

MAYBE AN ANSWER IS IN THERE: LIFE STORY IN DIALOGUE

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### Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways in which Gwich'in women's lives have changed over the past century through the life story and historical and cultural reflections of Vera Englishoe, a *Neets'qij* Gwich'in woman in her late 50s from Venetie and Fort Yukon. Vera's story illustrates one woman's pathway through changing times and provides an example of resilience in the face of family and community turmoil. This work also shows how Vera uses stories to sustain herself and others amid dialogues that challenge Gwich'in identity and how the Gwich'in approach to knowledge, understanding, and stories emphasize personal experience and accountability, promotes independent thinking on the part of the listener and acknowledges ambiguity and multiplicity in meaning. Through Vera's dialogue we see how stories of personal experience are offered to help others understand their own experiences and how putting stories into writing can be an extension of this tradition. Vera hopes her stories will remind people of the strength of Gwich'in culture and community and that they help others with similar experiences: that "maybe an answer is in there."

In this work I employ a dialogic approach to reading Vera's stories because this comes closest to Vera's and Gwich'in ideas about how knowledge and understanding is gained and passed on through stories. Each person's experiences lead them to engage in the dialogue differently and thus find their own understanding. Offering a story acknowledges the ambiguity of understanding and the fluidity of storytelling and story listening. Through exploring multiple discourses and providing a "reading" instead of an interpretation of Vera's narrative I hope that "maybe something is in there" that will help others understand Vera's words. Vera's approach to her life story illustrates a way of using life stories not simply to record culture and history, but to engage others in a broader attempt to create and reinforce shared meaning and identity.

This requires a way of looking at the collaborative process in the production of life histories that emphasizes continuing dialogues and negotiated meanings between all parties.

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From Vera: For my brothers and sisters, my sons, Leon and Winston, and my grandchildren.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Gwich'in culture is like the Yukon River itself: many channels coming together in a shared expression of a common identity as Gwich'in people. Each individual Gwich'in voice creates braided channels of experience and dialogue through time and space that together nurtures that identity. Flying over the Yukon Flats you see the rich and active hydrological history in the braided channels and sloughs of the present and the grassy meadows of ancient ponds and channels overlaid and interwoven with the living channels of silty water. Dialogues of past and present speak to one another on the land as they do in the community, representing the commonality and the individuality of Gwich'in experience. As the flood plain of the Yukon Flats changes in response to both ongoing hydrological processes and more recent climate change so, too, do the parameters of what it means to be Gwich'in in this place. To understand how people make sense of themselves as a cultural group we must listen to the individual stories they tell as a part of this dialogue, understand where they entered the river and where they might depart, and understand the channels of dialogue that they are in conversation with: their ancestors, their families, their friends and enemies, their children, their friends from other places and other cultures. The complex patterns of behavior and belief that make up Gwich'in culture in Fort Yukon emerge from this dialogue.

On one level, this dissertation explores the ways in which Gwich'in women's lives have changed over the past century through the life story and historical and cultural reflections of Vera Englishoe, a *Neets'qji* Gwich'in woman in her late fifties who has lived most of her life in Fort Yukon. Vera's life story offers us the opportunity to explore a time period often neglected by anthropologists and other chroniclers of Alaska Native culture and history: the middle period

between the nostalgic past and the conflicted present. Vera's grandmothers (born in the late 1800s/early 1900s) and mother (born c1920) were raised in a culture that, while clearly impacted by contact, retained much of the traditional (meaning late pre-contact/early contact – 1825 to 1875 for the Yukon Flats area<sup>1</sup>) ways of passing on knowledge, gender role expectations, and economic life. Vera's daughter, had she lived (she died tragically in 1975 at the age of 6), would have been raised with the most far-reaching affects of modern Western society, including the system of formal Western style education and a cash based economic system. Through Vera's story we see how the social and cultural support networks of Gwich'in society mitigate and transcend the disruptive effects of changing economic conditions, cultural expectations, and substance abuse.

Vera's story is one of adaptation within a socially rich, but economically poor environment,<sup>2</sup> where cultural definitions of concepts such as community and poverty are challenged. Her life illustrates one woman's pathway through these changes and provides an example of resilience in the face of family and community turmoil. In this sense the work might be seen as an acculturation study, focusing on Gwich'in women's acculturation to the affects of Western culture on Gwich'in culture. However, while acculturation and the resilience necessary to successfully negotiate culture change is a very real and significant issue for Gwich'in, Vera's life and the lives of other Gwich'in women and men are much more than a process of accommodation to or railing against culture change. At the same time that people utilize Western concepts such as "culture," "traditional," and "modern" they also resist attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Chief trader John Bell reached the Yukon River by way of the Porcupine in 1844 and Fort Yukon was established June 27, 1847 by HBC trader Alexander Murray, marking the beginning of direct contact trade in the western part of Gwich'in territory.

<sup>2</sup> By Western standards of poverty.

restrict their identities in this way. Creation and maintenance of Gwich'in cultural identity reaches beyond these categories to a sense of identity that defies simple categorization based on cultural origin and history.<sup>3</sup>

This work will show how Vera uses stories to sustain herself and others amid the dialogues that disrupt and tear at Gwich'in identity. It will also show how the Gwich'in approach to knowledge, understanding, and stories emphasizes personal experience, promotes independent thinking on the part of the listener/recipient and acknowledges ambiguity and multiplicity in meaning. I also hope to advance a methodology of negotiating meaning that can be shared beyond the storyteller and recorder to both guide and engage the audience in future dialogue. The choice of "dialogue" as a way to organize and understand how and why Vera tells her stories and how they might inform us about her identity and its relationship to Gwich'in culture and identity stems from the dialogic process of culture and identity creation and maintenance, my own understanding of how Gwich'in stories are offered and received, my personal experiences engaging in dialogue with Vera and other Gwich'in people, as well as from the commonly employed techniques of anthropological and life history research methods.

To ignore the conversations behind Vera's stories is to falsify the way they were told and collected. To disregard the conversations her stories will engage in after they are put into text is equally foolhardy. Dialogue can also be used to understand the process through which people create, maintain, and project their identity as individuals and members of a particular group and

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<sup>3</sup> I am differentiating here between identity markers based on visibly traditional (or quasi-traditional) activities (hunting and fishing, wearing ceremonial clothes such as beaded vests and chiefs necklaces, and speaking Gwich'in) and identity markers based on less visible behaviors and traits. However, any attempt to define identity risks "essentializing" certain Gwich'in qualities as more authentic than others. "There are no monolithic cultural groups, and to argue otherwise is essentialist thinking. Monolithic ways of viewing groups fail to recognize differences among groups and is limited by a belief that individuals from a certain ethnic, gender, sexual preference, or economic class hold identical or even similar views, ideas, or behaviors" (Brayboy 1999:94).

culture. In addition, it helps us to understand how an individual's telling of their life story contributes to an understanding of how the values and standards of their culture influence and provide opportunities for them to live in a way that is meaningful both to them and to others. No one voice can represent the whole of Gwich'in identity and experience, but Vera's voice, her part of this larger dialogue, provides a launching point into the wider river of Yukon Flats culture and history and dialogues about Yukon Flats culture and history provide a way of understanding her telling of her life. Finally, the dialogue within anthropology itself must be acknowledged as relevant to this research and text. Vera herself is in a dialogue with anthropologists, both through me and through her responses to previous anthropological works on Gwich'in culture. The culture of anthropology is created and maintained through dialogue itself and over the years a process of crossing boundaries of identity and acknowledging multiple voices within and without the discipline has occupied its practitioners and detractors as they attempt to move away from the focus on classification and cultural salvage work to understanding how peoples and cultures interact through time and across space. This work is informed by and enters this dialogue as well.

This dissertation is as much about me and finding ways to negotiate talking about Vera's life and the community respectfully, understandably, and appropriately in an academic context as it is about Vera's life story. As Margaret Blackman points out: "in every life history, the final shape of the narrative, both consciously and not, is determined by the editor/author and the narrator" (1992[1982]:xvi). How I came to this project and this approach to negotiating meaning between myself and Vera, the community, and other audiences make up a substantial part of this work. My voice is heard most clearly in the theoretical and methodological discussions and through my comments and presentation of the various dialogues that inform

Vera's stories and our understandings of them. I believe that it is essential to set a context not just of historical and cultural frameworks, but of how this work came into being and the various dialogues that inform and continue to impact understandings of Gwich'in people. I hope that through this discussion the reader will more fully realize that Vera's narrative and my contributions are not an end point, but a midpoint in the conversation.

### 1.1 The Partnership

I came to this dissertation through a combination of academic and personal experiences that crossed boundaries, both cultural and academic. I grew up in Alaska, primarily Ketchikan and Fairbanks, with the common obliviousness of a non-Native child to the existence of Alaska Native cultures, despite the fact that my mother had Native friends, as did I. I discovered anthropology by accident as an undergraduate, which led me to develop an interest in Alaska Native cultures primarily because I wanted to return home to Alaska. After my tour of duty outside, I returned to Alaska for graduate school and completed my Master's degree in Anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1995, meeting my Gwichyaa Gwich'in husband in the process of conducting that research.

My original doctoral project was to be a study of the role matriarchs played in the economic organization of Gwich'in families. I had not yet started my research, but had married and moved to Fort Yukon, when my advisor, Dr. Linda Ellanna, passed away in 1997. After drifting for a time I settled on a new project, this one developed with input from two other advisors, Dr. Phyllis Fast and Lillian Garnett, my Gwich'in language teacher. Lillian was eager to have Gwich'in women's culture more fully recorded. Phyllis and I were also particularly interested in gender relations within Gwich'in communities, including how the availability of white male partners for Gwich'in women had impacted these relations. This research again

went nowhere. I was busy having children and working in Fort Yukon while Phyllis returned to Harvard to complete her own Ph.D. In addition, I began to feel uncomfortable with the idea of doing traditional anthropological research in a community to which I was so intimately connected. I began to see that the additional access afforded by kinship came with additional restrictions and obligations.

It was Fast's publication of her dissertation that solidified my desire to avoid traditional anthropological research questions and methods. Her published work, *Northern Athabaskan Survival: Women, Community and the Future*, came out in 2002. Although I have since come to appreciate many of the insights from the book and have used many of her insights in my own work, my initial reaction was dismay. I was shocked that someone would write such a "negative" book about Fort Yukon. The reaction of many members of the community was similar to mine. The book was "negative," particularly towards men, based on "gossip" and made generalizations about all Gwich'in based on limited experience.

There were two basic issues that steered me away from the sort of research Fast had done. One was that the work privileged one voice in the community dialogue about Gwich'in and Fort Yukon culture and history: the voice that despairs over community and family dysfunction and uses the language of disease to describe the current culture. I did not feel that she acknowledged other dialogues in the community that resisted this viewpoint. I knew that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to present "all sides" of the community's dialogue in one document even if I had such access, which I did and do not. The second was that the work depended on what local people identified as "gossip:" stories told about other people without input from the people themselves. The issue of what is public and what is private remains contentious in Fort Yukon; however, many people, including myself, were uncomfortable

reading intimate details about people's lives that they themselves had never shared with Fast, let alone agreed to have published. These concerns combined to make me question how I could do "justice" to Fort Yukon culture, present an accurate picture, and avoid offending or betraying my friends and family.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, I had been working as the Coordinator of the Yukon Flats Center, a branch of the Interior-Aleutians Campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, assisting students from Fort Yukon and the surrounding communities of Arctic Village, Beaver, Birch Creek, Central, Chalkyitsik, Circle, Stevens Village, and Venetie in obtaining a college education while continuing to live at home. My work was taking me farther away from traditional anthropology and more and more into the realm of service and advocacy. So, I began to consider topics that might be more useful to people; topics in education or legal anthropology that might somehow serve the community in its negotiations with the Western institutions with which it had become enmeshed. At the same time, I was enjoying a particularly satisfying and productive working relationship with my Administrative Assistant, Vera Englishoe. Vera is *Neetsqji'* Gwich'in with roots in both Venetie and Fort Yukon. I first met Vera while attending a potluck at Lillian Garnet's home. Vera is a close friend of Lillian's and Lillian had recommended I work with her on my second dissertation topic. We met again several times and worked next door to one another in the City building for two years: Vera providing assistance to local people through the local office of the Tanana Chiefs Conference and me as the treasurer for the City of Fort Yukon. Although we spoke frequently we did not become close at that time. Vera was experiencing

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<sup>4</sup> Fast did many things to include the community in her work and to protect her sources. She sent copies for people to read and hosted a reading and discussion forum when her dissertation was complete. She also used pseudonyms. Her experience points to the difficulties researchers, including indigenous researchers, face when they study people who have the language and literacy capabilities to challenge their work.

increasing personal turmoil as her partner and husband of many years, Gene Englishoe, became ill with cancer and passed away. After losing her husband and her job due to the time spent caring for him Vera was ready for a new position when my administrative assistant position at the Yukon Flats Center came open.

Hiring Vera was thought by some to be ill considered (this reaction was partially sour grapes). Younger women with more formal education and technological skills had applied for the job. However, I knew that I needed someone who had skills that I did not have, particularly a rapport with potential students in the outlying villages. In addition, her steady work history spoke of a strong work ethic and I was always in awe of Vera's desire and ability to work any time and fulfill any task to help her people get an education. Over the first year of our work association we became a good team: Vera provided the contacts and traditional communication skills to bring students into the system while I provided the academic skills and institutional knowledge to help the students get through the system. As we worked Vera often shared with me the stories of her life, often with the goal of helping me in my own role as a wife and mother, often with the goal of educating me in the culture and history of the Gwich'in, and also as a friend sharing her joys and concerns with another friend. I shared with her my own concerns, including my desire to complete my doctorate and my difficulty in settling on a topic. It was during one such conversation that Vera commented that she wanted to record some of the information her grandmothers had taught her, as well as her own life story and would I like to work with her on it? At first, I was reluctant. What would anthropologists think? I felt that I was already suspect, having married into my "subject population" and now I was thinking of working with an employee that I directly supervised. How would this affect the oft-noted imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched?

When I decided to work with Vera my agreement was based on personal needs and obligations and, as David Mandelbaum (1973) notes, a reaction against the generalizing characteristic of ethnographies.<sup>5</sup> I needed a dissertation that was of interest to me and useful to the Gwich'in (I hoped) and Vera and other friends with an interest wanted to record some of what she knew. It also seemed, at the time, to get around part of the public/private debate in Fort Yukon.<sup>6</sup> Only later did I realize how fortuitous this opportunity was. We shared interests in women's culture, Gwich'in identity, and education and Vera is recognized in the community as knowledgeable in both traditional Gwich'in culture and in successfully negotiating modern Gwich'in culture. At the same time, the difficulties she has faced and the choices she has made in her life make her accessible to people throughout the Gwich'in region and in all life circumstances. Even her "enemies" have turned to her for support when they experience difficulties. Vera is not necessarily "representative" of Gwich'in culture, she does not hold any formal leadership positions, nor is she necessarily exemplary in a particular area of knowledge. What she is is a fiercely independent Gwich'in woman who loves her community and her people, who tried to live a productive and meaningful life through the application of Gwich'in

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<sup>5</sup> The stimulus to record them has been, I believe, not so much the outcome of a deliberate research plan as the result of a characteristic phase of the anthropologist's own life experience. When an anthropologist goes to live among the people he studies, he is likely to make some good friends among them. As he writes his account of their way of life, he may feel uncomfortable aware that his description and analysis have omitted something of great importance. His dear friends have been dissolved into faceless norms; their vivid adventures have somehow been turned into pattern profiles or statistical types. [Mandelbaum 1973:178]

<sup>6</sup> Although people might dispute a particular telling, both of traditional stories and personal experiences, "ownership" of stories, especially personal stories and the right to tell them as one sees fit appears to be the predominant attitude. Although I still believe that focusing on one woman's story will be both more acceptable for other Gwich'in people and is an effective approach for understanding aspects of Gwich'in women's culture and identity, I no longer believe that it will be without controversy in the community.

values to modern circumstances, and who wants to share her experiences in a way that will help them into the future.

## Chapter 2 Theory and Method

My theoretical approach to this project is intertwined with my personal experiences, relationships with my Gwich'in friends and family, and my thoughts on Gwich'in theories about knowledge. As Dorrine Kondo notes, one's theoretical stance cannot be separated from personal experience: personal experience "*enacts and embodies theory*" (1990:24). As an anthropologist, I have a rather atypical relationship with the community I "study." Wife and mother of tribal members, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, close personal friend (and in some cases, enemy) of individual Gwich'in, and for a time enmeshed in the day to day living of the Fort Yukon community. Through my personal experience I have reached a theoretical stance that emphasizes the particular and individual experience and views culture formation and maintenance as a continuing process within a community where individuals, through their continuing dialogue, strive to ensure that their own experience of Gwich'in history and culture are maintained and acknowledged by others.

### 2.1 Anthropology

I have drawn from three inter-related discourses within anthropology: the recognition and attempt to mitigate the historical and structural power imbalance between the researched and the researcher, the attempt to avoid or at least openly explore the generalizing tendencies of traditional ethnography, and the blurring of boundaries between previously bounded anthropological concepts such as culture, and perhaps more importantly between the anthropological self and the "distinctive-other" (Morsy 1988:70). These discourses have evolved within anthropology as the world in which anthropologists operate has changed from one dominated by Western colonial power to one with a broader, more diverse power structure,

although, of course, power imbalances continue to exist between and within countries, ethnicities, and cultures.

Arising during Europe's colonial enterprise, early anthropological theories and practices reflected that colonial ethos with theories that emphasized orderly boundaries and hierarchical relationships. As the geo-political situation has changed, anthropology has changed as well, reflecting the more nuanced and complicated approach necessary when one group can no longer assert their power at will. Thus anthropology has moved from ahistorical theories of function, structure, and type to historical, processual theories of practice, action, and dialogue.

Recognition of the power imbalance in anthropology came primarily from colonized peoples and other marginalized groups protesting being the subject of inquiry for purposes not their own. The postcolonial critique of anthropology came both from within and without the discipline and emphasized anthropology's reliance on the colonial power structure to enable fieldwork as well as the power inherent in the Western production of knowledge. Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Cultural Encounter* (1973) is particularly pointed in its criticism of anthropological representation and power relations. "We are today becoming increasingly aware of the fact that information and understanding produced by bourgeois disciplines like anthropology are acquired and used most readily by those with the greatest capacity for exploitation" (1973:16). Dell Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* (1969) is a softer critique: a call to arms for anthropologists to create a more humanist-based discipline. From outside anthropology, the writings of Vine Deloria Jr (1988) and Edward Said (1979) are particularly noteworthy. Said's questions in *Orientalism* continue to resonate today, particularly in light of the continued difficulty in relations between the "West" and the "East." "How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or

religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulations (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other?')" (1979:325).

Another important critique came from feminist anthropologists who objected to the limited attention paid to women's activities and roles, male-biased representations of women, and the essentializing of gender. The history of feminist anthropology prior to the 1990s has been described both with a "wave" model and a topical model. The "wave" model appears to be used primarily as a means of connecting the feminist anthropology of the 1970s and beyond (second and third waves) to earlier female anthropologists, the first wave (di Leonardo 1991; Visweswaran 1994). The second system is more descriptive and is used to distinguish the primary concerns of each phase of feminist anthropology. The "anthropology of women" phase (approximately the 1970s) was primarily interested in correcting male bias in anthropology. Early feminist anthropologists did not generally challenge the possibility of accurate, observation-based representations. For example, Rayna Rapp Reiter writes with some confidence "Male bias is surmountable, just as racial bias, or any form of ethnocentrism is, but only when it is taken seriously as an area for self-critical investigation" (1975:14). The "anthropology of gender" phase (approximately the 1980s) marked a concern with understanding gender as a cultural construct. As women anthropologists moved beyond attempting to correct the record, they began to write more about the naturalization and essentializing of gender within the discipline.<sup>7</sup> These early "waves" were characterized by general agreement on the important themes to be addressed. The feminist anthropology of the

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ortner and Whitehead's *Sexual Meanings: the Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (1981).

1990s and beyond, however, seems to have branched out so much that some refer to “feminisms” (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000).

