

Review Essay: Alaskan Yup'ik Ethnography at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*

***Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on its Head.* Ann Fienup-Riordan. Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with Calista Elders Council, 2005. 337 pp.**

***Ciuliamta akluit/Things of Our Ancestors: Yup'ik Elders Explore the Jacobsen Collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.* Marie Meade and Ann Fienup-Riordan. Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with Calista Elders Council, 2005. 420 pp.**

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[I]n the *Essai sur le don* [*Essay on the Gift*], [Marcel] Mauss...[tells] us... how much we have lost, whatever we may have otherwise gained, by the substitution of a rational economic system for a system in which exchange of goods was not a mechanical but a moral transaction, bringing about and maintaining human, personal, relationships between individuals and groups.

- E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Introduction," *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*

Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on its Head (*Fieldwork Turned on its Head*) and *Ciuliamta Akluit/Things of Our Ancestors: Yup'ik Elders Explore the Jacobsen Collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin* (*Things of Our Ancestors*) are the culmination of journeys of discovery and enrichment taken by Ann Fienup-Riordan and Marie Meade. The two colleagues are well-known to anthropologists, oral historians, and Native language scholars with an interest in Alaska and its peoples. They have pioneered an approach to Alaska Native research focused on Central Yup'ik history, language, art, and culture that is both timely and important. They are an unlikely pair, one mentored in the University of Chicago scholarly traditions represented by Marshall Sahlins, Raymond Fogelson, David Schneider, and James W. VanStone and the other tutored in Native Yup'ik language and traditions by her Yup'ik Elders from the Alaska village of Nunapitchuk.

The story of the two publications began in 1994 when anthropologist Fienup-Riordan was at work in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin just as the Jacobsen collection of Alaskan artifacts was being unpacked after long World War II and post-World War sojourns in Russia and East Berlin. Three years later Fienup-Riordan revisited the collection with a small team of researchers unlike any other to travel to the museum. It included Meade who is an Alaskan Native and Yup'ik language specialist and seven Yup'ik Elders originally from Alaska's southwestern Bering Sea coast and Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta areas. The team's intent was to examine this

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collection of ancestral Yup'ik objects obtained for the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin in 1882-83 by Johan Adrian Jacobsen, a Norwegian sailor, adventurer, and sometime employee of the museum.

For 15 days in September of 1997, Fienup-Riordan, Meade, and the Elders explored the Jacobsen collection with generous support from Peter Bolz, curator of North American ethnology at the museum, and his staff. Together they sifted through more than two thousand Yup'ik objects, audio-taping as they did so the Elders' conversations and reminiscences about these objects collected in their homelands almost a century before. The words of the Elders returned life, context, and substance to objects that had long rested silently in storage cases in Eastern Europe. This crossing of boundaries and borders resulted in the two volumes, one organized as an exhibition catalog and the other an almost lyrical recollection of objects once used, held and observed, together with the stories and memories they evoked among the Elders. What emerged from this confluence of traditionally educated Native Elders, museum professionals, and Yup'ik scholars could have been achieved in no other way. *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* and *Things of Our Ancestors* are the products of the group's remarkable journey, experience, and collaboration and are a compelling example of what can happen when the goods of everyday life, with the able assistance of Elders, do, indeed, give voice and remembrance to the "...human, personal, relationships between individuals and groups" (Evans-Pritchard 1967:ix) as embodied in commonplace objects that are the concrete evidence of culture and community. As Dawn Biddison notes:

These books provide an outstanding model of collaboration with indigenous peoples for museum work, perhaps the finest publication to date. Furthermore, given the fears European museums may have about indigenous peoples trying to reclaim objects, Fienup-Riordan provides an enriching, inspiring example of what can be achieved by Native communities, anthropologists and museums through open access to collections despite unresolved cultural property issues. [2005:341]

Fieldwork Turned On its Head, with its lesser-known companion volume *Things of Our Ancestors*, has received numerous reviews and acclaim since publication in 2005. Reviewers have commented on the former's attractive layout, Barry McWayne's impressive photographs of the objects, and the interesting organization of *Fieldwork Turned On Its Head* around the principle of reciprocity or gifting as explicated in Marcel Mauss's classic essay, *The Gift* (1967). *Things of Our Ancestors*, a bilingual Yup'ik/English text intended especially for Yup'ik communities, is one of several bi-lingual texts produced by Meade and Fienup-Riordan to accompany exhibition catalogs (see, for example, Meade and Fienup-Riordan 1996).

