such as Knud Rasmussen, I have listed the texts by their collector.

In chapter 4, “The Telling of the Tale,” I present the Native language text of one variant which I recorded from a blind woman I met in 1973. Maggie Gilbert came from the small Gwich’in community of Arctic Village, remotely located off the road system in the Brooks Range of northern Alaska, although much of her life was lived nomadically outside of the village. I present here what I know of Maggie’s life for context and describe details of the performance setting. Then I explicate the many voices in the text to open up subtleties of form and meaning, offering clues about its position as a subtle masterpiece of performance narrative.

“The Blind Man and the Loon” embodies a wealth of verbal art. But the Inuit or Eskimo subtype of the tale, in particular, has inspired a palpable wealth of modern visual art, in prints, tapestries, and sculpture, from many different artists, presented and discussed in chapter 5, “The Art of the Tale.” The scenes represented in these artistic pieces are the embodiment of selected subtraits, intertwining the genres of folk tale and folk art.

In the late twentieth century up to the present day the story of the Blind Man and the Loon has also been newly interpreted through films, audio recordings, ballet, classical music, radio, and other media. It has even been adopted into the repertoires of some professional storytellers. And it may be found all over the Internet, under a host of evanescent titles. Chapter 6, “The Mediated and Theatrical Tale,” explains how the story has been modified and manipulated through these mass media articulations.

In Native North American oral tradition, there are many stories with power. From a semiotic and ethnographic perspective, chapter 7, “The Power of the Tale,” attempts to answer the question of why this one narrative is so potent and so widespread, crossing so many linguistic and cultural barriers. A cherished kind of power, concentrated and embedded in both major subtypes of the Blind Man and the Loon, is the power of healing.

I wish to alert readers that there are two bibliographies herein. The first one, containing primary sources for the tale texts, both written and oral, is found in appendix B. The second one, addressing secondary and critical sources, is found in the References section. This rule of thumb should make it easier to find sources as they are cited.

Finally, as we fly together across the landscape, I should add that one reason the tale of the Blind Man and the Loon has traveled east across three countries from Alaska to Canada and Greenland in one direction and south to the Northwest Coast and the Great Plains in another is because of its direct links with medicine power, witchcraft, shamanism, and healing. In a philosophical way, it is also a study of kinship and the nuclear family, and its simultaneous existence in so many places testifies to a vast social network. It has flourished cross-culturally and internationally among two large disparate language families, the Inuit and the Na-Dene, and it has proven its durability and popularity in print and other media for a minimum of 185 years. Then too, we must not overlook the tale as a collective parable about the importance of subsistence and sharing—the highly portable flash memory of ancient cultures and modern ways of life.