Interpretive anthropology, which privileged interpretations (of both the native and the ethnographer), symbols, and meaning over behavior and social structure relaxed the grip of positivism on anthropological representation, making anthropology more receptive to the critiques mentioned above as well as more receptive to postmodernism’s questioning of the metanarratives and grand theories of Western science. Describing this approach, Clifford Geertz, a leading figure in interpretive anthropology, writes:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. [Geertz 1973:5]

According to Marcus and Fischer (1986), the rise of interpretive anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s is one of the developments that lead to an “experimental moment” in anthropology where previous ideas, models, and social conditions are challenged and turned on their heads.

Ethnographic writing, with its “classic norms of description,” has long been known to create generalized descriptions that obscure the rich complexity of lived culture.

Anthropologists, prodded both by the directed critiques of formerly colonized peoples, women, and other marginalized peoples and the rise of postmodernism, began exploring how new types of writing might better reveal the complexities of cultures and the historical events and power relations that affect them. In addition, the positionality of the anthropologists began to be of greater concern. Early exploration in this area, led and typified by James Clifford and George Marcus’ *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), focused almost entirely

on text, without calling for confronting and exposing the actual conditions of hierarchy and oppression that allowed such representations to flourish, including the internal hierarchies of anthropology. While Clifford and Marcus (1986) explored the conventions of ethnographic writing and called for an ethnographic practice that actively confronts and exposes these conventions to produce ethnographies that explicitly recognize the positionality and inherent power of representation by the ethnographer. However, their dismissal of women's contribution to new textual forms infuriated feminist anthropologists. Ruth Behar's response is particularly pointed.

The *Writing Culture* agenda, conceived in homoerotic terms by male academics for other male academics, provided the official credentials, and the cachet, that women had lacked for crossing the border. Even the personal voice, undermined when used by women, was given the seal of approval in men's ethnographic accounts, reclassified in more academically favorable terms as "reflexive" and "experimental." [Behar 1995a:4]

As anthropologists continued working through these issues a new set of ideas, focusing more closely on the effects of the postmodern condition on cultures (as opposed to in texts) as well as the assumptions and national narratives that allowed Westerners, including anthropologists, to believe they lived in a world of boundaries and cultural wholes, became the focus of anthropological theories. For example, Arjun Appadurai (1988) challenges the notion that people and cultures are contiguous wholes, either in the past or present, and argues that anthropologists have conceived of the "native" as confined to and defined by a physical location. In particular, the immigrant experience and the increasing connectedness allowed by media has highlighted the blurring of culture and space and makes it difficult to maintain the

view that people, culture, and place can be mapped directly on to one another. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson write, “all associations of place, people, and culture are social and historical creations to be explained, not given natural facts” (1997:7).<sup>8</sup> The concept of culture itself was questioned as a means of categorizing people as distinct, bounded groups and used as a tool for hierarchy, leading Lila Abu-Lughod to propose “writing against culture” as a means of breaking down such hierarchies (1991:138). Others toyed with the notion of “borderlands” as a way to de-calcify cultural designations and recognize fluidity within and between cultures. Is concept was first articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Sherry Ortner (1996) also proposed “borderlands” as a replacement for the concept of “culture,” although she later concluded that it remained a useful and essential concept (2006).

One result of these debates was that anthropologists became concerned that the process of producing “general ethnographic descriptions...risks smoothing over contradictions, conflicts of interest, doubts and arguments, not to mention changing motivations and historical circumstances” (Abu-Lughod 1993:9). Thus, ideas about how to write new ethnographies address how to account for history, including contact between cultures through time, how to account for hierarchy including the hierarchy within the community, between the community/individual and the ethnographer, and between the community, the ethnographer, and broader society, and how to understand lived experience as opposed to generalized cultural rules or norms. Proposed solutions have included Abu-Lughod’s “ethnography of the particular” (1991), Paul Stoller’s “radically empirical ethnography” (1989), and Richard Fox’s “nearly new culture history” (1991).

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<sup>8</sup> An idea that contradicts what I believe is a definite feeling among the Gwich’in that they are intimately tied to place.

Many anthropologists now strive to recognize physical and mental spaces that were previously invisible to the anthropological gaze, or at least in their texts. One of the major insights brought to anthropology by feminist and postcolonial scholars<sup>9</sup> was that the bounded categories that anthropology operated with – self/other, culture A/culture B – did not exist as such in the world. Some see this as crossing borders, but I think removing blinders is a more appropriate description. The boundaries between cultures, self and other, and method and theory, were never real and the discipline had never wholly embraced them, hence the continuing interest in life histories and other textual forms. However, anthropologists in the main failed to see these spaces, or failed to acknowledge them in their formal writing, because of the particular historical narrative they employed. This narrative represented people and cultures as bounded and separate, particularly from the anthropologist's culture. It encouraged anthropologists to view cultures as either pristine (separate) or degraded (blended or enmeshed) and to see the anthropological self as removed and moveable while the other was embedded and immovable. Ethnographic fieldwork became a type of specimen collection activity instead of an interaction between people of different places and worldviews. Post-colonialism and feminism penetrated this narrative and postmodernism provided a theoretical basis and academic cover for some of their challenges, although it also may be interpreted as an attempt to protect the status quo and re-marginalize less powerful peoples.

The porous boundaries between cultures and the individuals that navigate them are particularly interesting to me as a married-in anthropologist. Kamala Visweswaran (1994:113) argues that, "the lines between fieldwork and homework are not always distinct," drawing both

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<sup>9</sup>Here referring primarily to "native" and "halfie" anthropologists, although others have addressed this issue.

on the notion that native anthropologists such as herself do fieldwork at home and that the false dichotomy between field (research) and home (writing) in anthropology retains the hierarchical structure of colonization. The concept of “fieldwork” functions to enhance the self/other distinction in ethnographic writing both on a personal and sociocultural level as well as maintaining and reinforcing hierarchies within the academic arena. Doing “fieldwork” predisposes the ethnographer to maintain boundaries and separations that are written into ethnographies in a relatively unexamined way. It was primarily in field diaries or other “non-ethnographic” texts that anthropologists addressed issues such as personal identity and space and all the other issues that come up when people of different cultural backgrounds interact.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Life History

While in my case the choice of a life history project was initially somewhat casual and based on convenience and a desire to avoid community entanglements that could negatively impact my relationships in Fort Yukon and my children’s future there, the life history method confronts, through both its practice and product, the issues of hierarchy and authority, generalization vs. the particular, and cultural and individual boundaries explored above. Creating a life history is inherently dialogic. The life history approach has been an important part of anthropology since shortly after the beginnings of academic anthropology in America at the turn of the twentieth century. The production of life histories began in the nineteenth century in America as a means of preserving, and later giving voice to, the “vanishing” Indian, primarily the “vanishing” male Indian, and has grown over time into both a method and a field

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<sup>10</sup> These issues now make it into official ethnographies. For example, Kondo (1990) directly addresses her changing identity during her work in Japan. As her “subjects” attempt to place her into the role of Japanese woman she attempts to maintain distance and her identity as an American woman by living in her own apartment.

of study related to anthropology as well as many other disciplines. Within the main currents of anthropological enquiry, life history has often been seen as a tool: an extension of the “key-informant interview.” Boas, whose emphasis on data collection and the individual history of every culture over theoretical musings opened the door for the life history approach in anthropology, felt that it was “not much more than an account of customs collected in the usual way” (Krupat 1985:80). In Pertti and Gretel Pelto’s *Anthropological Research: the Structure of Inquiry*, life histories are discussed as one of several tools an anthropologist might choose to illuminate a culture (Pelto & Pelto 1970:75).

Alfred Kroeber published the first personal accounts of Native Americans collected by an anthropologist in *Ethnology of the Gros Ventre* (1908), beginning the use of life history as a tool in anthropological study. Prior to this time anthropology and the production of life histories developed along separate, but somewhat parallel paths. Before 1900 anthropological study was limited to the ad hoc collection of second hand information by so called “arm-chair” anthropologists. Lewis Henry Morgan is the most famous of this breed of American anthropologists and considered by many to be the father of American Anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Early life histories of Native Americans also exhibit a lack of connection between subject and researcher/writer. The very first publications were biographies written in the “life-and-times” form of eighteenth-century biography (Krupat 1985:39). The purpose of one such biography published in 1832 by Samuel Drake was “to awaken the public mind to a sense of the wrongs inflicted on the Indians” (Krupat 1985:51). While these biographies were generally sympathetic to the Native American, they did not challenge the inevitability of his extinction or allow him his

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<sup>11</sup> Leslie White (1951) disputes the “arm-chair” designation for Morgan, as does Tooker (1992). Nevertheless, early anthropologists rarely spent extended amounts of time with their subjects and the method of anthropological enquiry was primarily one of library research.

own voice. "The Indian biographer, master of books and writing, required no contact with his subject: he had no need to enter into a reciprocal relationship with him" (Krupat 1985:51). Both anthropology and Native American life histories began out of a desire to "salvage" primitive culture and practitioners of both believed that the destruction of these cultures was inevitable. People of many disciplines, both scientific and humanistic, shared this viewpoint during the nineteenth century as they began to recognize the destructive influence of Western society on both cultural and biological diversity. "Throughout the century, and within whatever theoretical framework, the refrain was the same: the savage is disappearing; preserve what you can; posterity will hold you accountable" (Gruber 1959:386). While this salvage concept does continue to inform some work in anthropology and life history, as native cultures changed practitioners began to use life history to try to understand more specific questions about the relationship between the culture and the individual.

Early Native American life histories had two basic emphases: important and/or representative people. In keeping with the historical theories of the times, which emphasized the contributions of "great men" to the course of history, early Native American life histories concentrated primarily on the extraordinary male experience, focusing on the lives of "leaders" who seemed to parallel the roles and contributions of Western leaders and were, of course, also male (Blackman 1992[1982]:6; Langness and Frank 1981:14-15). Chiefs and warriors were the most popular subjects of earliest life histories in works such as the anonymously published *Memoir of the Distinguished Mohawk Indian Chief, Sachem and Warrior, Captain Joseph Brant* (Anonymous 1872), John Patterson's *Life of Ma-Ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak or Black Hawk* (1882), and Barrett's *Geronimo's Story of His Life* (1906). The first anthropologist produced Native American life history, *Crashing Thunder: the Autobiography of an American Indian* (Radin

1999[1926]), the autobiography of Sam Blowsnake,<sup>12</sup> a Winnebago Indian, was written by a student of Boas, Paul Radin. As with many early anthropological life histories, in addition to celebrating an important male, *Crashing Thunder* was aimed at getting closer to the “real” Indian perspective by finding a subject thought to be “representative” of his culture.

### 2.2.1 Women and Life History

Early life histories of women were intended to provide representative examples of female culture, but also to expand representation by providing female counterparts to the overwhelmingly male-focused literature. Perhaps the earliest non-anthropologist produced life history of a Native American woman is Frank Linderman’s *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (1972) (originally published in 1932 as *Red Mother*). He notes in his forward that Pretty-shield’s agreement to work with him was fortuitous in part because she is contemporaneous to a Crow chief with whom he also worked (Linderman 1972:10). Like *Pretty-shield*, Nancy Oestreich Lurie’s *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (Lurie 1961) also provided a “matched set.” *Mountain Wolf Women* is the younger sister to *Crashing Thunder*/Sam Blowsnake, the subject of the first anthropological life history of a Native American. Lurie notes the lack of life histories collected from women and sees *Mountain Wolf Woman* as valuable both as a contribution to the understanding of women’s roles in Winnebago culture and as an individual life history.<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Frisbie’s work with Navajo Elder Tall Woman/Rose Mitchell (Mitchell 2001) is another example of a life history project with a woman developing out of a previous work with a man: in this case Mitchell’s husband Frank.

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<sup>12</sup> The real “Crashing Thunder” was actually Sam Blowsnake’s older brother (Krupat 1985:3).

<sup>13</sup> Other early life histories of women include Truman Michelson’s *The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman* (1925) and Ruth Underhill’s *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman* (1936).

In her discussion of the life history project in *During My Time: A Haida Woman*, the life story of Florence Edenshaw Davidson, Margaret Blackman writes “for native North America as a whole there are more than three times the number of male life histories as female life histories” (1992[1982]:6).<sup>14</sup> She attributed this lack to the gender imbalance among ethnographers, and cultural background among authors that emphasize the public arena as a more interesting and important subject area and autobiography as a male form of expression. Blackman’s comments echo those of “first wave” feminist anthropologists concerned with providing more balance in the ethnographic record through increased documentation of women’s lives. When I began my work, I also began with the idea that women were under-represented in both ethnographic and life history literature. Over time I have come to believe that “correcting,” or at least enhancing, the ethnographic record provided by early ethnographers and chroniclers of the Gwich’in is not possible. Information obtained today<sup>15</sup> can suggest gaps or misconceptions in past accounts, but never fully recover missing information whether gender based or no.<sup>16</sup> In addition, I no longer feel that women’s lives are underrepresented for the Gwich’in, at least in modern times. However, life histories and oral biography are one area where anthropologists have chosen to fill in gaps, both in terms of correcting gender imbalance and in filling in the details of culture through lived experience, and they provide a rich and fruitful area of study for insight into past ethnographic literature and present cultural and social conditions.

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<sup>14</sup> Of the twenty-one oral biographies produced by the Yukon-Koyukuk School District in the 1980s, for example, only four were of women, including Martha Joe of Nulato (Joe 1987), and one that included a husband and wife in the same book giving a ratio of approximately three to one male to female subjects.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Vera’s descriptions of traditional marriages.

<sup>16</sup> This goes not just for information on women and is not solely due to some sort of male bias on the part of the ethnographer. Any record will be incomplete based on a myriad of factors including, but not limited to, the interests of the observer, the interests of the person willing to talk to him or her, his or her access to information and activities, and what is considered important both within the academic discipline of anthropology and society at large.

By 1982, when Blackman was decrying the continuing lack of female life histories of native North Americans, there were a few significant additions to the overall genre of women's life history, most notably Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981). Since then a number of important female life histories have been produced and published, including Blackman's *Sadie Brower Neakok: An Inupiaq Woman* (1989), Joanne Mulcahy's *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island: The Life of an Alutiiq Healer* (2001), Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman* (2003[1993]), Sharon Gmelch's *Nan: The Life of An Irish Travelling Woman* (1986), Julie Cruikshank in *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990), Patricia Sawin's *Listening for a Life: a Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories* (2004), and Esther Horne and Sally McBeth's *Essie's Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher* (1998). These life histories in particular have been influential in how I have approached the collaborative process and Vera's story.

Margaret Blackman's *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman* (1992[1982]) is the product of a deep collaboration and Blackman's introspection and consideration of the collaborative process were instrumental in my initial thinking on the key elements of life history, particularly dual authorship and voice and considerations of audience. The purposes for the book are also diverse: to expand the representation of Haida women; to explore Haida ceremonial life and female puberty rituals; and to record an exemplary life for all time. The voice is a combination of Blackman and Davidson and their collaboration included editing input from Davidson's family as well (1992[1982]:xiv). The audience includes both local people and anthropologists and other "outsiders" and both Blackman and Davidson consider how these different audiences might receive the work. *During My Time* is a particularly "ethnographic" life history. Chapters one, two, and three discuss life histories, Haida women's

ethnography, and Davidson's biography, all before Davidson's voice is ever heard. Over one half of the book is analysis and discussion provided by Blackman. In her discussion of various responses to the book Blackman indicates that people from different cultures have different reactions to the chosen format. Regarding the comments and discussions of Davidson's children and relatives regarding the usefulness of her portion she writes: "life histories intended for local use do not need introductions, analyses, summaries, and afterwords" (1992[1982]: xvi). On the other hand, one non-Haida reviewer complained about the omission of conflict from Davidson's life story (1992[1982]:xiii).

Both of these responses are problematic in different ways. The response of Davidson's family does not acknowledge the problem of cross-generational communication: the very real possibility that their children and grandchildren may not have the same cultural insight they themselves have. This presumes that culture change will continue at a rapid pace, leaving future generations somewhat ignorant of the meaning behind Davidson's words. The desire of the non-Haida person to hear all the "dirt" in Davidson's life misses the point of life history as opposed to ethnography. As Blackman points out, "If we are interested in how people construct their identities and how they tell their stories, we must read the omissions, with the understanding that they, in their own way, also tell the story" (1992[1982]:xiii). Understanding culture is not just learning the "facts;" it is also and perhaps more importantly, learning the nuances of that culture. Learning what can be said and what should be avoided.

Blackman takes a slightly different approach in *Sadie Brower Neakok: An Inupiaq Woman* (1989). This book is the life history of a woman whose life spans many of the changes that occurred in Barrow over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As with *During My Time*, Blackman begins with some historical and cultural background. However, instead of putting everything in separate

chapters, she includes many of her comments in the body of Neakok's narrative, using different type to distinguish her writing from the narrative. This approach has the advantage of allowing the reader to hear Neakok's voice sooner, but the disadvantage of breaking up the flow of her narrative with important, but disruptive, additional information. Each collaboration, with the myriad choices about what to include and not include, inevitably entails trade-offs that invite accolades or criticism depending on each audience member's preferences.

While every life has a story to tell that contributes to our knowledge of culture and the individual human experience, some people are seen as more influential in their cultures and communities than others. Both *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman* and *Sadie Brower Neakok: An Inupiaq Woman* are the stories of women who could be considered exemplary in their respective communities. Davidson as a respected and high ranking elder "who faithfully fulfilled the expected role of women in her society" (Blackman 1992[1982]:7) and Neakok, the college educated daughter of Charles Brower and, among other roles, a magistrate in Barrow for 20 years. Mulcahy's *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island* (2001), Behar's *Translated Woman* (2003[1993]), and Gmelch's *Nan: The Life of An Irish Travelling Woman*(1986) all tell the stories of women whose lives are more challenged and in some ways less influential than Davidson or Neakok's.

*Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island* is the story of Mary Peterson, an Alutiiq woman from Akhiok on Kodiak Island. Although Peterson is a respected elder and healer, Mulcahy meets her when she is fleeing the cycle of domestic violence and alcoholism in her village. Five years later, Mulcahy's interest in traditional healing led her to work with Mary Peterson on a life history that both describes the painful changes in Akhiok, but also the tradition of midwifery and the women's stories that sustain her and her culture. The collaboration between Mulcahy and

Peterson seems particularly intense, perhaps in part due to the intensity and personal nature of the story Peterson chooses to tell. The work includes two aspects particularly interesting to me in relation to my work with Vera: an emphasis on acculturation and personal adaptation to change and an emphasis on identity formation and maintenance. Peterson recounts many stories that are similar to Vera's with an emphasis on hard work, traditional knowledge of women, including healing techniques, and dealing with the rise of alcoholism and domestic violence. Although in all of these areas Peterson illustrates the use of culture and storytelling to make meaning out of life events, Mulcahy specifically addresses the question of the meaning of oral narratives that are ignored or contradicted by written history in her discussion of Alutiiq women's narratives about traditional healers versus historical records. She finds that these narratives are a part of an oral tradition of revitalized Native identity.

Stories of healing do not deny the reality of illness chronicled by the written history of health care, nor do they denigrate the genuine alleviation of suffering certain technological advances have offered. Rather, women's stories seek to mend severed connections, splintered dreams, worlds torn asunder, wounds left gaping. [Mulcahy 2001:xxviii]

The use of story to connect past and present may be more easily recognized in Peterson's stories due to the hybrid identity of Alutiiq culture.<sup>17</sup> Mulcahy highlights this somewhat neglected area in anthropology; "hybrid" cultures (2001:xxvi) and Peterson's stories highlight the use of stories to create identity out of a complicated history. Stories serve as

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<sup>17</sup> The term Alutiiq is "Aleut" in the traditional language of the region, Suqpiaq, and was chosen to highlight the dual cultural history of the region.

healing forces connecting past to present without becoming simply an echo of traditional culture.

Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman* (2003[1993]) is the life story of Esperanza Hernández, a Mexican woman who defies the conventions of her culture. Although not an Alaska Native life history, *Translated Woman* has influenced me through their collaboration, Behar's treatment of the story, and Esperanza's own approach to her story. *Translated Woman* combines the subjects of women and poverty and also explores notions of resistance to cultural categories and constraints on poor women and in that sense it is a life history of an "unusual" or "deviant" (in the sense that Esperanza does not comply with cultural expectations) individual. The construction of *Translated Woman*, as the title suggests, involved both "translation" in the sense of from one language to another as well as "translation" of meanings so that others may understand. Esperanza had definite ideas of how her story should be written, advising Behar to "write angry" so that the meaning of her words would come through. Although Esperanza's primary audience is initially people "across the border" and not her own community, her intensity and her insistence, as a marginalized woman, on making her story known has informed my thoughts on the use of life stories as a weapon to assert and direct identity within a community setting.