Fieldwork Turned On Its Head has three major sections, "The Gift," "The Gift-Givers," and "The Return Gift". "The Return Gift," the major section of the book, is further sub-divided chronologically around the 15 days of the trip and ends with an assessment of the trip entitled "Visual Repatriation." It starts with a brief biography of each Yup'ik participant. This is followed by the daily presentation of objects by type and the conversations that accompanied that process. Thus the sub-section "First Day: Tools for Ocean Hunting" is devoted to items such as harpoons, water containers, paddles, and other gear associated with hunting at sea. Individual team members discuss what they see, recount stories that the objects have brought to mind and

sometimes demonstrate their use. McWayne's excellent photographs document each day's artifacts and illustrate poignantly the Elders' interactions with the objects that once belonged to their ancestors. As Molly Lee remarks, *Fieldwork Turned on its Head*:

...breaks new ground in its use of informal images of people handling the objects and sometimes even wearing them, activities forbidden in the course of normal research. It is a credit both to the Berlin Ethnology Museum and Peter Bolz, its curator of North American collections, that such rules were relaxed on this unusual occasion. [2005:1007-1008]

And, as Margaret Blackman comments:

Their [the Elders'] study of the objects not only amplifies Jacobsen's catalogue data but equally importantly it stimulates memory and triggers stories, reminding us of the deep and abiding cultural connection between these ancient objects and their makers' descendants. [2007]

Each volume depends on the Elders' transcribed and translated conversations about the objects, but the translations differ stylistically and the contents differ as well. *Things of Our Ancestors* is a bi-lingual text of the Elders' words while *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* is both an extensive narrative of the research team's museum experience and an ethnography of the team's approach to that research. The opening section, "The Gift," is actually a biography of Johan Adrian Jacobsen's life with special attention given to his Yup'ik collecting period. The biography is an expansion of an earlier piece from *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks* (Fienup-Riordan 1996). Fienup-Riordan takes advantage of the newly available reference materials to quote extensively from Jacobsen's travel diary and field notes. She also delves into the problematic and biased attitudes that pepper Jacobsen's diary entries, common enough among 19th century explorers and traders. "The Gift Givers: Turn of the Century Yupiit and Their Descendants" is an historical account of Yup'ik life as it would have been during Jacobsen's time and ties Jacobsen's observations of the Yup'ik communities he encountered to his Euro-centric understanding of what he saw. Here, too, Fienup-Riordan expands on an earlier piece in *The Living Tradition of the Masks* (Fienup-Riordan 1996). For those unfamiliar with Fienup-Riordan's extensive work on Central Yup'ik history and culture, both volumes will be rewarding because of the attention given to the objects and their historical contexts and to the knowledge imparted by the Elders themselves. Readers will also benefit from the attention given to the details of the collaborative process with its emphasis on the importance of Native presence, Native knowledge, and contribution. That aspects of what is essentially Fienup-Riordan's lifetime project should be occasionally repetitive does not detract from the overall success of the volume. Throughout *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* the primary focus is on the Elders and on the travel experiences of the group rather than on the theoretical notion of reciprocity that Fienup-Riordan uses as the volume's back-grounding. While there is some discussion of the theoretical bases for the book's framing, in the end, the book is framed by the emotions and heartfelt expressions of the Elders and, indeed, the uniqueness and major strength of the book emerges from this focus on the Elders voices.

Though each volume is linked through its compelling account of the Elders' daily conversations about the objects, *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* is more comprehensive as it seeks to establish the broad context in which the collection should be comprehended. In contrast, *Things of Our Ancestors* consists almost exclusively of the Elders' words, bracketed by the brief biographies of the Elders at the beginning and a closing conversation with the Elders at the end in which they describe what the trip has meant to them. Thus, the two volumes are in no way identical. Further, as Fienup-Riordan explains in the introduction: "This bilingual book has the advantage of presenting long, lightly-edited passages from the original transcripts, providing a safe harbor for the special information jettisoned in the interests of communication to a wider audience (2005:xxxix)."

