

So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History

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William Schneider. *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002. Pp. 206, black and white photographs, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.

In William Schneider's *So They Understand*, the author sets out to explore issues of archival representation and collection management, but the subtext of his investigation becomes an even more important theoretical debate about the competing demands of academics and informants. "On the one hand, there is a long tradition of academic freedom, but there is also an awakening sensitivity to the rights of people to have a say in how their information and performances are represented and presented in public forums" (29). Schneider is rightly sensitive to the desires of his native informants, as traditional folklore researchers never were. He proposes folklorists correct the traditional academic failing by carefully gathering as much contextual data and oral literary criticism as possible to create an emic picture, especially when collecting cross-culturally. "The challenge is to recognize how stories are used and to try to preserve the intended meaning as part of the recorded account" (63). Schneider also proposes dozens of ideas about how informants can have more power over their archived narratives and feel more comfortable sharing their personal and cultural history, all commendable goals.

However, Schneider sometimes seems to value the emic, even at the expense of the etic, the teller at the expense of the interpretation. For example, at the beginning of chapter three, Schneider relates two similar stories about a young woman in "puberty seclusion" who broke cultural taboos and brought natural disaster upon her people (37). Schneider then happily expounds upon his informants interpretation of the stories as a warning "not to 'go against nature'" (38). It's certainly beneficial that Schneider takes the time to collect what his male informant sees as the meaning of these narratives. But undoubtedly, these stories could suggest more than just cultural attitudes about nature, but also cultural attitudes about a woman's place in society. As Schneider attempts to

reconcile the competing demands of sensitivity to informants and multiple interpretation perspectives, I find that he sometimes shortchanges academic integrity for the sake of his informant's comfort.

Schneider later tells of a panel discussion he attended in which he learned that one collection of archived Inuvialuit stories was only accessible to those whose research projects were approved by a council of Inuvialuit. This almost seemed the natural conclusion for Schneider's argument, but thankfully he pulled back from the brink, explaining that allowing a group to censor their narratives from certain individuals, whose interpretations they may not like, "would set a serious, negative precedent that could affect scholarship and, in the long run, the community's understanding of its history" (156). So in the end, while Schneider may not be comfortable even briefly exploring a feminist interpretation of his informant's (and friend's) stories, he would advocate that those stories be available to a future scholar who would, and that seems to me to be a fair compromise between informants and academics.