Behar's approach to the collaboration and writing has also been influential. Behar addresses several issues important to life history collaborations. Behar's relationship with Esperanza was based on the *compadrazgo* relationship, a friendship and patronage between persons of high and low economic standing common in Mexico (Behar 2003[1993]:5). Thus the structural inequality inherent in many anthropological collaborations becomes a central part of Behar's work and fuels her introspection. In addition, while Esperanza's notion of a story fits

well into a Western category, the Christian narrative as a story of suffering and as a confessional (2003[1993]:12), she nevertheless found her role was to make it recognizable "as a story." To do this her role had to change from listener to storyteller, not simply reporting, but retelling Esperanza's story (2003[1993]:13). Behar also explored the role of and representation of the anthropologists in life history work through her "Biography in the Shadows:" a look at how her own life experiences influenced her work. Behar writes "In this book I attempted something that was taboo for anthropology. I not only presented Esperanza's life story, but I explored my own interpretations and responses to her story..." (2003[1993]:xvii). Although many anthropologists discuss their impact on the construction of the life history, Behar's discussion is more explicit and personal, something which earned the book the label (or accolade?) of "naughty" by one reviewer (2003[1993]:xiv). The result is a book that is both more transparent and more powerfully emotional than other life histories.

Another important example of an oral history that combines issues of women and poverty is Sharon Gmelch's *Nan: The Life of An Irish Travelling Woman* (1986). Gmelch emphasizes Nan's role as an Irish Traveller as well as her role as a woman enduring desperate poverty and abuse. Gmelch's relationship with Nan, as with many life history collaborations, emerged out of her fieldwork with the Travellers and her desire to bring out the individual experience as opposed to the generalized anthropological descriptions of Traveller life (Gmelch 1986:23). Although Gmelch's work does not include the same depth of personal experience and transformation that Behar's does, she does place herself explicitly as the audience for whom these particular stories were told and the narrator of the final work. An example of this is how Nan's address to Sharon when telling the stories is retained in the book. Reading Nan address her comments to a specific person constantly reminds the reader that these stories were told at

a specific time and place and to a specific person, something that can be lost if the anthropologist/audience is edited out of the text. Belle Herbert's *Shandaa* (1982) provides a similar sense of place by including reference to the immediate audience of her stories. Herbert directs her stories to her granddaughter, who was enlisted by Bill Pfisterer to assist in the recording.

Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990) is the life stories of three Yukon Native elders: Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. Cruikshank began her foray into life history at the request of community women who suggested she could contribute by recording life histories with their mothers and grandmothers (Cruikshank, J. 1990:13). The work preserves history, as these women wished, but it also illustrates how the oral traditions of the story teller impact a life story and how those traditions play out in preserving cultural identity. For example, Angela Sidney uses multiple tellings of traditional stories to provide "cultural scaffolding" for her own life story (Cruikshank, J. 1995:57). In addition to providing this important information, Sidney was also recording her own interpretations of these traditional stories, not to be fixed in meaning but to continue to be used in the storytelling tradition of her culture.

Angela Sidney understood, as only the most talented storytellers can, the importance of performance – that it involves not simply a narrator but also an audience, and that narrator and audience both change at different points in time and in different circumstances, giving any one story the potential range of meanings that all good stories have. [1995:57]

All three women chose to record their stories, both traditional and personal, in English. Cruikshank attributes this to both the desire for an immediate audience, the importance of stories as a teaching tool for that audience, and the desire to see their stories included in school

curriculum (1990:16-17). Cruikshank's work again illustrates how storytelling is used to create and recreate cultural and personal identity and how stories are shared in a meaningful way both between generations and between cultures.

*Sawin's Listening for a Life: a Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories* (2004), and Horne and McBeth's *Essie's Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher* (1998) have both influenced me primarily through their approach to collaboration.

*Listening for a Life* is the life story of Bessie Eldreth, an Appalachian folk singer who spent most of her life in obscurity, making a life for herself and her children with minimal spousal support. Sawin takes a dialogic approach that emphasizes the dialogue between herself and Eldreth as well as their separate dialogues. Although I appreciate Sawin's efforts and *Listening for a Life* provides a compelling portrait of Eldreth's life, it seems more dialogic in form than in function; that is to say she provides access to their joint dialogue, but there is not a sense of communication. One never gets the sense that the book is substantially a work of Eldreth's.

Horne and McBeth's work demonstrates the opposite approach. The work is clearly dialogic in function. They edit and re-edit the text together, but they remove much of the "evidence" of their dialogue from McBeth's stories. The contrast between these works highlights issues in my own use of a dialogic approach with Vera where producing a dialogic product with all its interruptions, questions, and side trails was abandoned in order to honor Vera's wish to produce a more polished and organized product.

These works have been instrumental in forming my own thoughts about the collaborative process and the meaning and use of life histories. From them I have taken several lessons: the multitude of choices in structuring a life history and their impacts on the audience's

understanding of the story, the importance of dialogue in collaboration, the importance of transparency in acknowledging my own positionality and its impact on the collaboration, and how storytelling can be used to create and maintain personal and cultural identity over time - the art of the story to link tradition to the present. Each life history is unique in its collaboration and subject, and yet each share elements as well. The life histories of these women address both the gender gap in ethnographic and life history literature and broader issues of culture, identity, meaning, and change. But they also are agents of culture, identity, meaning, and change for their storytellers, collaborators, communities, and the audiences that read them.

### *2.2.2 Anthropology and Life History*

Over time, the focuses of life histories have changed and they are now collected and published in many disciplines for many reasons. In *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Bibliography* L. L. Langness and Gayla Frank (1981) discuss a number of purposes for collecting life histories, including the study of personality and culture, to portray the culture, for literary purposes, to portray aspects of culture change, to illustrate an aspect of culture not normally portrayed in other venues, to communicate something not otherwise communicated, and to say something about deviants or unusual subjects. They emphasize the importance of cultural information to the purpose of the life history and to this list one should add purposes that emphasize the individual as well: to illustrate acculturation and personal adaptation, to explore psychological issues across and within cultures, to commemorate a life, and to illustrate the differences or variety within a culture.

The life history approach also provides a method for anthropologists to describe culture from an “insider’s” perspective and to explore the relationship between the individual and his or her culture. Regarding the usefulness of life history to scientific understanding Sidney Mintz

writes "...our outsiders' knowledge of what happened to the community becomes more immediate, richer, through having the testimony of a person who did experience those events, and then interprets them for us as lived perceptions, recounted in spoken words" (Mintz 1989:790). Another important contribution of the life history method is the ethnographic authority it confers upon the narrator. The narrator, and by extension the community, become active participants in the ethnographic process. In some sense, the life history is simply a different treatment of the same ethnographic material. As Blackman writes, "the basic fabric of ethnology is woven from the scraps of individuals' lives, from the experiences and knowledge of individual informants" (1992[1982]:4). The collective life stories of informants can be transformed into a general ethnography, completely obliterating their individual identity, or they can be transformed into life histories that preserve the individual identity while still attempting to say something broader about culture.

As with anthropology, the life history method has struggled with issues of power, representation, cultural accuracy, and appropriateness. One issue is the cultural fit of the telling of life histories with non-Western cultures. Krupat (1985) argues that the Indian autobiography has no place in traditional Native American culture. The genre arose out of the contact and subsequent conflict between Euro-American and Native American cultures, and, as a construction between the Western writer and native narrator, it cannot necessarily claim to provide a native point of view. In a similar vein, Cruikshank discusses the "thwarted expectations" of the Western writer in trying to make Native American life histories fit the Western autobiographical model (1990:x). On the other hand, Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands (1984) see the life history genre as a combination of American Indian oral tradition and

Western written tradition and Cruikshank's own efforts show how the oral traditions of her collaborators shaped the final life histories they published.

Michael Frisch argues that the approach raises "important issues of culture, communication, and politics – not only in the material they engage, but in the very process of engagement" (1990:xvi). While Frisch sees oral history<sup>18</sup> as a way to redistribute intellectual authority, the same structural inequality in wealth, social position, and intellectual authority that characterizes anthropology is found in oral history work and should be addressed. For example, in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* Behar (2003[1993]) describes in great detail her and Esperanza's *compadrazgo* relationship which "highlighted and formalized the contradictions of the racial and class differences" between them (2003[1993]:7). Shepard Krech III discusses how his position as a native of Talbot County placed him in the "race and class structure of the county" and impacted his work with Joseph Sutton in *Praise the Bridge that Carries You Over: The Life of Joseph Sutton* (1981:x). Despite this inequality narrators often have their own ideas about the form and purpose of their life history. As Julie Cruikshank writes; "a contemporary narrator working in collaboration with an anthropologist usually has an agenda every bit as clear as the ethnographer" (1990:16).

The earliest life histories also gave little consideration to the nature of their collaboration or the style of their representation. As noted above, over the last century issues of collaboration and representation have been discussed throughout anthropology as well as within the life history genre. As questions were asked and debated, anthropologists made changes in the way fieldwork was conducted and ethnographic material was presented. In

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<sup>18</sup> Schneider (2002) notes that life histories are just one piece of the oral history record which is created through many different types of oral sources.

reflecting on how these changes impacted readings of the life history, *Worker in the Cane* (Mintz 1960), Sidney Mintz notes that in the 1960s the canon of effective fieldwork dictated that an informant that was a friend could not provide objective information. Thus Mintz's method was originally criticized because he was too close to his subject. Twenty years later he is criticized for manipulating the text and enhancing his position of power in respect to his narrator. Mintz remarks on the irony; "at first suspect because I was overfriendly, I had now become not friendly enough" (1989:788).

Friendship, however, is not the real issue. The question is how and in what way are life histories made meaningful to an unknown future audience? While early life histories were seen as transparent and their meaning "self-evident," oral historians today are exploring how to both create a meaningful life history and convey that meaning to others. In *...So They Understand*, William Schneider (2002) discusses the importance of understanding cultural patterning in providing context for oral histories. Meaning is not lying there to be discovered, but developed through our interactions and our continuing attempts to communicate with and understand others.

We have to know what we are preserving, what it means, and why it is important in order to preserve it. Aware that our personal background may differ from that of the people who shared their stories, we need, on one hand, to keep cultural patterning in mind and, on the other, to see story as part of our own lives, to be open to the messages in personal ways. [2002:10]

In a sense, Schneider is calling for oral historians to parallel the storyteller's skills. "Skilled storytellers find ways to bridge their "old" experiences to the younger generation...call it the art of the moment crafted from the past" (2002:77). Life history collaborators must do the same

thing, and in some ways face the same issues of translation. For the storyteller, generational differences may be the most difficult divide to cross, for the researcher cultural issues may be more difficult, but both are attempting to bridge between different conversations and different experiences.

For Behar, the tendency to treat life history narratives as static and self-explanatory leads to the use of typifying narratives or frames that “talk past” the storyteller’s narrative. Her answer to this is, like Schneider, to delve deeply into cultural meanings and personal interactions. She views life history narratives as texts that should be theorized and interpreted.

The life history text is not meaningful in itself: it is constituted in its interpretation, its reading. Reading a life history text, and then writing it, calls for an interpretation of cultural themes as they are creatively constructed by the actor within a particular configuration of social forces and gender, and class contexts; and, at the same time, a closer analysis of the making of the life history narrative as a narrative, using critical forms of textual analysis and self-reflexive (rather than self-ingratiating) meditation on the relationship between the storyteller and the anthropologist. [Behar 1995b:152]

While Behar’s approach seems overly theoretical to me and possibly lacking in collaboration with her storyteller<sup>19</sup> her concept of “reading” the text seems very helpful, as does her concern with typifying narratives.

Utilizing pre-existing narratives to interpret texts is, on the one hand, necessary as they will often inform the storyteller themselves as well as the reader and cannot be ignored. On the

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<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to tell from *Translated Woman* (2003[1993]) how much input Esperanza had although she appears to have encouraged Behar to be free with her storytelling.

other hand typifying narratives can speak past the narrative in the same way that producing “general ethnographic descriptions” (Abu-Lughod 1993:9) eliminates the contradictions, arguments, and changing circumstances in lived culture, contributing to the anthropological view of groups of people as discrete, bounded “cultures” instead of individuals with complex and textured lives.

Schneider’s concern is less with the dangers of pre-existing narratives than with their importance in preserving the context necessary for future readings; without context understanding is compromised. Context must not only include historical and cultural background, but also an understanding of the cultural processes that both inform the storyteller’s use of stories and the ways the storyteller moves from orality to literacy. Behar is addressing the context issue by taking on the end product of the life history process: explicitly and deliberately treating the narrative as a piece of writing that is then “read.” She is essentially arguing that the “afterlife” of the life history requires an active and engaging process of contextualization and interpretation that attempts to avoid falling into the rut of existing narratives or reifying the text as a piece of information. Like Behar, Cruikshank does not see life stories as simply factual contributions to historical or anthropological knowledge, but a window into cultural processes of life story creation and knowledge transmission. Cruikshank makes how Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned use traditional narratives to explain their life experiences the central issue of *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990:2). Without this crucial piece of context, future audiences may fail to understand these women’s stories.

Cruikshank’s insight into the importance of understanding how stories are used relates to another important factor in the process of creating a life history: how an oral performance becomes a piece of literature. Walter Ong (1982) explores the emergence of literacy from

orality and the continuing dominance of primary orality in the languages of the world even as literacy both enhances and tyrannizes orality. Ong offers “voicings” as an alternative to “oral literature” which he sees as inherently conflicted.<sup>20</sup> However, it seems to me that “oral literature” captures the process of creating a life history quite well. As storytellers from primary oral traditions deliberately transition to literacy a hybrid category is appropriate. Schneider calls these hybrid works, “the story of a person’s life told in their own words but compiled and edited for publication by a writer, ‘oral biographies’ (2002:112), another “conflicted” term, but one that captures the essence of many of today’s life history collaborations. Life history collaborators are increasingly taking into account the intersections and transitions necessary to move oral traditions into literary traditions and by extension, considering the permanency of the written word and the fluidity of the understanding of present and future audiences. For example, the women Cruikshank worked with recorded both their personal and their traditional stories in English in order to make them more accessible to young people, recognizing that the education process was changing and wanting their stories to be a part of the new system. Gwich’in writer Katherine Peter has also begun to retell her stories in English instead of translating them directly from Gwich’in. Her daughter, Kathy Sikorski, comments on translation styles in the introduction to Peter’s last autobiographical book, *Khehkwaii Zeh Gwiich’i’: Living in the Chief’s House* (2001).

Perhaps one of the biggest movements that Katherine Peter advocates is the natural approach to language revitalization. It is of no surprise, therefore, that unlike in all of her other works, the English in this book is only a loose

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<sup>20</sup> Although he did not expect the term to launch and sticks with “verbal art forms” (Ong 1982:14).

translation of the original Gwich'in, thus giving the writing an authentic Native voice and a validity all its own. [Peter, K. 2001:9]

In another example of the considered use of English in life stories, Esther Burnett Horne and Sally McBeth sometimes turned to the thesaurus to find just the right word to express Esther's story's meaning in writing (Horne and McBeth 1998:xvi).

To appreciate and understand Vera's life history it is essential to focus on transitional spaces: the spaces between the past and the present and future, between orality and literacy, between individual and community, between Gwich'in and non-Gwich'in. These are the spaces that bridge the past to the present, the spaces that Vera consciously uses to encourage and support a cultural identity of strength and power. Vera offers her stories in the tradition of Gwich'in educational processes while attempting to negotiate the changing experiences, including literate education, of young people. Her stories are not information to be preserved as "history," but an expression of, an explanation of, and an argument for, a Gwich'in identity in the modern world. Thus this project needs an approach that supports and complements these dynamics.

### Chapter 3 Dialogics: Theory, Process, Product

I believe that for my work a dialogical approach, theoretically, processually, and representationally, comes closest to addressing these issues. A dialogic theory of culture addresses issues of historicity and the relationship between culture and the individual as well as the role of “outsiders,” including anthropologists, in creating culture. A dialogic process also addresses issues of power imbalance in representation and text creation, and a dialogic product challenges future audiences to view and respond to the text in a way that can work against the authoritarian nature of texts. I will first describe how each of these aspects of dialogics work and then how I applied dialogics in this work and when and why I did not, as Vera and I worked together to determine the nature of our final product. Dialogics may be, to me, a theory and approach of infinite possibility and explanatory power, but the very process of a dialogic approach works against such theoretical and functional unity.

#### 3.1 Dialogics as a Theory of Cultural Emergence

“Dialogism” or “dialogics” is strongly associated with the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin although his ideas can be placed within a broad set of theories relating to the nature of language, subjectivity and intertextuality. Under Bakhtin’s influence, as a theory of culture, dialogics brings together language, culture, and history into a somewhat freeform dance that gives primacy to historical agents and agency, diminishing, but not negating the influence of the privileged and powerful. Bakhtin’s contribution is in specifically locating meaning in the space between the speaker and listener, self and other, in language, or more importantly, dialogue and in seeing all language and dialogue as socially constructed. In “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin begins by stating that “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (1981:259) and goes on to describe how a novel may contain a diversity of social speech types and social languages

and how this diversity reflects and perpetuates the heteroglossia of language. Bakhtin takes his concept of dialogue beyond the novel, showing how heteroglossia within a novel interacts with living language and how the centripetal (“unitary language”) and centrifugal (“heteroglossia”) forces interact to create meaning.

Language, Bakhtin writes, “...lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent...” (1981:293). For Bakhtin there is no solid ground for a given word or a given speaker to stand on. Each utterance becomes an active participant in social dialogue and every word is directed towards and anticipates an answer. It is in this in between that meaning is created, and also where speakers vie for control of that meaning. Bakhtin continues:

Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions: it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions

of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process." [1981:293-294]

Bakhtin's focus on discourse is shared by other literary and social science theorists. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Michael Foucault (1972) focuses on discourse as a productive system that creates people's sense of who they are. While Foucault also locates the creation of culture and self in discourse, his emphasis is on the constraints that language exerts over individual expression and understanding. All discourses are systems of knowledge and those discourses that obtain or control power relations through the production of knowledge Foucault calls "normalizing discourses." They define what is considered normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural. Whoever controls these discourses then has power over others. For Bakhtin these normalizing discourses would be the "unitary language" that serves "to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" (1981:270). Bakhtin emphasizes, however, the power of the centrifugal forces of language that serve to create heteroglossia: the diversification of language into socio-ideological languages of social groups, professional genres and generations and their further diversification with every utterance within them. Each utterance participates in each system, simultaneously dialogical, heteroglossic, and unifying, while carrying the specific content and intentions of the individual making that utterance. Language, culture, and self are remade with each utterance.<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin writes:

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions

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<sup>21</sup> The idea of individual variance within a more or less unifying structure is not unusual. Other examples are Ward Goodenough's (1968) discussion of culture as both a set of standards that local authorities accept as appropriate and as individually variant among group members and Mark Johnson's (1987) discussion of how "narrative unity" provides a framework for individual experience.

between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These “languages” of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying “languages.” [1981, p. 291]

However, it is important to note that while heteroglossia is presented as a powerful force for disrupting or negating hegemonic narratives, Bakhtin is not suggesting that speakers have complete freedom from unifying language. Unifying language provides the framework, the borders, through and within which meaning is created. The difference from Foucault is, I believe, one of emphasis: an emphasis on what we might call narrative resistance over narrative conformity.