I found the lightly edited passages in *Things of Our Ancestors* especially engaging because they revealed more clearly the individual nature of the Elders and brought to mind other Yup'ik Elders I have known. *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* does include most of the Elders' descriptions, but as Fienup-Riordan explains above, the passages are edited differently. Often passages are shortened slightly to create a more swiftly moving text. In some cases a group of objects is not included, perhaps to make room for explanatory paragraphs that tie one description of objects to another on a particular day or to allow for the Jacobsen biography and the formal introduction to Yup'ik history and experience found in *Fieldwork Turned on its Head*. Each volume, however, depends not only on the richness and depth of the Elders' descriptions, but also on the Elders' casual departures from a systematic examination of the objects into the realm of story, experience and recollection as a particular object invokes a tale told by a grandparent almost one-hundred years ago or a memory of learning to make a suddenly familiar object in youth under the watchful eye of a great aunt. The similarity of the volumes lies in their heavy reliance on these marvelous conversations of the Elders as they describe each object or object group. The visits of Fienup-Riordan, Meade, and the Elders to the museum each day become the structure, repeated in each volume. Mauss' concept of the gift and its sociological and philosophical place in cementing the social order in what he called archaic or ancient societies provides the conceptual framework overall.

Essentially, *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* and by implication *Things of our Ancestors* suggest a complex return gifting event that began with Jacobsen's early travels among Yup'ik people somewhere along the Yukon or Kuskokwim Rivers. As the reader first encounters the text, it is difficult to work out the intricacies of what might be considered "given" and "received" much less who is the "giver" and who is the "receiver." However, gradually these exchanges do materialize as a series of gifts given and received over a long period of time, in fact whole centuries. Nevertheless, there is so much that could have been discussed around the concept of gifting that one must assume either that this will be tackled some time in the future or instead that the theme of gifting has been left incomplete. For example, there is the problem of return gifting that occurs long after the death of one or more of the parties of givers. There is the business of the motives and methods of Jacobsen as both recipient and giver or perhaps purchaser and of the various Yup'ik residents of Jacobsen's time as traders and sellers. In other words, it seems a bit of a stretch to think Jacobsen's travels through the Delta in the 1880s to barter for objects for the Berlin Museum with payments to local Yup'ik residents in coin or goods as more than a commercial exchange and, of course, at times he simply resorts to theft! At best, Jacobsen's collection has evolved into a gift of great measure through the circumstances of

the collection's perilous and miraculous survival into the present. The Elders, however, have generously credited Jacobsen's fortuitous collecting as a God-given gift for which he was the intermediary. There is no question that the survival of the collection is an unlooked for gift for anyone interested in Yup'ik culture or northern indigenous cultures generally. And, it is certainly the case that the Elders' words and stories apart from the objects are also a gift, wrapping each object in an enduring cloth of memory woven of each storyteller's own history and experience in a multi-dimensional fashion that enhances the objects' stature as cultural, historical, and aesthetic messengers from a once quiet past.

Fieldwork Turned On Its Head bookends the objects and their stories between Jacobsen's life history, whose attempts to earn a living on the sea and whose fascination with foreign travels led to his transformation into an unlikely collector of ethnographic objects for the Berlin Museum. It ends with Fienup-Riordan's discussion about the privileged viewing of the objects by the Elders as a form of repatriation. She then draws us, as she has throughout the book, into the daily world of the team as they relax at the end of a day at the Pension Danhelm, where we glimpse the deep friendship and warmth of the group of Elders who have, with the help of Fienup-Riordan and Meade, made the third floor of their modest hotel into a home away from home. As a reader, I found myself almost unwittingly turning away from the museum setting and pondering the lives of these momentarily transplanted Alaskans on the streets of Berlin as they compare Alaskan Native life with that of the Germans they encounter. The volume ends with a glossary of Yup'ik terms and a detailed notes section that provides literary and object references. And, as an aside, *Things of Our Ancestors* would have benefited from a glossary as well as the more intimate descriptions of the group's experiences in Berlin. Even though *Things of Our Ancestors* is a bilingual text, the glossary could have provided readers with a better understanding of certain Yup'ik terms, given the number of younger Yupiit who increasingly have a limited command of Yup'ik.

Taken together, *Fieldwork Turned on its Head* and *Things of Our Ancestors* are extremely well done, both as products and as examples of a successful collaborative research effort. For those with an interest in northern indigenous communities and cultures the two books are moving accounts of a research partnership that joined indigenous knowledge bearers with academic and museum professionals, the result of which was to place indigenous knowledge at the center rather than at the periphery of the research enterprise and the resulting volumes.

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