Bakhtin’s melding of dialogue and textuality is attractive to anthropologists and others who have grappled with issues of power, representation, and cultural identity. For theorists, dialogism provides a mechanism for cultural continuity and change that addresses the role of the individual without reducing culture to the individual and addresses the role of culture in creating the individual without reducing the individual to his or her culture. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (1995) argue that culture does not originate from independent actors or the collectivity, but is an emergent property of dialogue.<sup>22</sup>

We would argue instead that cultures are continuously produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members. Cultural events are not the sum of the actions of their individual participants, each of whom imperfectly

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<sup>22</sup> See Tedlock and Mannheim (1995) for a discussion of how social and political factors influenced anthropological theories of culture as existing without or within the individual.

expresses a pre-existent pattern, but are the scenes where shared culture emerges from interaction. [1995:2]

Culture emerges from dialogue between individuals speaking the socio-ideological language of their group (by birth, desire, or happenstance), but at the same time changing that language, their culture, and themselves, with each word they speak. In this way culture is being continuously both reinforced and recreated. The individual emerges from their dialogue with others in a similar way; individuals choose to tell their story in a particular way, but it is never completely their story because their words can only be received and responded to through the dialogic process.

*Dialogics* also provides a framework for understanding interactions between individuals or groups of unequal access to power. One focus of anthropologists' use of Bakhtin's concepts is centered on ideas of "resistance" either within a cultural system or to cultural or dialogic hegemony of more powerful groups. Wendy Weiss (1990) uses Bakhtin's concepts to explore how a young woman defies her father in Ecuador (and by extension how Bakhtin's concepts can be used to defy patriarchal authority in anthropology). Julie Cruikshank uses Bakhtin's ideas, in conjunction with those of Harold Innis (1950) and Walter Benjamin (1969), to explore how storytelling can "subvert official orthodoxies and challenge conventional ways of thinking" (1998:xiii). Martha Kaplan and John Kelly (1994) use the concept of dialogue to understand processes in the "transcursions of power." These approaches emphasize the centripetal forces of heteroglossic language ability to re-imagine and re-make the world and one's position in it through language.

### 3.2 Dialogics as Process

In addition to a dialogic theory of culture creation in situ, anthropologists have seen the process of fieldwork and ethnography as itself dialogic in the sense of anthropologists being a part of creating culture in the field. For example, Stephan Gudeman and Alberto Rivera (1989) view their field interaction with Columbians to be “long conversations” not only between themselves and the natives, but between the natives and other times, other cultures, and other residents. Dennis Tedlock (1979) originally proposed “dialogical anthropology” as an alternative to “analogical anthropology” as a change in textuality and presentation in ethnography. He argued that anthropology is inherently dialogic in nature, but becomes analogic in product – the ethnography – by attempted imitation of the natural sciences.

If sociocultural anthropology were founded upon nothing but silent observations, there would be nothing to distinguish it from the natural sciences. But the moment we talk about this hunting or singing with the people who participated in it, we have entered the realm that is the special province of the social sciences...The anthropological dialogue creates a world, or an understanding of the *differences between* two worlds, that exists between persons who were indeterminately far apart, in all sorts of different ways, when they started out on their conversations. [1979:388]

In his later work Bakhtin makes a similar distinction between the object of the natural sciences and the subject of the human sciences.

The exact sciences constitute a monologic form of knowledge: the intellect contemplates a *thing* and expounds upon it...Any object of knowledge (including man) can be perceived and cognized as a thing. But a subject as such cannot be

perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be *dialogic*. [1986:161]

The human sciences, then, including anthropology, can be seen as a dialogic form of knowledge, knowledge that has no final end point and is continuously in play between various actors and speakers and the process of trying to understand such types of knowledge is itself a type of dialogue through which culture emerges: “ethnographers at one and the same time observe culture and make culture” (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995:15). Anthropologists have long grappled with their dual roles of observer and creator even as they have tried to write it out of their ethnographies. Researchers who collaborate in the process of creating life histories have similarly struggled with this duality, but have been able to more freely express their dual role, albeit most often in the margins of the text (Behar 1995b:149).

### 3.3 Dialogics and Product

Much of the discussion within anthropology about textuality and representation has been about how to translate the more processual theories about cultures such as dialogics into texts that reflect both the interactive nature of the process and the contingent nature of the knowledge. Tedlock and other proponents of dialogic anthropology are looking to use dialogue within their products (ethnography and life history) to provide two basic things. First, dialogue within the text may more transparently represent how the text and the knowledge it presumes to represent was produced and to put the subjects (on whose insights the text is often based, but are appropriated by the anthropologist as their own) on a more equal footing as the producers of that knowledge, and second, to allow dialogue to continue in all directions by not supporting the silos of “field” and “home” as separate discourses and again, not to privilege

particular types of discourse. Creating a “dialogic product,” however, is not without complications, not least because in some instances these goals may be incompatible.

In his article “The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology,” Tedlock (1979) notes that both ethnography and confessionals are presented as monologues despite the dialogue that created them and he extends the same critique to life histories.

It is true that native texts and life histories are direct quotations rather than analogical replacements of native discourse, but they are not shown to us in the full light of primary dialogue. Rather, they are presented as if the anthropologist who collected them had had a tracheotomy prior to entering the field. Again, as in the case of the ethnographies, there may be compensatory marginalia, but otherwise it is now the native who is talking endlessly....”

[1979:389]

In 1979 Tedlock is able to cite few examples of actual dialogue in ethnographies and the most notable example he finds (he and Mannheim do cite additional examples by female authors in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (1995))<sup>23</sup> is Victor Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), in which Turner explicitly argues for his objectivity over the Ndembu voice, but makes no secret of his conversations and provides enough of a dialogue to allow reinterpretation by the reader.

The issue of reinterpretation is an interesting one. Tedlock, in his final chapter to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* writes: “when interpretive anthropology is written in such a way

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<sup>23</sup> They note that female and other marginalized anthropologists have been at the forefront of creating ethnography that emphasizes dialogue, but are careful not to essentialize either monologic or dialogic tendencies to males or females. “It is not that there is something essentially male about a reductive and authoritative monologue or essentially female about an expansive multivocality...Rather, the suppression of multivocality may be laid at the door of a particular construction of language and truth that finds its purest expression in the omniscient third-person discourse of the solitary male, whether divine or human” (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995:20).

that the voice of the author crowds all the other possible voices into the fine print or silences them altogether, then to that same extent any *re*interpretation by readers will ultimately tend to focus on the author and on authorship" (1995:255). Using dialogue to expand potential voices for reinterpretation, however, can be problematic for both the researcher and the researched. What I call into question here is how a dialogic product serves the purpose of its creators: as readers we may want to "make up our own minds" using "all available information" but as speakers, actors, and writers, and I include here the "informants," community members, and individuals who are the subjects of ethnography or life history, we want to guide people towards or away from certain interpretations or types of readings. The issue, then, is not so much that the dialogue is not fully included, but that, as Behar says, the theoretical frame speaks past the narrative, or, more importantly, speaks past the narrator. There is a tension between fixing meaning (and whose meaning will be fixed?) and allowing or even encouraging a proliferation of meaning, between providing guidance and avoiding too much direction.

Here, I believe, is part of the explanation of the "unfulfilled promise of life histories" described by James Freeman and David Krantz (1979): the tendency to create and interpret the life history in accordance with the rules of social sciences utilizing potentially problematic frames instead of analyzing them in their own terms or in the terms their narrator prefers. Besides privileging certain voices, the use of such frames is a sort of spoon feeding to the audience. By fixing meaning through these authoritative frames we alleviate the need for critical judgment on the part of the reader and help them avoid the potential discomfort of ambiguity. While the possibility of "analyzing them on their own terms" may be as farfetched and obfuscating as any other theoretical method, the use of an anthropological (or sociological or psychological) frame to understand a life story continues to assume that at some point

language stops being a part of a dialogue and becomes a monologue and that there is a language that has more weight, that is more true, that has more explanatory power than another.<sup>24</sup> In anthropology, this language is the authoritative voice of the ethnographer, the “at home” voice that purports to leave behind the dialogue of the field and put a period on the final sentence. This demarcation actually marks the removal of the utterances from one dialogue to another. The “in the field” dialogue, primarily between the anthropologist and the subject is replaced by the academic dialogue between the anthropologist and other academics, what Tedlock refers to as the “replacement of one discourse with another” (1979:389).

As noted previously, Behar argues that the typifying narrative or frame provided by the anthropologist often speaks past the narrative of the life history itself.

Rather than looking at social and cultural systems solely as they impinge on a life, shape it, and turn it into an object, a life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor’s retrospective reflections on that action. A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account. [1995b:150]

Behar’s solution – to replace “informing” with “reading” as the way of representing life stories – may be primarily one of semantics, but it is an important distinction. “Informing” leaves all the power of interpretation with the anthropologist and implies that a fixed commodity, information, is being provided, while a “reading” de-privileges the anthropologist’s voice and

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<sup>24</sup> For Tedlock and Mannheim, this tendency in oral history stems in part from the historical distinction between individuals and transcendent social wholes, with the ethnographer providing the holistic view of culture and the individual’s story presented as self-evident.

invites continuing dialogue. This approach asks us all, the storyteller, collaborator, and audiences, to live with ambiguity: to give up the false certainty of authoritative interpretation (even that of the story teller themselves) for the fluidity of a continuing dialogue. Building upon Isabel Hofmeyr's (1993:54) idea that oral history "live[s] by its fluidity," Carolyn Hamilton argues that their fluidity is the strength of oral accounts (2002:112) and that "academic pursuit of knowledge of the remote past cannot proceed without due acknowledgement of the multiple fluidities involved in the production of knowledge" (2002:226). I would argue that this fluidity extends to written accounts as well. The ability to fix words is not the same as an ability to fix meaning.

The increased emphasis on ever more comprehensive collaborations in life history may allow for multiple readings, expanding the possible frames and increasing the visibility of the narrator beyond their role as story teller. Behar argues for life histories to be a double telling where the "native and the anthropologist, side by side, act as narrators, readers, and commentators" (1995b:149). Elaine Lawless (1991; 1992; 2000) proposes a reciprocal ethnography where the ethnographer and collaborator "sit down together and begin a dialogue about what they each have written and presented and record their responses to this gathering of information" (2000:201). However, as Sawin notes, "not every ethnographic subject will be willing to engage with our texts or even our entextualized versions of their words in a way that seems so automatic within the world of academic hyperliteracy" (2004:19). For Sawin, utilizing a dialogic methodology was liberating, allowing her to fulfill her role as ethnographer without undue anxiety about the ethics of representation.<sup>25</sup> Horne and McBeth's (1998) *Essie's Story*

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<sup>25</sup> For me, Sawin takes this liberation a bit too far. She writes: "A dialogic ethnography allays anxieties about the ethics of representation, promoting the ethnographer's joyful assumption of her inevitable

provides what appears to me to be truly reciprocal ethnography in the sense Lawless intends. Horne and McBeth's collaboration included taping, transcribing, and editing the editing process, a process that mimicked, in Essie's mind, life itself. McBeth writes, "The process had become much more important than the product, the dialogue more significant than the text" (Horne and McBeth 1998:xvii).

Although clearly a more dialogic approach has had some success in addressing issues of representation, I do not argue that forms of ethnography or life history that are not dialogic or provide some sort of discipline based frames are necessarily less "true" or less "responsive" to the needs and desires of the author(s) or discipline. Instead, I argue that the *purpose* of the work, determined collaboratively by the researcher and teller, should drive the presentation of life histories and the underlying theories that provide the framework for that presentation.

Bakhtin's picture of each individual's utterance entering into almost a battleground of centrifugal and centripetal forces speaks to my view of the use of stories among the Gwich'in as tools in their cultural and personal battleground. The purpose of most, if not all published life histories is not just to shed light on the rules of engagement, but to engage, and while dialogic process is necessary, and even inevitable, a dialogic product may not meet the needs of either narrator or researcher. The tension between between dialogue and text is not just about process and product or the monologic and freezing nature of texts, but about the intentions of the participants. People may intend to freeze meaning or guide readers to certain types of readings, even when it is ultimately impossible to avoid the effects of heteroglossia on language even with a text. Thus the dialogue about how to translate the spoken story into text becomes

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interpretive responsibilities" (2004:3). While within a dialogic framework one can argue that their interpretations are simply part of a larger dialogue this does not absolve an ethnographer from the responsibility to "watch what they say."

as important as the original story. Without an understanding of the process, we cannot fully understand the chosen product.

### 3.4 Entering a River of Dialogue

Anthropological knowledge is situated knowledge, positional and partial. Abu-Lughod argues that “‘culture’ operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy” and that feminist and “halfie” anthropologists are in a unique position to experience the adversarial relationship between the anthropological self and the other, revealing the shifting ground under every anthropologists feet (1991:137-138). Feminist and halfie anthropologists experience a “blocked ability to comfortably assume the self of anthropology” (1991:140). Adopted-in anthropologists may experience a similar shifting of the anthropological landscape (Kan 2001). In this section I will explore the positionality and partiality of *my* view of Fort Yukon and *my* voice in the conversation, as I understand it. My view of Fort Yukon and of Vera’s life is positional and partial based not only on my gender and interest in “women’s” issue, but on the constraints and choices I was given as a married-in member living the community.

When I first started dating James, his brother Richard would tease him saying, “she’s studying you; make us look good.” We all laughed, but I, at least, was initially uncomfortable with the implication that I was dating someone to gain access. Starting a relationship with, and then marrying, a man from the community I was studying required me to make choices about the role I would play in Fort Yukon. Many of these choices involved reconciling my own ideas of how an “anthropologist” should behave, my idea(l) of the anthropological self, and aspects of my own personality which were ill-suited to anthropological work. Beyond these personal issues, family, friends, the Fort Yukon community, and the broader Native community each

involved a different set of choices and accommodations and different positions from which to work.

Broadly speaking, there are two areas of potential conflict or choice in my experiences that need to be explicated: one relating to action and the other relating to perspective. In terms of anthropological action, or method, I believed that an anthropologist must be open to any and every experience and accepting of any and every community standard. In other words, an anthropologist must take every opportunity to observe and participate in all aspects of community life and do so in culturally appropriate ways. One might think that marrying in would open many, if not all, doors, and make such participation even more possible.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, I had been taught that social and psychological distance was supposed to be necessary to produce appropriately objective descriptions and insights into my chosen topic. “Marrying in” certainly reduced at least some of the distance and with it my potential to be “objective.” I want to explore in this section how I made decisions about my role and behavior in Fort Yukon and how those choices impacted my work.

In terms of anthropological action, the root of the problem for me was that being a good anthropologist, in my mind, involved being more outgoing than I was comfortable with on a permanent basis. While spending a couple of years attending every potlatch, community meeting, and school event might have been possible, spending a lifetime certainly was not. In this arena my personal inclinations generally won out and I chose to “be myself.” I attended the occasional community event, often alone or with my sister-in-law Kathy, since James does not like large gatherings. I didn’t make any special attempt to record what I observed or did, but of

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<sup>26</sup> Or not. While becoming a part of a particular family enhances the depth of information and access an anthropologist has, it can also compromise access to other community members and limit the positions an anthropologist can take (Black-Rogers 2001; Powers and Powers 2001; Miller 2001).

course, being trained in anthropology I often understood behavior in an anthropological context (which I also do with the non-Native community). I almost never attended church although church attendance is a very important thing for many people in Fort Yukon and had I been actively studying the community it could have been an important place to make observations (and, at the Episcopal Church in particular, to learn the language). However, I felt that it would have been hypocritical to attend church for research purposes, and, again, what might be possible in the short term would certainly not have been sustainable in the long term.

Food etiquette was another area where I had to choose between my ideal of the anthropological persona and my personal desires. Do I politely accept every offer of food and drink or, due to my already full-figure, less than politely (for the Gwich'in) refuse? I ultimately chose to refuse, explaining that I had already eaten, or eaten enough, but it took several years for me to be comfortable doing this. I also eventually became comfortable telling people I didn't like certain traditional foods, such as moose head soup (moose lips are chewy!) without fearing that I would offend them. With good friends, like Vera, this eventually led to discussions about cross-cultural attitudes towards food and hospitality. In one instance, a coworker from the lower forty-eight refused all offers of food, explaining that he was raised that way (something that I can identify with as my own culturally conditioned response to any offer of food or assistance is to say no, whether I want what is offered or not). Since Vera cooked nearly every day at the Center it became something of a ritual and inside joke for her to offer food to Ken, which he would always politely refuse.

Although I have not had many explicit conversations with my husband's family about being an anthropologist, their ideas and attitudes also affected my behavior in the community, often in ways that would seem to constrain my ability to act like an anthropologist. Again, my

personal view of the anthropological persona was to say yes to everything in order to observe and participate in everything. By marrying into a particular family I was placed in a particular relation to other families in Fort Yukon and the Yukon Flats generally. I felt that certain activities would be frowned upon by my family. I was also afraid that my family would feel that I was using them as a source of information. Thus, although I might go to them with questions, I was careful not to “study” them or place them in a situation where they would feel obligated to help me. This is one reason why it took so long for me to pick a topic and begin work. I didn’t want to be an anthropologist either with my family or the community (of course, in many ways this discussion belies that sentiment as clearly I am using my experiences with them in this anthropological work).

Although divisions and alliances between and among families are not set in stone, they are at least etched into it. However, as family ties become more distant a great deal of choice is exercised in deciding who gets to be kin. For Gwich’in close kinship ties imply a great deal of reciprocity that can be both beneficial and burdensome. You are expected to give freely, but also to receive. In addition, this kin based view of reciprocity often conflicts with the Western, employment based view. I would occasionally have someone call upon their kinship with my husband to garner a favor through my work. When I would mention to James, “so-and-so says they’re your cousin,” he might initially deny kinship before describing the actual connections of blood and marriage that tied him to that individual. In another case, I observed bitter disagreement when one family member fulfilled their obligation to their employer over their obligation to another family member. I quickly learned that my behavior and choices in companions reflected on the family as a whole. With so much at stake, it is necessary to choose your kin wisely, something that I learned early from James’ reactions as well as subtle cues from

other family members. This is not to say that the Carroll family itself is wholly unified in its outlook and approach. There are certainly divisions within the family and I have “chosen” sides, as it were, in those divisions as well, but being a Carroll certainly defines in a significant way what my partial view can be.

Being an anthropologist in the community was in some ways less constraining than being an anthropologist in the family. The Gwich'in people generally, and the people of Fort Yukon in particular, may not always like being studied or written about, but they are used to it. Starting with the publication of Alexander Murray's journal (1910), Fort Yukon and the Gwich'in people have been the subject of trader's and trapper's accounts and memoirs (Beaver 1955; Carroll 1957), missionary accounts (Stuck 1914b, 1917), anthropological accounts (Balikci 1963; Fast 2002; Krech 1976; Leechman 1954; McKennan 1965; Osgood 1936a; Slobodin 1962), oral histories (Frank and Frank 1995; Herbert 1982; Martin 1993), memoirs (Peter, K. 1992[1981], 2001; Wallis 2002), traditional stories (Wallis 1993, 1996) and other accounts (D'Orso 2007; Peter Raboff 2001) including the occasional feature in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. This is by no means an exhaustive list and most people in Fort Yukon have only read or heard about a fraction of these works; however, it is generally known that a lot has been written about Fort Yukon and the Gwich'in by both non-local and local people and that they are the frequent object of study by anthropologists and other researchers.

Thus, community members have their own expectations of anthropologists which are in some ways similar to my own ideas about the anthropological persona. Anthropologists should be interested in everything and willing to do anything<sup>27</sup> and most importantly, should listen to

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<sup>27</sup> The expectation that an outsider be willing to try anything (food, hunting and fishing trips etc.) extends to anyone outsider in the community, not just anthropologists. Going on a late September (and thus very

what they are told. Of course, the anthropologist should only listen to the “right” people as some people do not know enough to be reliable, but who the right people are also depends on who you ask. There is certainly some broad agreement on this, but not complete agreement. Since I wanted to be a community member first and an anthropologist second again I downplayed, to the point of abandoning, any action that might appear like I was studying or analyzing people (at least that is what I thought I was doing). At the same time, as the coordinator of the local university center and a teacher of a course on Alaska Native cultures which several local people took in the course of their studies, people would often share information that they thought I should know or correct an interpretation they felt was unwarranted.

Of course, over time I made good friends in Fort Yukon and many of these friends also have an interest in culture, tradition, acculturation and change, and other “anthropological” issues. For them, I believe, my being a sometime anthropologist was integrated into our friendship as simply a commonly held interest in certain topics. This shared interest represents both the extent to which anthropological concepts have been integrated into Gwich’in ideas about themselves and their relationship to others and, I believe, the extent to which anthropology’s interest in “others” represents a departure from other academic disciplines and American cultural attitudes generally. Thus we often had a common or at least somewhat compatible framework for discussion around topics such as the role of education in Gwich’in culture, the positive and negative effects of acculturation, and, quite commonly since we were all women with children, the cross-cultural issues surrounding raising children in today’s world.

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chilly) hunting trip up the Porcupine River went a long way towards impressing my family for a mutual friend who lived in the village for two years and solidified her status as a welcome addition to the community.

In addition to my Gwich'in friends in Fort Yukon I am also a part of a larger network of Alaska Native people working in education, primarily through the University of Alaska Fairbanks. These Native friends and co-workers represent yet another community with ideas and expectations about anthropologists in general and me in particular. In general there is broad support for oral history in this community as a way of preserving culture and history and as a way of healing.

All in all, my own reservations and attempts to not impose myself as an anthropologist on family, friends, and community have been more marked than anyone else's attempts to dissuade or exclude me. Not acting like an anthropologist also created new and unexpected challenges in identity. Partially because of Fort Yukon's history of in-marrying or in-partnering non-Natives I was particularly concerned with appearing to be a "wannabe" or trying to usurp local people's right to speak for themselves. While anthropologists are concerned with "over-report" distorting the researcher's analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996), I was more concerned about becoming the "white-woman de jour" or "the blond woman who speaks for us." I never wanted anyone to think that I was trying to become Gwich'in. That, however, was not necessarily a concern for some of my friends and relatives. In fact, I have been chided at times for what I thought were polite and self-effacing attempts to not claim too much kinship and solidarity with Gwich'in people but were interpreted as attempts to distance myself from friends and family.

### 3.5 Crossed Signals: The Academy in the Anthropologist

The preceding discussion of how my actions and choices as an anthropologist were shaped by the ways I interfaced with the community as family, friend, and actor in community politics provides some necessary context on my positionality within the Fort Yukon community. The issue of perspective is obviously intertwined with the constraints and choices I had as a

married-in member of the community, but it is also intertwined with the constraints and choices imposed by Western academia in general and anthropology in particular. Throughout most of this work I am concerned with the process of negotiated meaning between myself and Vera, myself and the community, and Vera and the community. However, as noted above, there have been many challenges over time to the form and content of anthropological representation and knowledge of the other and theoretical discussions of our notions of the whys and wherefores of understanding and the legitimization of knowledge. What is it we want to understand? Why do we want to understand (or do we)? How can understanding (of a physical process, a mental process, a cultural process) be achieved? What constitutes knowledge? There is another negotiation between myself as the writer of a dissertation and the expectations of academia about what academic writing, and particularly a dissertation, should be.

There are two primary issues in this area that I have struggled with: is social distance necessary for academic knowledge and what form of presentation is necessary to demonstrate academic knowledge. Drawing upon the distance between the physical scientist and her study area, anthropologists and other social scientists have claimed that similar distance was necessary to produce a scientific understanding of human cultures. This distance, or detachment, is labeled objectivity and at one time only knowledge produced through objectivity was considered scientifically valid. The “objectivity” I was introduced to through my undergraduate studies I would now call a lay understanding of objectivity that does not address the nuances of objectivity as an epistemic virtue or its history in the sciences. “To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence” (Datson and Galison 2007:17). According to Lorraine

Datson and Peter Galison, as an epistemology in the sciences, objectivity challenged the epistemology of “truth to nature” and has been substantially eclipsed by “trained judgment.” Despite the changing epistemologies (and the obvious relevance of trained judgment as a model for anthropological interpretation), anthropologists and others continue to be challenged for being too close to the people they study (Brayboy and Deyhle 2000).

Unlike the physical sciences, the subject of study for the human sciences is also the self. The space between even individuals of the most widely divergent cultures is vastly smaller than the space between a physicist and an atom. Thus anthropology had to devise strategies to define and enforce a difference in order to maintain a “veil of objectivity” over their work.<sup>28</sup> The self/other distinction has served a primary role in maintaining this distance. This distinction encouraged anthropologists to create writing strategies that presented the people they studied as objects more akin to microbes in a petri dish than human beings like themselves even as the process of studying and understanding was clearly dialogic. Tedlock (1979) argues that it is this dialogue that places anthropology in the social sciences and should continue past the fieldwork stage. Again, Bakhtin shares a similar idea on the difference between physical and social sciences.

The exact sciences constitute a monologic form of knowledge: the intellect contemplates a thing and expounds on it. There is only one subject here – cognizing (contemplating) and speaking (expounding). In opposition to the subject there is only a voiceless thing. Any object of knowledge can be

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<sup>28</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1978) argues that the social sciences use the term “objectivity” as a shield that veils the construction of their particular form of knowledge. Interestingly, arguments that support the importance of distance to understanding is akin to the argument that culture is “invisible to the subject”; an argument that I most recently came across in Father Michael Oleksa’s *Another Culture/Another World* (2005).

perceived and recognized as a thing. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject become voiceless, and consequently, cognition of it can only be dialogic.

[1986:161]

As noted above, this distinction began to collapse most clearly when feminist and halfie anthropologists entered the field. At issue, in part, was how one could objectively study a group of whom one also claimed membership. However, the increasing reflexivity expected in anthropology has not so much challenged the value of distance in anthropological research as provided a space for the researcher to redefine that distance in more personal terms and to recognize the movements within that space. I share with other anthropologists the shifting and multiple accountabilities, the blurring of the boundary between self and other, and the shifting positionality that makes anthropology both difficult and deeply rewarding on a personal level.

The second area of negotiation that has impacted this work is negotiation over the form and content of academic knowledge. Academic writing is expected to conform to certain written conventions that signal understanding and recognition of other academic writing in the field as well as contribute to academic knowledge in a particular way. In her discussion of how the authoring function impacts collaboration Morrow writes:

As the academic member of the team, I have to grapple with the expectation that my contributions to the world of “the literature” will be valued only insofar as they are original, individually “owned” insights. This creates a certain pressure toward high-risk interpretations; that is, going out on an intellectual limb to say something new or at least express myself in a unique way. [1995:43]

As an academic I am expected to contribute to academic knowledge in ways that are not only original and individually owned, but are also said in a way that is direct, specific and sometimes distancing. As a visiting President's Professor for the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Lumbee academic Bryan Brayboy spoke about his experience as an indigenous man working on his Ph.D. dissertation (1999) and arguing for the legitimacy of his way of knowing. He described how, at his after-defense party, a faculty member commented that "he sure did tell a good story," implying to Brayboy that his presentation was somehow less academic or legitimate, just a story (public presentation, September 2008). I would argue that all academic writing is story. The dissertations, books, and articles we write are all forms of storytelling, but they are prescribed by a certain style of writing that often creates a sense of distance, at least in the "serious" parts. The question is what happens when what we are signaling to academics signals something very different to another audience? A dissertation should signal a grasp of the material through reference to past academic work and through analysis of both old and new material and the creation of new academic insights. In anthropology the demonstration of knowledge in an academic way can contravene our knowledge of and ability to demonstrate knowledge in a culturally appropriate way. To Vera and others these pieces can signal something different from what academics see: a lack of respect for Vera's stories and for the form and content of Gwich'in knowledge. My negotiations with Vera over the form and content of her life story, my dissertation and our work together has always been complicated by the additional issues of academic expectations.

### 3.6 Dialogues of Knowledge

Dialogues about knowledge provide some insight into this core area of difficulty in any collaborative process; we do not all share the same ideas about what constitutes knowledge. It

is no secret that many people from other cultural traditions do not share the value of the abstract, theoretical language used by academics to produce and disseminate knowledge. While oral historians may argue that life histories do not “speak for themselves”<sup>29</sup> and that life history texts should be decoupled from the person telling the story and theorized as a “version of the self constructed by a subject and presented to the anthropologist” (Behar 1995b:151) narrators of other cultures do not share their views. Or, perhaps I should say that they do not necessarily problematize the same issues as anthropologists.

Anthropology is both a descriptive and an explanatory social science, but of late the explanatory aspects have taken precedence over description, in large part because people began to challenge their representations in ethnographies and other anthropological works. Pure description is not as easy, or pure, as we had hoped. However anthropologists respond to these challenges, problematizing representation itself does not address the central issue: not that there can be no representation, but that the representations anthropologists create may be *wrong or incomplete*. To some, including feminist anthropologists, it seemed highly suspicious that when so many groups began engaging in “nationalisms” which involve their own redefinitions that doubt arose in the academy about the nature of the “subject,” about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, and about historical “progress.”

Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes “problematic”? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world,

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Young, for example, comments that life history texts “are frequently offered as self-evident ‘cultural documents’ rather than as texts to be interrogated and interpreted” (1983:480).

uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be adequately theorized? Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of “meaningfully” organizing human society become suspect? And why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory? [Hartsock 1987:196]

To put it bluntly, it seemed as though if the establishment academics couldn't be right, then no one could be right.

Suspensions aside, however, problematizing representation did address real issues about the nature of power and hegemony, historicism, and the processual creation of culture and self, whether through practice, dialogue, or some other active medium. Problematizing representation gave anthropologists a new and fruitful area to write about, diminished or at least acknowledged the power gap inherent in traditional ethnographic writing, and has led to greater collaboration and dialogue between anthropologists and their subjects, and greater transparency in their product, but it also challenges the desire of indigenous people to create and utilize authoritative narratives of their own and fails to address some of the issues of knowledge and interpretation that led to their challenges in the first place. In a world where authoritative narrative is power, backing away from that authority may again put anthropologists at odds with the needs and desires of indigenous people.

It seems that the rest of the world, particularly in the arena of politics, did not follow anthropologists into their experimental moment. Cruikshank writes:

Changing theoretical questions led anthropologists to particular conclusions about social construction just about the time that indigenous organizations began to recognize the strategic value of using such concepts as “tradition” and

“boundedness” as a framework to present their claims to collective rights and distinctive identity. If our 1970s criticism of earlier anthropology centered on its confident assertion of objective truths, emerging preferences for deconstruction may now be viewed as offensive or even as harmful to indigenous peoples’ struggles. As disciplines like anthropology and history become more comfortable with ideas about social construction of the past, we may disappoint audiences who are asking different questions and searching for clearer depictions of history more consistent with notions of objectivity than with the apparent ethical barrenness of postmodern relativism. [Cruikshank, J. 1998:162]

As a part of my efforts to translate Vera and my dialogue about the appropriate use and interpretation of her stories I would like to call attention to two related areas where anthropologists and Gwich’in (and other native peoples) problematize different aspects of representation: one, whether or not stories need to be or can be interpreted; and two, whether such interpretation can be considered in any way knowledge.

### *3.6.1 Western Knowledge/Gwich’in Knowledge*

Much of what we write as anthropologists and academics we write for ourselves and others like us and even people of an academic bent sometimes don’t see the purpose in theoretical analysis, no matter how peripheral (or essential) it seems to the author. While I was reading Kirin Narayan’s *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* (1989) an Alaska Native friend and fellow graduate student who had also read the book came by and asked, “are you going to write like that? I hope not. Make it fun to read.” While Narayan saw her use of theory as secondary, a way to illuminate people’s lives, and not an end in itself (1989:11), my friend saw Narayan’s

use of theory as overwhelming Swamiji's stories. Another Gwich'in friend asked why I had to "say something" about what Vera said. Like Ralph Kotay (Lassiter 2001), my friends are concerned about someone saying something "above" what they or other native people have said. Kotay comments:

I'm always willing to give out information like this. But...I don't want anything else said *above* this. Some people who write books, I've read their stories where they build things up that's not there. When people don't know [any better], anytime they hear these things, they believe what you say or write.

[Lassiter 2001:137]

These concerns are significant to Gwich'in people and other "subject" populations who feel they have been analyzed to death and often in ways that have not always been accurate or helpful.

The objection, I believe, that many of the Gwich'in and other Alaska Native people I know have to "theory" is how it is used to create explanations of Gwich'in culture through generalized categories and to the arrogance of a discipline that believes an "observer with minimal familiarity with the language, culture, or attitudes of those studied capable of cogently explaining their beliefs" (Jules-Rosette 1978:550). This disconnect is particularly troubling for cultures that value direct experience such as the Gwich'in and other Northern Athabascans, who emphasize the value of knowledge derived from experience and encourage learning through direct experience and observation as opposed to direct instruction.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, descriptions of Gwich'in teaching styles in McKennan (1965:52), Scollon and Scollon (1980), and Fast (2002:149). My personal experience with this style of learning came from a sewing workshop I took with Fort Yukon elder Doris Ward who tried to teach me to make a four-strand yarn braid for my skin boots. She would demonstrate, her fingers flying through the task, and I would attempt to copy her. She became very frustrated with my inability to learn this way. I never did learn to make the braid.

Anthropologists have noted three common attributes of northern Athabascan worldview: autonomy, knowledge, and power. Most direct study of Northern Athabascan concepts of the relationships between these three attributes have been done with Eastern groups (Ridington 1968, 1982, 1988, 1990; Rushforth 1992; Scollon and Scollon 1979) with the greatest emphasis on how power is obtained through experiential knowledge. Fast's (2002) work with the Gwich'in addresses these same attributes, but with a greater emphasis on the relationship between individualism, community solidarity, and leadership.<sup>31</sup> I feel that this complex of ideas constitutes a Northern Athabascan theory about the acquisition and nature of understanding and can best be understood as an epistemology of knowledge mediating the cultural concepts of personal power and autonomy. Both personal autonomy and personal power and leadership are based on the acquisition of firsthand knowledge obtained through personal experience.

This experiential knowledge is an important aspect of identity and successful living for a Gwich'in person. Such knowledge of the material world may be gained through personal experience hunting, gathering, or some other activity while knowledge of the supernatural world and the acquisition of power are gained through dreams or other experiences with the sacred.<sup>32</sup> Primary knowledge is identified with authority and leadership both in the sense of being able to inspire belief in others and of being able to influence others. It is also associated

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<sup>31</sup> Fast believes that there are conflictual symbols of personal perfection and effective/appropriate leadership stemming from conflicting ideals. "One is a cultural ideal of individualism that directs each person to act with as much emotional, physical, and economic independence from others as possible. The other is a cultural ideal of conformity through consensus that suggests that every Athabascan somehow knows 'the' Athabascan way of thought, word, and act" (2002:138).

<sup>32</sup> Fast identifies the traditional concept of a supreme power for the Gwich'in in two interchangeable terms: *k'eegwaadhath* (translated as both "heat" and "that which gives orders") and *vit'eegwaahchy'aa* ("that on which we depend"), which many Gwich'in now equate with the Christian God. However, Gwich'in incorporate other aspects of spiritual power and the sacred not related to this supreme power as well (2002:142).

with personal power and autonomy. Thus leadership,<sup>33</sup> formal or informal, is based on a person's primary knowledge: their personal experiences. The person who assimilates primary knowledge can consume it themselves, but can pass it on only as secondary knowledge and secondary knowledge, though useful, must be legitimated experientially. In addition, this transmission of knowledge should be done in a way that preserves the personal autonomy of others by not demanding or directing a person to do or think something. Gwich'in friends who work, officially or unofficially, as counselors in the community have described their approach to me in just this way. "I don't tell them what to do. I just talk to them." Although "direct" communication is in part a matter of expectation and understanding (what is indirect to me may feel quite direct for a Gwich'in person), this type of education generally leaves room for individual interpretation. Learning is done through watching something done correctly, listening to information without questioning, and finally doing without the type of directives common in Western teaching styles.

The importance of experiential knowledge in mediating personal power and autonomy conflicts with Western concepts of understanding through detached observation and learning through secondary experience or instruction, especially as practiced by academics. Thus the discomfort engendered between the distance believed necessary for understanding by anthropologists and attempts by the studied to fully immerse the anthropologist in what they view as essential life experiences. For example, Jean-Guy Goulet (1994) argues that anthropological understanding of Dene religion is underdeveloped because the Dene

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<sup>33</sup> And here I must distinguish between true leadership – when people actually listen to you and follow what you say – from the elected leadership system now followed in community and tribal organizations. Many Gwich'in leaders do not have formal leadership positions and many in formal leadership positions have few actual followers. There has been a near total breakdown in the leadership structure as people struggle to accommodate Western political structures into the community.

epistemology requires that learning of both mundane and spiritual knowledge occur primarily through personal experience. In this case, one way of knowing says you are too close to your life experiences to fully know yourself and the other way of knowing says you cannot even approximate true knowledge unless you join in experience.

The importance of primary knowledge and how it is transmitted appropriately has implications for the practice of recording traditional stories and personal experiences in ethnographies, life histories, and other publications as well as for how Gwich'in receive these texts and the viewpoints and theories they promote. Are these recordings primary knowledge or secondary and does putting them into text form change their status as primary or secondary knowledge? I believe that Gwich'in who work with anthropologists and others are attempting to preserve their primary knowledge by recording their traditional stories and experiences. However, when other Gwich'in read these texts they may interpret them as mediated by the anthropologist and the Western theories applied as well as imposing on other's autonomy through their authoritative textuality. This is not to say that theories devised and applied by "outsiders" are of no value to Gwich'in, but the tension between the Western style of theorizing and other ways of knowing is always present and impacts how an anthropologist's work is received and understood.

## Chapter 4 Constructing the Narrative

Ethnographies and life histories are doubly voiced and doubly constructed representations:<sup>34</sup> constructed first by the group or individual as they choose what to represent to the observer through their dialogue and actions and then constructed by the researcher (or collaborators) as they decide what and how to represent textually what they have been told and seen. These representations, one of an individual's life experiences and the other of a particular groups ideas, actions, and expectations, draw upon a multitude of existing dialogues to create both a snapshot of a life or culture (in the sense that the text itself remains static) and a new voice or thread within the dialogue (in the sense that others will respond, both through conversation and writing to the text). In each case, the representation is selective and partial, with pieces selected and framed based on input from many different voices and dialogues appropriated and shaped by the researcher and storytellers/actors.

I have chosen the concept of dialogue proposed by Bakhtin because he provides both a role for the individual voice through the concept of heteroglossia and the group voice through the concept of unitary language. Combining Bakhtin's ideas about dialogue with anthropology's continuing concerns about generalizations and analogic products, Behar's concerns about how typifying narratives or frames may speak past life history narratives and Schneider's concerns that context and interpretation is essential to preserving meaning, I hope to create a life history with Vera that preserves the dialogic nature of life history production and acknowledges the various dialogues and frames that inform and engage the narrative while guiding the reader

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<sup>34</sup> There are multiple levels of constructed representations when we consider how we represent ourselves to others (to our friends vs. to our co-workers, for example) in our daily lives and these constructions are a part of, and impact the creation of ethnographies and life histories as well. These types of representations impact both levels of construction in a research project such as a life history.

towards those frames that Vera and/or I find most appropriate or helpful. Dialogics in this case is used in part as theory of discursive frames, especially how various frames impact both the creation of the life history and the reading of it and in part as a process of dialogic production, how the story teller and researcher decide which frames to employ, support, and challenge and the dialogue that leads to those decisions. What follows is a discussion of the various dialogues and frames that contributed to the development of this work starting first with dialogues from the life history genre about their construction, moving to our specific dialogue about these issues, and finally looking at the various interpretive frames that contribute to the production of the narrative and potential readings of the narrative.

#### 4.1 Dialogues: Considerations for the Life History Genre

While what constitutes a “good” life history is debateable, within the life history genre is a continuing dialogue concerning the elements and considerations necessary to create a life history and general agreement of what those are. In a life history, the narrator and writer each bring their own ideas and purposes to the project. They must make choices about what is to be represented and how that representation will be manifest in text. Each partnership is unique and produces a different dialogue and a different product, but there are certain decisions that should be made, or at least discussed, to create an effective and satisfying partnership. These decisions relate to basic, inter-related elements to representation in a life history project: audience; purpose; and textual presentation.<sup>35</sup> The element of audience is perhaps the simplest to understand, but particularly difficult to negotiate. Who is the intended audience - local people, outsiders, academics, laymen, etc. - and what information is suitable or desirable for

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<sup>35</sup> This division is somewhat similar to the text, context, and texture framework noted by Alan Dundes (1964) and discussed in relation to Alaska Native oral tradition and the oral record by Schneider (1995).

each? The element of purpose is related to the academic and lay uses of life history. Is the life history intended to represent one individual or the entire culture, one issue or topic or multiple issues and topics? Will it expand representation, commemorate a life, represent a theme, address deviance within the culture, or illustrate personal adaptation to change? Will it educate youth or preserve important cultural and personal knowledge? Decisions about audience and purpose drive decisions about the third element, textual presentation, the difficult task of translating the more fluid and ephemeral art of storytelling to the seemingly rigid finality of text.

#### *4.1.1 Audience*

The writer and narrator of a life history may have the same or different audience in mind for their collaboration. If the writer is an anthropologist, the primary target audience invariably includes anthropologists and other academics, and results in lengthy chapters about method, theory, and cultural issues that attempt, as I have done, to illuminate the processes, the scaffolding, upon which the life history has been built. Although this information is intended primarily for an academic audience, it is important for all audiences. Just as anthropologists have long treated life stories as bits of information to be stored away and uncritically applied typifying narratives as explanation, non-academic audiences do the same. Narrators may be more concerned with preserving cultural and historical knowledge both for their own people and as a way of communicating with other groups, usually those “in power.”<sup>36</sup> In considering their audience collaborators must also be cognizant of the future uses and interpretation of the

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<sup>36</sup> In Alaska, life histories produced to preserve cultural knowledge for their own people have been very popular, including the series of oral biographies published by the Yukon-Koyukuk School District beginning in the 1980s. This series commemorates the lives of important individuals in the communities as well as provides a patchwork of history that includes the perspectives of many people.

life history, what Blackman calls “the afterlife” of the life history (1992). These considerations will affect the “final” life history in many ways.

The positioning of self relative to anticipated audience(s), perceived and actual postpublication politics, and the differing cultural realities of narrator and interviewer regarding the book’s postpublication reception and application all direct, in both subtle and obvious ways, the telling and elicitation of the story.

[1992:5]

One obvious concern is the possibility that inappropriate or unflattering information might be conveyed to the narrator’s community, the outside audience, or both. The possibility of inaccurate or inappropriate information being recorded is a serious problem for Alaska Natives that collaborate on life histories, as their communities are very cognizant of what is written about them and every text becomes a part of the negotiation of meaning and power between Alaska Natives and the dominant Western culture and within the community itself.<sup>37</sup>

This issue, of what is public and what is private, what is appropriate for some groups to know or not know, requires considerable thought and negotiation, particularly in cases where the story teller is part of a community with ready access to what is written.<sup>38</sup> As the original

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<sup>37</sup> In addition, the very concept of accuracy may be called into question. As collaborator Elsie Mather responded to her co-collaborator Phyllis Morrow in a discussion on providing context for Yup’ik stories: “What is accurate information? Accurate for who? Even if an explanation is not wrong, it is not complete” (Morrow 1995:34).

<sup>38</sup> In situations where the storyteller is protected by language barriers, at least in the short term, such considerations are important, but less fraught. For example, Shostak was careful to change names to protect Nisa and Nisa herself said “don’t let the people I live with hear what I say” (1981:51), but the relatively small chance that people around her would ever be able to read the book allowed her to talk more freely and Shostak to include details that would be considered “private” in both !Kung and Western society (leading to a question about how Western definitions of what is “private” and what is “public” impact these negotiations). One of the conditions of Behar’s work with Esperanza was initially that her stories never be published in Spanish, a condition she later reversed after a priest complimented her on being the subject of a book (2003[1993]:xvi).

“audience” that listened to Vera’s stories, my interests and position within the community directly impacted Vera’s choice of stories to tell. My own interest in women’s issues, particularly gender relations, and Vera’s own interest in her role as a Gwich’in woman were neatly matched, but also focused our discussion so that Vera’s stories illuminate particular events in a particular way. In addition, my ability to “hear” between the lines is different than other audiences. As a friend and member of the community, I am privy to information from Vera that is deeply personal to herself as well as to the community and Vera is privy to such information from me. Our intimate association and sharing of stories prior to and during our “work” together adds depth to my understanding that may not be shared by future audiences, particularly non-local audiences. In turn, my own knowledge is different and shallower than Gwich’in people who have known Vera all their lives. Vera’s siblings, for example, will bring a completely different set of private and public knowledge to her stories than I do. Necessarily, some “private” information is not shared so that each audience member will experience Vera’s stories differently and those farther from Vera will experience her stories with relatively minimal background even if additional context is provided.

Within the Fort Yukon community it seems that little is truly “private” in the sense that other members of the community do not know about it. While individuals may not verbally share information with others about their situation (as Vera did not share information about her partner’s abuse at the time it was taking place) that information is often widely shared by others.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in this context “privacy” involves not “hiding” things from others, but not directly talking about them. The actors remain silent (private) while the viewers speak (public).

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<sup>39</sup> This is one reason Fast’s (2002) book was considered a “gossip” book. The information wasn’t necessarily private in the sense that others did not know about it, but in the sense that the actors did not talk about it.

When the actor or protagonist of an event does speak publically it is often to counter such talk and to correct the public community record, although this is often done through an intermediary (a friend who will give voice to the protagonist's version of the story). Thus Vera's decision to speak publically can be seen as a way to correct or establish a record about her personal story, her family's story, and recent Gwich'in history. This does not imply, however, somehow "improving" the record. Vera makes no apologies about the troubles she, her family, and her community have had. Instead, by sharing her personal experiences she hopes that others might find information that is valuable to them in their own lives.

#### *4.1.2 Purpose*

As noted above, there are many purposes that drive life history projects, including the recording of exemplary, typical, or deviant lives. The various anthropological purposes of life histories will not be reprised here. However, the question of memory and its relation to history and "truth" should be addressed as a "purpose" for life history. Life histories are often used to explore issues of self and cultural identity formation and the relationship between memory and history. Anthropologists are often concerned with determining the "truth" of what their collaborators are saying in order to use the information for anthropological purposes. For example, Shostak was initially uncomfortable with Nisa because she was not sure of the "truth" of one of the first stories she told about saving her brother from infanticide (1981:31-32). She abandons her discussions with Nisa and only goes back months later, still not sure that she can "trust" her. Krech discusses the role of memory selection in the narrator's story and the reliability of individual accounts and concludes that "the validity of any single version of historical events cannot be taken for granted. Biases are inevitable in *all* historiography" (Krech 1981:193). The difference between truth and fiction and different definitions of truth and

fiction may also be acknowledged by the narrator. In *Translated Woman* Esperanza does not believe that the audience, people in the United States, will believe her story. She jokes with Behar that her stories are lies saying, "tell me a story, even if it's a lie" (Behar 2003[1993]:16,235). Nate Shaw carefully distinguishes between the stories he told for truth and stories he told for entertainment in his life history, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Rosengarten 1974:3-4).

As with anthropological theories about culture, there has been a movement away from studying memory as bits of information to exploring memory as an individual and social process of creation. Memory both creates and challenges our histories and relates in part to the tension between Bakhtin's discussion of the tension between unifying discourse and heteroglossia. Unifying discourses, whether an officially sanctioned history, typifying narrative imposed by one group on another, or local narratives of identity all work to shape our memories and our stories, but are continually challenged, as well, by each other and by individual's appropriations and challenges to these narratives. Frisch writes:

Memory is living history, the remembered past that exists in the present. In one sense, it is a force that can be tapped, unleashed, and mobilized through oral and public history to stand as an alternative to imposed orthodoxy and officially sanctioned versions of historical reality; it is a route to a broadly distributed authority for making new sense of the past in the present. But in another way, memory is a deeply cultural artifact, manipulated in a host of direct and indirect ways, especially in an age of mass-mediation, to reproduce culturally appropriate attitudes and behaviors. [1990:xiii]

It is no longer possible, or at least fashionable, to claim that a particular history or memory is “true” and unaffected by individual and group processes and piecing together an understanding of the past and linking it to our present and future involves continual negotiation. Like oral historians and other researchers who wrestle with ways to understand multiplicity of meanings in history, Gwich’in people also struggle with establishing their own “true” account of events while acknowledging the validity of multiple interpretations. Vera is often concerned that I understand the truth of her stories (“I’m telling you the truth, Jennie”) without negating the interpretations of other community members. It is inevitable that others will remember things differently.

Another aspect of purpose is the narrator’s readiness to tell his or her story. This readiness arrives in many ways. For some, money is a consideration, for others the issue is simply posterity; establishing their own record of their culture and history. Moses Cruikshank was initially inspired by the request of his niece. However, it was not until he became more interested in preserving history that he began to work with Schneider to record his stories (Cruikshank, M. 1986:121). On the other hand, Esperanza sought out Behar herself, requesting that she become her *compadre*. Behar writes: “She chose me to hear her story and to take it back across the border to the mysterious and powerful *otro lado*” (2003[1993]:6). In addition, the writer and narrator may have different topical interests as well as divergent reasons for initiating a life history collaboration. In the case of Margaret Blackman and Florence Edenshaw Davidson, Blackman’s interest in female rituals as opposed to Davidson’s interest in the role of Christianity in her life created a different life history than might have been produced by another collaboration. In other instances it is the shared interest between researcher and narrator that brings them together (Mohatt and Eagle Elk 2000; Mulcahy 2001).

### 4.1.3 Textualization

Decisions about audience and purpose drive choices in the editing process. How much editing should be done? Should the narrative be sculpted into a linear “history” in the Western model or use some other organizational framework?<sup>40</sup> How does textualization change the nature of the narration and how can we better understand the processes of textualization? How the narrative is edited and put on the page will determine whether your intended audience understands and whether your purpose is achieved. On one level this is a question about the lost nuances of live performance. Communication and storytelling is more than words: pauses, gestures, facial expressions, and changes in intonation all make meaning in a story. Context is also important: immediate audience members impact a telling through their own knowledge or lack of knowledge, their responses, and their interests and needs. Turning an oral narrative into text immediately loses a certain amount of information.<sup>41</sup> However, placing narrative into text also provides an opportunity to add cultural and historical information that a listener may not have access to.

Questions about textualization also involve questions of “cultural appropriateness.”

Arnold Krupat (1985) believes that the life history has no antecedents in Native American

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<sup>40</sup> For example, in *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990) Julie Cruikshank organizes her collaborator’s narratives using both a linear life history approach and what she felt was the approach her narrators were using, telling traditional narratives to provide the necessary scaffolding for understanding, by interspersing the traditional narratives into the most appropriate section of the life history.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Rosengarten writes of his work with Shaw:

There is something lost and something gained in the transformation of these oral stories to written literature. Their publication marks the end of a long process of creation and re-creation and removes them from the orbit of the storyteller. His gestures, mimicries, and intonations – all the devices of his performance – are lost. No exclamation point can take the place of a thunderous slap on the knee. The stories, however, are saved, and Nate Shaw’s “life” will get a hearing beyond his settlement and century. [1974:xxiv]

This consideration is more important to some collaborations, less important to others, depending on the purposes and nature of the storyteller. For Rosengarten and many narrators the trade is worth making.

cultures and could only arise through contact with the West. Phyllis Morrow (1995) draws a similar conclusion about the recording of stories from her work in Alaska, particularly in collaboration with the Yup'ik. Like Foucault (1984), she sees the "authoring function" as a particularly Western cultural institution and one that does not fit with the traditional narrative styles of Native Americans (1995:31). In Yup'ik culture, telling stories that others already know signals the authenticity and authority of the story. At the same time, the meaning of a story is not fixed, and cannot be gained at once, but over a lifetime (Morrow 1995:33). The authoring function of texts limits the proliferation of meaning in the culture while at the same time fixing the "official" meaning in the culture. It trades the craft of the storyteller for the craft of the writer. Thus, an important concern for placing oral narrative into text is the possible fixing of meaning in ways that are culturally inappropriate. On the other hand, some narrators and storytellers may wish to "fix" the meaning of their story in relation to other community members and outsiders.

#### 4.2 The Collaboration

To create this project, Vera and I needed to come to some mutual understanding about the elements discussed above. In some ways this was easy, facilitated by our friendship. But in some ways reaching that mutual agreement was more difficult, and even complicated by our friendship and my relationship to the Yukon Flats community. This section explores the dialogue of our collaboration as it relates to audience, purpose, and textualization.

##### *4.2.1 Collaboration: Audience*

Vera is open to reaching the broadest possible audience, stating that "If anyone can use what I'm saying, they're welcome to read it, to further their education." However, she also has a target audience in mind and she has attempted to create a story that will reach this specific

audience in particular ways. Not surprisingly, the audience she is speaking to directly include her family, her friends, young Gwich'in, and other Native people. Regarding her family, she said, "for my brothers and sisters and our children, I want them to be proud of where they came from. I want them to know. Oh, some will say this and that and that's ok. What I said is what happened in my life and I want to be respected for that." Academics are not a primary audience for Vera,<sup>42</sup> but she knows that they will read her story and hopes that it might help academics better understand the people they write about. All in all, while Vera knows that different people will read her stories differently, she is comfortable with sharing what is hers to share: *her* experiences.

I have three primary audiences in mind. First, there is my dissertation committee who must accept this project in order for me to complete my doctorate. By extension, then, my primary audience is anthropologists, oral historians, and other academics with an interest in culture and life history. My second primary audience is, in fact Vera, and by extension my friends and family in Fort Yukon. And third, there is an additional public audience of other Alaska Natives, indigenous peoples, and communities. For me, negotiating the needs and expectations of these audiences has been difficult due to very different ideas about knowledge held by each audience. As I noted previously, Gwich'in and other much studied populations often do not appreciate having theories and interpretations based on another culture's ideas and ideals applied to them. The academic disciplines of anthropology and oral history require a theoretical framework and a certain amount of explanation. I have been very much concerned that in

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<sup>42</sup> One might say that since Vera told her stories to me, an academic, that academics are part of her primary audience. I would argue, however, that my roles as an academic for Vera is to use my skills to put her stories on paper in a way that will best reach her intended audience, not to reach an academic audience. What I do with the stories as an academic and how other academics read her stories is secondary to her.

satisfying one audience I would not only not satisfy the other, but would offend them. One way I have handled this is by trying to include Vera's perspective in my interpretations and realizing, as Vera has done, that some people "will say this and that" and I will not satisfy every reader. However, by addressing the disparate expectations of these audiences through dialogue I hope to provide a way to negotiate meaning that moves beyond the immediate negotiation of the storyteller and writer to engage each audience member in their own negotiation of meaning with us, with the text, and with each other.

#### *4.2.2 Collaboration: Purpose*

Vera and I have different, but I believe complementary, intentions for this work. These have changed somewhat over time due to our changing relationship and interests. For Vera, her initial motivation was to record some of what she learned from her grandmothers, particularly her maternal grandmother. For me, the initial choice of topic came from a desire to fill in the gender gap in the anthropological record generally and in Gwich'in culture specifically. Over our lengthy association these motivations have remained, but been refined and defined by our discussions and life events. Sometimes it is not until you start talking that you know what you really want to say.

Vera has refined her purposes for this project to two, both educational, both aimed primarily at a young Gwich'in audience and extending to other Alaska Native and indigenous peoples, but with a different emphasis. The first is a lesson in the strength of Gwich'in culture and how that strength can be expressed and utilized by the individual to meet life's challenges. The second is a cautionary lesson about the perils of substance abuse. In particular, Vera wants to help young Gwich'in girls understand their role as Gwich'in women by sharing her own

experiences, successes, and mistakes. In this comment Vera addresses an important part of the knowledge she is trying to pass on:

*We struggle with drugs and alcohol, even myself. I truly think that's the main problem. I'm not trying to hurt anybody, but it's true, not only for Gwich'in people, but all over the world. Those kinds of stuff should be put in here because of education. Young mothers need to know about this kind of stuff: about FAS and FAE and how it affects our kids. We need parenting classes for the young people today so they can learn.*

Vera frequently takes the role of unofficial counselor or advisor and this work can be seen as an extension of that role. She intends her stories to both instill pride in the strength and power of Gwich'in culture to meet life's challenges and show her chosen pathway through life for others to potentially learn from. Finally, Vera is motivated by a desire to establish a formal record of her story and her feelings about her own culture and to assert her voice as a woman and as Gwich'in.<sup>43</sup> She seeks to correct anthropological and other writings on the Gwich'in in the public arena, but to also address local dialogues about Gwich'in women and Gwich'in cultural identity as it has developed over her lifetime.

Although I continue to have an interest in women's culture, my original purpose of expanding the representation of Gwich'in women has been somewhat modified by a recognition of the lack of current work with Gwich'in men. While previous anthropological works certainly neglected women's culture and issues, current works are more female focused (and produced),

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<sup>43</sup> Aron Crowell writes of the "rightful reclamation of Yupik heritage and historical voice" in his discussion of Estelle Oozevaseuk's retelling of the story of St. Lawrence Island's famine and epidemic 1879/80 (Crowell and Oozevaseuk 2008:58). The Kukulek narrative, unlike Western histories, emphasizes the why over the how of the events it describes and Mrs. Oozevaseuk's retellings publically challenge Western historical accounts as the private retellings over the last century have resisted Western descriptions of their people as "improvident" and "degraded."

leaving the modern male Gwich'in experience under-represented. I am primarily interested in understanding how Vera creates her identity through dialogues with me and others and uses her stories to help others understand their own experiences. Telling stories is a traditional way of educating people in Gwich'in culture. It is through these stories that people form an understanding of who they are as Gwich'in as well as learn specific skills. As a frequent recipient of these teaching moments over the past 15 or so years, I have long been interested in the disconnect between this non-directed way of educating and the more pointed and directional approach Western culture takes, including the relatively recent bombardment of popular culture. One purpose in this work is to explore, through Vera's stories and her use of stories, how meaning is negotiated, particularly in the areas of personal and cultural identity.

#### *4.2.3 Collaboration: Text*

Another theoretical interest involves the use of dialogic theories of culture and personal identity creation and representation to frame both the process and the product of Vera and my project. As discussed previously, I believe that Bakhtin's notion of the heteroglossia of language through time and space is particularly helpful in understanding how life history narrators might use their stories in performance and text to enter into broader cultural and cross-cultural conversations. Each utterance, oral or textual, enters into a stream of "'languages' of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981:291). Life histories generally bring a number of "languages" or "dialogues" together; conversations among anthropologists, between anthropologists and the people they study, among members of a culture, to name a few. My intention was to produce a work that transparently reflected the dialogic process of the project by limiting the editing process that creates the linear and smooth narratives of the traditional life history. Instead, I hoped to leave Vera's narrative substantially untouched to show more of our dialogue and the

process of negotiation over meaning. The process that Vera and I undertook to produce a final product, however, showed that a dialogic process does not guarantee a dialogic product, nor should it if such a product does not suit the authors' purposes.

Vera and I have conducted 18 interviews, varying from a half hour to 3 hours in length depending on how we were feeling on that particular day. Most of the interviews were conducted at my kitchen table in Fort Yukon, always drinking tea and occasionally enjoying a meal.<sup>44</sup> These interviews were originally transcribed with careful attention to Vera's emphases and verbal mannerisms. In my first editing attempt I kept the original order of discussions intact even when some stories were repeated and while I removed disfluencies such as "um" and "er," I left the majority of repetitions and false starts in place. Vera's ability to mimic voices is a great part of her storytelling; aural imagery is most difficult to convey in text and this work is limited in its ability to convey the immediacy and vibrancy of Vera's experiences. However, I hoped that for those who know Vera the stories could be "read" in Vera's voice. This draft was used for Vera and my first joint editing session. Prior to that session I marked areas of concern, whether due to the personal nature of the information, its completeness or fit with the story, or accuracy (particularly in Gwich'in spelling)<sup>45</sup> and Vera and I spent two days reviewing the transcripts. Vera eliminated some information, again, either due to its personal nature in relation to other people and/or it just didn't fit ("Just take it out. No use, heh?"). However, in trying to create a "story" we also lost some important aspects of Vera's life that change how the reader might perceive her narrative: specifically we eliminated most discussions of politics and her work

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<sup>44</sup> My kitchen table is frequently the site of Vera's storytelling. When I lived full-time in Fort Yukon we had Scrabble games at my house nearly every weekend and I still host games when I return to visit. The games were attended by a few "regulars," and occasionally other local players and visitors. Scrabble is a very popular game among Gwich'in women.

<sup>45</sup> Gwich'in linguist Kathy Sikorski assisted with my Gwich'in transcriptions.

history where it did not fit with the flow of the narrative. Although we did not use pseudonyms Vera did remove some names and replace them with appropriate relationship terms. In other cases she removed last names and in others retained the full name if it had been in the original transcript. Vera also corrected or elaborated in some areas either through dictating sentences to me or, in the case of longer entries, with the use of the recorder.

I then re-edited the transcripts for readability, eliminating more false starts and repetitions, but still attempting to retain the character of Vera's speaking voice. I also reordered certain sections, with the exception of the first two interviews, which I left to more fully reflect the conversational style of most of our interviews as well as provide a relatively unfiltered picture of Vera's sense of her own identity and history. Many of the themes introduced in the first two interviews were more deeply explored in later interviews. After more conversation with my committee I re-edited the transcripts again for even greater readability, including integrating the first two interviews so that there was less repetition. However, I continued to retain most of Vera's original speech, including "mistakes" in grammar as well as my own comments and questions.

It was at this point that Vera and I discovered that we had different ideas of what the final product should look like. Vera was disappointed in what I had done, or, more accurately, by what I had not done. She wanted a product that was "perfect" as a piece of writing. She wanted much more editing. She was concerned that future generations would not understand her or take her seriously if her stories were maintained in their oral form transcribed into text, but not into a written story that flowed smoothly (and linearly) and followed standard English pronunciation and grammar. "Later on in the future they won't know what I'm talking about." Like Schneider (1995), Vera is concerned that simply presenting a transcript of her oral telling

will not be understood by future generations that do not have the context to hear her voice through the text. By focusing on analyzing the dialogic process and producing a dialogic product I felt that I was being more respectful of Vera and not writing over her. Vera felt that I was not doing my job in our partnership: to turn her oral stories into written stories.

I was initially upset that my plan for a gloriously dialogic life history was stymied, but it only took one evening for me to decide that my concerns about power and representation were best served by a dialogic process, not a dialogic product. If Vera could not determine how she was to be represented then I may as well be writing a novel: fully dialogic, according to Bakhtin, but produced without dialogue. So I called Vera again to set a timetable for further editing. In the meantime she had also spoken to her sister, who assured her that oral history projects were not expected to be written like a biography. I explained that I was trying to be respectful and she explained that she was trying to be better understood in the future. We tackled the transcriptions again, partly together and partly separately. After editing 10 pages together, Vera took the rest home to make what she considered the most necessary changes. This process was very difficult for her. Vera is fully literate, but not an "editor." However, through her own editing she was finally able to make it clear to me how she wanted her story to "read:" what types of language she wanted changed or removed and how she wanted topics organized. I was then tasked with making additional refinements, eliminating repetitions, false starts, and any grammar "mistakes" that are not part of Vera's normal speech pattern.<sup>46</sup> We settled on creating a series of stories, each with a primary topic, and arranged in a semi-historical way. This necessitated some moving around of certain stories and eliminated many of the repetitions

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<sup>46</sup> However, attempting to "correct" every aspect of the grammar made the text sound stilted and unnatural so I tried to maintain a balance between readability and Vera's oral presentation.

that bothered her. In addition, we chose to include certain historical, genealogical, and cultural information in short introductions to each story.

Gwich'in culture was a culture of "primary orality" and in some ways the transition from primary orality to secondary orality is still in progress.<sup>47</sup> Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981; 1984) believe that Alaskan Athabascans experience literacy as "a crisis in ethnic identity" (1981:58) because the authoritative nature of texts is inappropriate to traditional Athabascan discourse and that reading requires them to sacrifice their right to participate in "sensemaking." However, literacy also holds a special place in Gwich'in culture because of the early translations of the Bible, Hymnal, and Book of Common Prayer into Takudh, a Gwich'in dialect, by Anglican Archdeacon Robert McDonald. Through these early translations and their continuing use in Gwich'in religious life, literacy as a tool for preserving and passing on information has gained an important place in Gwich'in culture. The use of writing, either through Gwich'in oral literature (produced through collaboration between a teller and a writer) such as Belle Herbert's *Shandaa: In My Lifetime* (1982) and Richard Martin's *K'aiiroondak: Behind the Willows* (1993) or Gwich'in literature (produced directly by a Gwich'in author) such as Katherine Peter's work, including *Neets'qjj Gwindaii: Living in the Chandalar Country* (1992) and *Khehkwaii Zheh Gwiich'i': Living in the Chief's House* (2001) and Velma Wallis' work, *Two Old Women* (1993), *Bird Girl and the Man Who Followed the Sun* (1996), and *Raising Ourselves* (2002), has become an accepted form of personal presentation, cultural preservation, and knowledge transmission. These works and others like them constitute a tradition of Gwich'in literature and provide a model for other

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<sup>47</sup> The terms "primary orality" and "secondary orality" come from Walter Ong (1982). Primary orality is "the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" while secondary orality is the orality "of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (Ong 1982:11).

Gwich'in with literary aspirations, whether through a life history collaboration or self-authorship. Thus, Vera, while not herself a "writer" or "editor," is very aware of literary conventions, including Gwich'in literary conventions, and has definite ideas about how literacy should be used to translate and preserve Gwich'in ideas, including how to present her stories for maximum understandability while also allowing for individuals to make their own meaning from how her stories relate to their personal experiences.<sup>48</sup>

For Vera, a more crafted approach to her story is appropriate. As a reader of Gwich'in oral literature and Gwich'in literature she is aware of how written language is being used to preserve and transmit Gwich'in culture to young people and she wants her work to fit into this new tradition. She wants it to be presented in a way that encourages reading by drawing the reader into and through the story and enhances the reader's understanding of her experiences. Vera wants her story to provoke a certain type of response, a particular dialogue, and she understands that there is a difference between a conversation between individuals or a small group, where her stories are usually shared, and a larger audience that may not be able to directly respond or ask questions. In short, Vera prefers a more "traditional" oral history product. For my purposes, a less crafted approach is preferred where the lumpy, bumpy texture of a conversation, the presentation of stories, their ordering, repetitions, false starts, and etc. are maintained. Thus I have tried to help Vera craft a "story" out of her stories, but also

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<sup>48</sup> Elsie Mather explores similar issues in "With a Vision Beyond Our Immediate Needs" (1995) where she writes about the issues surrounding literacy and preserving Yup'ik cultural knowledge. Like Vera, she sees a role for literacy and literature based on a cultural approach.

It is an awesome task, this recording of our way of life and our values. We must be preservers not only of the past but also of the here and now for the future – like our ancestors with the Bladder Festival. They preserved the culture, and by putting the bladders of hunted animals back into the water, they provided for the future. They did this not only to help themselves in the next hunting season but, I suspect, with a view that those animals would continue to come to them for all time to come. So we must also treat our oral literature in the same way as we write it down. [1995:25]

maintain reminders of the texture of our conversations, in particular my presence and the setting of our sessions, to remind the reader that these were conversations that took place with a particular person in a particular place and time and that these stories have been told before and will be told again in different places, to different people, and with different purposes in mind. In writing for multiple audiences we must take into account how our different readers will interpret and follow the literary signposts of her written narrative.

## Chapter 5 A Brief History of Ethnographic Research among the Gwich'in

The first likely recorded Euroamerican contact with the Gwich'in was in 1898 when Alexander Mackenzie's party encountered several families fishing along what is now known as the Mackenzie River. Mackenzie's (1971[1801]) account includes limited descriptions of the people he called "Quarrelers" who are presumed to be of the Eastern Gwich'in (Osgood 1936a:17). Since that time numerous accounts from missionaries, including Robert McDonald (n.d.), Emile Petitot (1976[1876]), and William Kirkby<sup>49</sup> (1865), traders, including Alexander Murray's (1910) 1847-1848 journal on the founding of Fort Yukon, and anthropologists, including Cornelius Osgood (1936a) and Robert McKennan (1965; 2006). These accounts and many others, although not all ethnographic in nature, have contributed to ethnographic information about the Gwich'in and are a continuing piece of the dialogue about Gwich'in culture and history, although the majority of these works are not themselves dialogic and Gwich'in people were not formally invited to engage in dialogue with them.

Broadly speaking, there are six areas of concentration or interests that run through Gwich'in ethnographic publications; language; land use and economy; social change; ethnohistory; community based research and self-documentation; and "special topics" such as music. In this section I explore some of these accounts using a combination of chronological and topical organization to understand how Gwich'in people and culture have been perceived and described over time. It is important to remember that each account highlights certain information at the expense of others. I liken reading ethnographic and other accounts of a culture to peering through a veil or curtain: one must try to understand what is missing or altered based on your own experience, your understanding of the time period, and how each

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<sup>49</sup> The Reverend William Kirkby's name was misspelled in publication and is cited under "Kirby."

piece of information fits or does not fit into the picture. It is not an exact science by any means. In addition, much of the early work falls squarely into the monologic traditions of ethnographic writing.

### 5.1 The Generalists

Early writing by traders, missionaries, and anthropologists, was general in nature and addressed such topics as language, material and social culture, and band organization. The first substantive writing published on Gwich'in culture was Alexander Murray's *Journal of the Yukon, 1847-48* (1910). Murray's journal<sup>50</sup> provides information on western Gwich'in immediately post-contact including descriptions of the language and limited vocabulary lists, descriptions and drawings of native dress and personal adornment, physical culture, inter-tribal conflict, trade practices and preferences, and gender roles and status. Murray's tone is generally descriptive, but includes culturally based judgments and language, concluding his most extensive description of the people with, "I suppose I have said enough about these Barbarians" (1910:89). Most interesting, from the point of an anthropologist interested in gender relations, is his description of gender roles and the treatment of women, remarking on their hard work, the jealousy of the men, but also on their kindly treatment: "I have even seen the men carry them from the canoes to where the ground was dry for fear of having their feet wet" (1910:86). This balanced description departs greatly from later descriptions by Hudson's Bay Company post managers William Hardisty (1867) and Strachan Jones (1867). Hardisty (1867:312) describes Gwich'in women as "literally beasts of burden to their lords and masters" and Jones writes that "the treatment of women by their husbands is very bad; they are, in fact, little better than slaves" (1867:325). Osgood (1936a:112-113) disputes accounts of this nature; blaming them on a

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<sup>50</sup> Termed "proto-ethnography" by Slobodin (1981).

misunderstanding of the economic system and on the sentimentalism of white men living without women.<sup>51</sup>

Hardisty's and Jones' accounts, as well as Reverend Kirkby's (Kirby 1865), may have been influenced by Morgan's kinship systems questionnaire (Slobodin 1981:532). All three are accounts from the same time period (Kirkby visited the region in 1861), published in the Smithsonian Institution's reports, and include basic ethnographic and kinship data, along with a healthy dose of shock over the "savagery" they encountered. Additional descriptions can be found in Frederick Schwatka's *Report of a Military Reconnaissance in Alaska, made in 1883* (1885) and descriptions and illustrations can be found in Frederick Whymper's *Travel and Adventure in the Territory of Alaska* (1869). While these early writings add some details, it is Murray's account that provides the early foundation for descriptions of several of the themes common in research on the Gwich'in, particularly land use and economy, and social customs and organization.

The earliest modern ethnography of the Gwich'in is Osgood's *Contributions to the Ethnography of the Kutchin* (1936a). Osgood was instrumental in establishing the distribution

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<sup>51</sup> Only two Northern Athabascan cultures have been described as having an extremely low status for women: the Chipewyan and the Gwich'in. Samuel Hearne, an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, described the Chipewyan women he encountered as being of extremely low status and at the mercy of their husbands (Hearne 1911:144). The case of the Chipewyan as described by Hearne played a part in an exchange between Eleanor Leacock and Ronald Cohen regarding the pre-contact status of women. Leacock argues that the pre-contact status of women cannot be understood without taking into account the incorporation of traditional societies into "world economic and political systems that oppress women," selectivity of research questions, and an understanding of the nature of autonomy in egalitarian societies (Leacock 1978:247). Cohen uses Hearne's report to suggest that the Chipewyan he encountered were not influenced by outside contact and that the low status of women was already a part of pre-contact egalitarian societies (Leacock 1978:257-259).

Looking at the case of the Chipewyan as well as the Gwich'in, Richard Perry (1979) supports Leacock's position and attributes the contrast between the treatment of women among these groups and other Northern Athabascan cultures to specific developments from the fur trade. He suggests that the extremely low status of women reported by Hearne and others was "not an example of an undisturbed aboriginal pattern but the result of developments set in motion by the introduction of the fur trade, in combination with certain traditional orientations" (1979:364-365). For the Gwich'in, Perry believes that the contrasting reports on the status of women are due to the different time periods in which the reports were made: before, after, or at the peak of the fur trade.

and tribal designations of Northern Athabascan groups (1936b) and did work among the Dena'ina/Tanaina (1937) and the Deg Hitan/Ingalik (1940; 1958; 1959). His fieldwork among the Gwich'in was in the summer of 1932. Although Robert McKennan's work on the Chandalar Gwich'in (1965) was published much later, McKennan did fieldwork nearly contemporaneously with Osgood, in the summer of 1933. Both Osgood and McKennan reflect the emphasis on cultural categories and comparisons common during their time, finding perhaps its fullest expression in Murdoch's Cross-Cultural Survey, which ultimately developed into the Human Relation Area Files. Osgood in particular categorizes and indexes Gwich'in physical and social cultural traits. In addition to his cultural descriptions, McKennan was also collecting body measurements and blood samples from the Gwich'in he met. This information is not included in his ethnography, but again, reflects the interests and objectives that informed his research among the Gwich'in. Both Osgood and McKennan provide exemplary traditional ethnographic material, descriptive, categorical, and generalized, but probably as thorough as possible given the limited time each spent in the field. In addition, McKennan's field notes, recently published (2006), provide insight into both how he conducted his fieldwork and how he decided how to present the material. Vera has said that her family was unwilling to share information with McKennan and he writes frequently in his journal of his difficulties with the Roberts family (2006:205, 207, 212). The Jimmie Robert McKennan mentioned is likely Vera's grandfather, James.

## 5.2 Language

In the area of language Reverend (later Archdeacon) Robert McDonald is the most influential early chronicler of the Gwich'in. McDonald first arrived in Fort Yukon in 1862 and travelled extensively throughout both Alaskan and Canadian Gwich'in territory. He is

remembered primarily for developing a syllabarium, writing *A Grammar of the Takudh Language* (1972[1911]) and translating the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and a Hymnal into Takudh, a now extinct dialect of Gwich'in. Since McDonald's time a modern writing system was developed by Richard Mueller, a linguist and Bible translator with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which was adapted by the Yukon Native Language Center in the 1970s. A similar modern writing system is used by the Alaska Native Language Center. In addition to his translation work, McDonald left journals of his lifetime among the Gwich'in. Although these journals primarily include descriptions of his work providing missionary services to the people, they also include some ethnohistorical gems such as this report of a discussion with Shahnyaati', whom he had previously convinced to give up his multiple wives. "Had a talk with Sahnyati. He says that he had not taken back the women he put away, but that he merely provides for them on account of the children he has by them" (n.d.:26). Sophie Paul of Fort Yukon recounts a similar story to Schneider (1976:326). McDonald's early work in developing Gwich'in literacy has had a profound effect on how Gwich'in see the role of literacy in preserving and transmitting their culture.

Additional early work on the Gwich'in language includes that done by Emile Petitot (1876) and Edward Sapir's work with John Fredson, some of which was retranscribed by Katherine Peter and published by the Alaska Native Language Center (Fredson and Sapir 1982). Both the Yukon Native Language Center and the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) continue to do work in the language, much of it centered on developing educational materials such as the Gwich'in Junior Dictionary (Peter, K. 1979). Vera and Mary Fields worked with linguist Tupou Pulu in the early 1980s to develop language materials for the Yukon Flats School District, including illustrated picture books such as *Łuk/Fish* (Pulu, Fields, and Englishoe 1983). People

outside of academics have also done work on the language: Virginia and Clarence Alexander compiled and self-published a Gwich'in to English Dictionary in 2005 (Alexander and Alexander 2005).

### 5.3 Land Use and Economy

There have been a number works focused on human ecology, economics, and subsistence, frequently with an emphasis on economic planning for the region and produced by and/or for the State of Alaska. Dimitri Shimkin's *Fort Yukon, Alaska: An Essay in Human Ecology I* (1951) is a survey of the resource patterns and development issues affecting Fort Yukon in 1949. *The Economy of a Trapping Center: the Case of Fort Yukon, Alaska* (1955), based on the same research, provides a more detailed look at the actual mixed subsistence/cash economy of the region. Shimkin paints a grimmer picture of the economics of the region than Vera, who was born shortly before his fieldwork, recounts. Regardless of interpretation, Shimkin's work provides important details about land and resource use in the area. Additional work in this vein includes a Yukon-Porcupine Regional Planning Study (The Agricultural Experimental Station and The Institute of Social and Economic Research 1978) done for the U.S. Forest Service that proposed development options for the region and looked at various demographic and social data for the region including income, health, and participation in the subsistence and wage economies. Richard Caulfield's *Subsistence Land Use in Upper Yukon Porcupine Communities, Alaska* (1983) addresses a similar topic, but with an emphasis on subsistence and community land use in the area. Frederick Hadleigh-West's Ph.D. dissertation (1963) provides a detailed look at the Chandalar/Neetsajj region including the people, flora, fauna, geology, and climate and their inter-relations. Hadleigh-West's work is scholarly in nature and, unlike the previously mentioned work, not intended to promote or suggest government policy.

Another anthropological work, Richard Nelson's *Hunters of the Northern Forest* (1986[1973]), fits somewhat into this category, as it considers the subsistence and survival techniques used by the Gwich'in of Chalkytsik. Nelson's work might also fit into the category of a study of social change, particularly had he not chosen to remove the last two chapters of the first edition (published in 1973) that included discussions of cultural change and what initially appeared to Nelson as a "lack of commitment to their own culture" (1986[1973]:283). Nelson removed the section in subsequent editions and goes on to argue for the value of purely descriptive ethnography over theoretical work.

#### 5.4 Social Change

Also in the area of social change research are Asen Balikci's study of Crow Flats Gwich'in social change (1963) and Fast's (2002) work on Athabascan women. Balikci's account is an unremitting listing of social dysfunctions. While very little that he reports seems implausible, the total lack of redeeming and positive social interactions seems highly unlikely. In addition to the use of alcohol, lack of ambition or work ethic in the young, and difficult gender and generational relations, Balikci comments on the overall "suspicion, hypocrisy, hostility, jealousy and hate" that characterize ingroup relations (Balikci 1963:134). While again, Balikci generalizations appear vastly overdrawn, the issue of social anxiety, including jealousy in gender relations, is one that both anthropologists and local people note. Slobodin explores the topic at length in "Some Social Functions of Kutchin Anxiety," concluding that "There is a drawing together of people and a reinforcement of communal bonds even while, in some respects, mutual distrust is evidenced and social distance is emphasized" (1960:124). Slobodin's work with the Gwich'in also includes study of Gwich'in social organization and leadership, primarily with the eastern Gwich'in (1969; 1962).

Similar to Balikci's work is Frank Alexander's *Contemporary Fort Yukon Culture* (1971), which looks at Fort Yukon culture as it was in 1971, finding similar issues with social interactions fueled by alcohol. Carolyn Peter, a long-time school teacher and resident of Fort Yukon took a different tact in her Master's dissertation, focusing on resilience and how people cope with loss and grief (Peter, C. 1988). Many of the stories and comments of the participants in her project are similar to Vera's experiences and advice, including concerns about how children are being raised and cared for and important Gwich'in prescriptions for survival: keep working, keep talking, keep going. Finally, Alice S. Walker's *The Acculturation of Alaskan Natives in the public school at Fort Yukon, Alaska* (1958) provides a glimpse of school performance for Fort Yukon students between 1956 and 1958. Although Vera was unlikely to have been at the Fort Yukon school during this time, Walker's findings show the other side of Vera's early school experiences, noting that students at the BIA school with low English skills had more difficulty and that disruptions in teaching staff and larger class sizes had negative results – something the Yukon Flats School District continues to struggle with.

### 5.5 Ethnohistory

Ethnohistorical work among the eastern Gwich'in has been done by Shepard Krech in the areas of historic trapping patterns (1976), interethnic relations (1979a), and demography (1978; 1979b), focusing on how the fur trade impacted Gwich'in culture and land use. One theme within ethnohistoric research in this area has been identifying the full extent of Gwich'in bands and their territories pre-contact. Krech's (1979b) paper on Gwich'in demography suggests a tenth Gwich'in band in the east, but there is better documentation of the ninth Gwich'in band, the Di'hajj, and its demise and absorption into neighboring Koyukon and Gwich'in bands (Burch and Mishler 1995; Peter Raboff 2001). Adeline Peter Raboff's work is

particularly interesting in how it traces individuals in the region through missionary, trader, explorer, and ethnographic accounts and is useful in tracing family relationships in the early contact period.

William Schneider has also done ethnohistorical research of the area including his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on the ethnohistory of Beaver (1976) and "On the Back Slough" (1986) that explores the ethnohistory of the Interior region through its cultures, people, and historical and economic changes. Although much ethnohistoric work can be seen as documenting social change, Schneider's work focuses on adaptability and integration instead of the emphasis on negative disruptions that characterize many other works on social change.

#### 5.6 Community Based Research and Self-Documentation

As an oral historian, much of Schneider's work is in the area of collaborative oral biographies (Cruikshank, M. 1986; Bodfish 1991) and oral history projects such as Project Jukebox, a digital oral history project started in 1988 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Department. Fort Yukon was one of many communities to participate in Project Jukebox, which involved the use of photos to elicit stories from community members. The Fort Yukon project is now online through the Council of Athabascan Governments website (Oral History Department, University of Alaska Fairbank 2007). Alaska Natives have become more involved in documenting their own culture and history and this can be seen, in the case of Gwich'in, both through their involvement in Project Jukebox and the number of life stories from the area. These include collaborative life history projects such as Herbert's *Shandaa: In My Lifetime* (1982), Richard Martin's *K'aiiroondak: Behind the Willows* (1993) and Johnny and Sarah Frank's *Neerihinjik: We Traveled from Place to Place* (1995); and the autobiographical work of Katherine Peter's *Neets'qjj Gwindaii: Living in the Chandalar Country* (1992[1981]) about her

early life and marriage and *Khękwaii Zheh Gwiich'ı̄: Living in the Chief's House* (2001) about growing up in Chief Loola's household and Velma Wallis' *Raising Ourselves: A Gwich'in Coming of Age Story from the Yukon River* (2002) about her youth in Fort Yukon. Wallis has also published traditional stories for a mass audience (1993; 1996). Adeline Peter Raboff's ethnohistorical work (2001) can also be included in this section as an example of Gwich'in people documenting and analyzing their own culture and history along with Moses Gabriel's work (1993) on Gwich'in language, culture, and history (most of his unpublished work is held at the Alaska Native Language Center Archive). In the area of Gwich'in language, Katherine Peter, Lillian Garnett, and Kathy Sikorski have all been instrumental in documenting and teaching their language.

Two "special topics" must also be mentioned in any overview of ethnographic material and study of the Gwich'in: fiddle music and beadwork. The history of northern Athabascan fiddle music was most thoroughly explored in Craig Mishler's *The Crooked Stovepipe* (1993) and there are several recordings of Gwich'in music collected by Mischler in the University of Alaska Fairbanks archives. Gwich'in beadwork has been documented by Kate Duncan in *A Special Gift: the Kutchin Beadwork Tradition* (1988). Duncan explores the history of beadwork among the Gwich'in and documents the techniques and designs unique to the culture. Both fiddle music and beadwork are "introduced" traditions that Gwich'in have adopted as their own and there is great interest in documenting them.

Through time ethnographic studies of the Gwich'in have moved from general descriptions of culture based on ethnographic and lay categories to more specific topics of land use, human ecology, social organization, and social change, to ethnohistorical research produced both by anthropologists and local people with an emphasis on connecting the past

and present and exploring social change in a more holistic ways. Vera's decision to tell her own life story continues this trend.

## **Chapter 6 “Maybe an Answer is in There”: The Life Story of Vera Englishoe**

Vera Englishoe’s life spans a time in Fort Yukon and Venetie history, the latter half of the twentieth century, which has received little attention. Born June 9, 1948 at fish camp, Vera’s life story touches upon several themes that resonate with Gwich’in living in Fort Yukon and the surrounding areas including gender relations and the impact of GIs/non-Native men, the introduction of formal Western education, participation in the cash economy, the impact of tuberculosis, and the impact of alcohol and drugs. Her account also emphasizes the importance of hard work, self-sufficiency, and family support as important and positive aspects of Gwich’in culture. Hers is one voice that contributes to a community dialogue that continues to work to create a meaningful shared narrative of these experiences and, while there is commonality, the meaning of these experiences to individuals, communities, and culture is often deeply contested, both within and between generations.

### **6.1 Fort Yukon and Venetie: A Brief History of the Yukon Flats Region**

Two Gwich’in communities figure prominently in Vera’s narrative; Fort Yukon and Venetie. The community of Fort Yukon was established in June of 1847 by Alexander Hunter Murray, a trader for the Hudson Bay Company of Canada. Murray came to the location on the Yukon River by way of the Porcupine River, a route explored by Chief Trader John Bell three years prior. Russians were also in contact with people in the area and the establishment of a Canadian Trading Post in the region was fraught with the potential for conflict. The site of the new fort, approximately a mile up the Yukon River from the mouth of the Porcupine, was not a traditional village site, but was said to be utilized as a meeting place for Gwich’in in the region (Stuck 1914a). The fort quickly became the locus point for trade in the area, although as Vera’s account and historical documents illustrate, the development of permanent residency in Fort

Yukon and other villages in the region developed slowly as changes in the trapping and subsistence economy and mandatory schooling increased the time women and children, and later men, spent in the village.

The first missionary into the region was Reverend W.W. Kirkby of the Church of England who visited the post in the summer of 1861.<sup>52</sup> Much of the early development of the community was tied to the church. Archdeacon Robert McDonald, also of the Church of England, visited Fort Yukon in 1862 and a church and mission house was established in 1863. As noted previously, McDonald is well remembered as the man who translated the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Hymnal into Gwich'in (using the Takudh dialect). A mission school was also established around this time. The Church of England remained active in the region until 1895, when the American Episcopal Church established the Alaska Diocese and elected its first Bishop, Peter Trimble Rowe. Bishop Rowe visited Fort Yukon in 1896 and ordained the Gwich'in leader William Loola as lay catechist to conduct services in the village. St. Stephen's Mission was established in 1900 and a hospital was built in 1914, staffed by Dr. Grafton Burke, a medical missionary brought to Fort Yukon by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck in 1908. Although there are now two additional churches in Fort Yukon, the Baptist and the Assembly of God, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church remains a central feature of the Fort Yukon community, as it was in Vera's youth. The government eventually took over schooling in Fort Yukon with a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school for Native children operating from 1904 to 1957 (in partnership with the Mission) and a Territorial/State school for non-Native children opening in 1927. The two

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<sup>52</sup> No comprehensive history of the Yukon Flats region has been published and the early contact history of the region is not always clear. Information on Fort Yukon history can be found in a variety of sources, including Murray's journal (1910), the writings of Hudson Stuck (1914b; 1917), first Archdeacon of the Yukon, 1904 to 1920, Mackenzie's biography of John Fredson (1985), the Episcopal Church's *A Century of Faith* (1995), and Evelyn Melville's pamphlet on Fort Yukon (1949).

schools were merged in 1957 when a new school was built, but the rivalries the schools created are said to continue to influence the community, and Vera's account includes some discussion of her experiences as a student at the BIA school. Fort Yukon has two local governments, the Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Government (formerly Native Village of Fort Yukon) established under the Indian Reorganization Act in 1939 and the City of Fort Yukon, established under State Law in 1959. Fort Yukon also has a village corporation, the Gwitchyaa Zhee Corporation, established under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1972.

Venetie is located on the north side of the Chandalar River, approximately 45 miles northwest of Fort Yukon. The name "Venetie," according to Vera, was originally *Vijhtajj* in Giwch'in, meaning a place where you pass through.<sup>53</sup> Venetie was on the way from Beaver to Caro, a goldrush town established on the Chandalar in 1905 that faded to ghost town status in 1909. Venetie, previously known as Old Robert's Village or, more commonly in the literature, Chandalar Village, was established in 1895 by Old Robert (Vera's mother's paternal grandfather) due to its proximity to fish and game resources. The community gained its first school in 1937 with John Fredson as the first teacher. Fredson, with other Venetie, Arctic Village, Robert's Fish Camp (Kachick), and Christian Village residents, began advocating establishing the Venetie Reservation in 1938 and the reservation was established in 1943. The reserve was dissolved by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, but the people were given the choice to obtain their lands in fee simple title, which they chose to do, and officially received that title in 1979.

Prior to the establishment of Fort Yukon as a trading post, Gwich'in people lived in semi-permanent camps along the Yukon River and surrounding areas and hunting, fishing, trapping,

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<sup>53</sup> Clara Mackenzie identifies the name as meaning "Plenty Game Trail" (1985:155). *Tajj* is trail in Gwich'in.

and gathering were the primary economic activities. People were most certainly already participating somewhat in the fur trade, but it was not until Fort Yukon was established that people became part of the mixed economy of subsistence and commercial trapping. The traditional economic system centered around small family groups and the collective local band gave way to a system based on family centered trapping. The trapping economy flourished through the 1940s, but prices dropped in 1949 making it more difficult for families relying on trapping to bring in their cash income (Shimkin 1951:7). Vera's stories of her early life describe an economic system no longer practiced, but remembered in Fort Yukon as one that provided economic self-sufficiency and stability.<sup>54</sup> Over Vera's lifetime wage labor has become a significant factor in the local economy, and as her narrative shows, she was always able to find employment. Subsistence continues to play a significant role in the economy, but the types of opportunities to make cash have changed from the relative independence of trapping to office jobs and seasonal employment such as fire fighting and construction.

In addition, Fort Yukon's historic role as a regional hub has created a multi-band, multi-cultural community unique within the Gwich'in region. Early patterns of land use involved large territories utilized by groups of individuals. In the middle historic period (1898-1941) patterns of land use changed to reflect the different economic conditions (fur trapping) and pressures from White men coming into the country.<sup>55</sup> In addition, when the Russian American and Hudson Bay Companies were forced to vacate their posts, they were replaced by many individual traders

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<sup>54</sup> It is worth quoting Shimkin (1955:228) regarding the "trapping, hunting and fishing" economic complex in which the majority of Yukon Flats residents were participating in 1949, the year after Vera was born. "To gain a livelihood in this fashion, a household must control a trapline of 20-100 miles in length (60-200 square miles) and have access to lake and marsh areas for catching whitefish and hunting moose and muskrat." Vera's father's family trapline (great-grandfather Erick Isaac, grandfather Paul Erick, and father John Erick) is included in Shimkin's map of area traplines (1955:230).

<sup>55</sup> Prior to 1899, trapping was restricted by law to Alaska Natives. In 1899 Congress amended the Customs Act to allow non-Native trapping.

who set up trading stations along the Yukon. In addition, many prospectors came into the country. Some of them became disillusioned with prospecting and began trapping and woodcutting for the steamboats, both formerly Athabascan occupations.

In response to the increased number of trappers, both Gwich'in and non-Native trappers began to establish separate territories and individuals and their families began to be associated with specific trap lines, with Native trap lines still based on previous traditional land use patterns and, in the case of White trappers married to Native women, their wife's family's traditional area. When trapping ceased to be a full-time commitment and women and children settled into villages in order for the children to go to school, they often chose the hub community of Fort Yukon where they came to trade over a village closer to their trapping area. Thus the range of territory utilized by various Fort Yukon residents is quite large resulting in a community that lacks either band or ecological cohesiveness and this mix has social implications within the community as well. For example, although Vera has lived most of her life in Fort Yukon, she is not a tribal member. She is enrolled in the Venetie tribe. This limits, to some extent, her (and other residents in similar situations) involvement in Fort Yukon politics and community decisions.

## 6.2 Narratives about Family

*Vera Englishoe is the oldest child of John Erick of Fort Yukon and Maggie (Robert) Erick of Venetie. Here Vera tells of her own birth at her family's fish camp and the births of her 10 younger siblings. Her great-grandmother, Rachel Erick, was a traditional midwife who also had spirit power. Vera was the last child Rachel Erick delivered. In this brief introduction to her family, Vera includes a few anecdotes that bring her siblings to life and sets the stage for their*

*closeness and strength as a family through difficult times, including the untimely death of her mother in childbirth when Vera was only 17.*

My name is Vera Louise Englishoe. I was born June 9, 1948. I was born, I would say, 16 miles below Fort Yukon in the back slough and there's a little spot there, a little hill, where I was born. They call it *Vera Vatqih*.<sup>56</sup> I was delivered by my great-grandma, Rachel Erick, and I was my parent's first child. As soon as my mom got in labor my dad start paddling all the way up to Fort Yukon. It took him all night. Cliff Fairchild, he used to fly, he came and picked up my mom and me with a pontoon plane. In those days that's what they call it, but these days they call it floatplane. He pick us up and took us to Fort Yukon to the Hudson Stuck Memorial Hospital. My father, he swear to God I was five pound because in his hand, my little head was there and my little toes reaching at the elbow. So, he think I was like eighteen inches long and a little over five pound. He told me, "hey daughter, I never thought I was going to end up with such a big, huge daughter" (laughter). Boy, they had a lot of kids after that. There was eleven of us altogether.

The next one to me was another girl. Virginia Edith was born August 19, 1949. According to what my dad told me she was a healthy fat little rosy cheeks baby with lots of black hair and she was a pretty little girl. She was born in a tent in old Fort Yukon, downtown, and they took her to the hospital later. And then here comes another child. That was John Erick Jr. and we all call him Sonny. To this day it's hard for me to say John because it sounds funny. I rather say Sonny. And I don't know where he got that little turned up nose, but, he had cute little nose. I don't know how many people praise his little nose as we were growing up (laughter). He was just a handsome kid from baby until now.

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<sup>56</sup> Vera's Hill.

And there's Jimmy. His real name was James Paul Erick and he deceased December 16, 2000. He was mister know-it-all (laughs). He always try to correct me and I always tell him, "hey, I'm older than you" (laughter). He think he knows it all, but he's just a little brother. And there's Ernest Dale. He was born January 12, 1957. And, then there's Earl William. Oh, that one is a shorty boy. He even walks underneath a table.

"Where's shorty boy?" my dad used to say. "Where's my little shorty boy?"

"I'm down here," he say (laughter).

And there's Dennis Wayne and then Mildred Selina. Mildred was named after my mom's sister, Mildred, and then Selina is after my Grandma Natalie's mom. And then there's Sherry Jean. And there's Robert Oliver. And finally there's Richard Claude. Richard Claude Nagwa'in Erick. He's the last baby. My mom died 1965, October 7th with childbirth. So Richard never got to know his mother. He only know Grandma Myra.

#### 6.2.1 Mom – Maggie Erick

*Vera's mother, Maggie Roberts Erick, was born July 28, 1928. She was one of 17 children born to James and Myra Roberts of Venetie. Maggie and John Erick were married on September 8, 1947. According to Vera, her father worked for her grandfather for some time before asking if he could marry Maggie. James Roberts died two days after Maggie and John's wedding, leaving her Grandma Myra to raise the younger children alone. Vera describes her mother as stern, but loving, and emphasizes how her view as a child, that her mother was mean or too strict, has changed as she realized the important lessons her mother taught her. Vera's mother died October 7, 1965 in childbirth at age 39. Her death had a profound impact on Vera and her siblings. Vera describes the struggle she went through to keep her family together and how her concern for their welfare kept her from leaving the state.*

My mother's name is Maggie Roberts Erick. She died at 39 and she had 11 kids. We didn't have a lot of things, but I'll tell you, she made it fun for us. As long as we were all in our home, you know. But she make us work. We have chores to do every day. She look and check on us at school. Make sure we're going to school. We're doing good. We're supposed to listen. And then when we go home we have chores to do. Like me and Sonny, if it's our turn, we go out and cut wood together. We split it and bring it in. And while that my sister, Virginia, will be washing the dishes. And then another brother, like Jimmy, will be sweeping. So, we had a lot of chores and we know what to do. "Oh, it's Saturday so it's our wash day." "Sunday, it's our bath day." Thursday is our bath day too (laughs). And then we all fix our bed the night before. My mom taught us how to fix our clothes and put it by our bed so in the morning we don't have to go around looking for something to wear the last minute. She just tell us what to do and at the end she don't even have to tell us what to do. We just know it all.

And in summer time, we do the same thing. We go down to fish camp and there's a lot of work to do there, too. We pick berries, put in snares for rabbit and ground squirrel. We have to check the rabbit snares every day, otherwise the rabbit will rot. We have to do it fast and then bring it all back, skin it, clean it, either to make soup with it or to fry it. And then we do the same thing for ground squirrel. We bring it back, singe it, clean it, and then boil it up.

My mother was brought up just like how she raise us. We have to work in order for us to make a living. I mean work. She always told us, "you have to work. You can't sleep all day. You got no time to sleep all day. You got work to do." You know, that's how we were and that's how she was raised too, by my grandma and grandpa. When I was a kid I thought she was mean, you know. But she's not mean, she discipline us. My sister Virginia thinks that too. She

thinks that my mom was mean, but I told her, "Mom was never mean. She just want to discipline and make good children out of us."

So, all I know is to work. I can't sit down too long. I got to do something all the time. And that's how my mother was. Every Saturday we have to do laundry and that's what she did. And we have to take a bath, well, in those days there's no running water, you know. We got to pack our own water and then heat it on the stove and then take a bath in the washtub. She make sure we do all that. And then preparing food; got to be clean. What we're going to eat on the table. There's so many children in our family we always squeeze in, you know, but, we manage to eat what she prepare. Nothing fancy in my young life, but we pull through. I'm pretty sure many families did that. She see to it that we're clean, we ate, we sleep good, and we did our chores. That's the kind of mother I had.

But boy, one time I got smart to my mother. Sometimes I'll say, "ooh, I wish I could just move out of here." You know, I mumble a little bit. "Ooh, I can't stand this place." And one time when I was sixteen I told her, "do it yourself. If it bothers you, you do it yourself." And she turn around and she was going to hit me and I grab her arm. I just let go and I walk out. Never came back 'til one month later. I told my father, "I'm not coming back to that place." See, I thought I know it all. I thought I was old enough and could do it alone. So I stayed with Sarah and Isaac John for one month. And all I did was took care of kids there too. Babysat. Nothing new man, nothing new. So I went home and I apologize to my mother and never walked out again.

She don't want us to wear makeup, too. One time I fool around with my eyebrows and I cut it all off (laughs). I was way younger. Well, I seen a lot of my friends and neighbors wearing makeup so I try to do that too. But I don't have any makeup. All I had was the Yukon stove

where you get the charcoal so I got that and I try to make my eyebrow with it. And I try to curl my eyelash with this eyelash curler, but that rubber was gone and it cut off my eyelash. My eyelash was just short and I only had eyebrow right here at the corner and the rest was just shaved off. And I forgot about it. My parents were out to show house and I was babysitting my brothers. They were all sleepin' so I went to sleep.

Next day I woke up and its weekend, you know, and she keep lookin' at me. Cripes, what did I do now, I thought. Why is she lookin' at me like that?

And finally she say, "come here! What the heck did you do to yourself?"

"Oh, no!" I said. "I'll tell you the truth Mom. I got my dad's shaver and I was tryin' to shave it."

"I thought I always told you that it looks nice the way your eyebrow is. You don't need to pluck it. You don't need to pluck your eyebrows at all. Why you do that?"

And I said, "because, the other girls are."

"Now you don't tell me that. You don't have to copy anybody. The girls around here they don't even know how to wear makeup. Some of them are so pretty they don't even need makeup and still they put it on. They just don't need it. Well, you don't need makeup, Vera. I don't know why you have to do that" (laughs).

One of my aunties, I think it was Sarah Henry, had eyebrow pencil so she made my eyebrow for me, my mother, and then I practice. Oh, she was just mad at me. "Don't ever do stuff like that again!" And I never did (laughs). She never did wear makeup, her. So I just never bother with it. And if I do put on makeup my friends find out real fast. "Huh, you got makeup on?" (laughs).

So that's the kind of mother I had. She's pretty strict about everything. I think I had a wonderful mother. I really think so.

I'm not putting down my mother, but I was closer to my dad. I wasn't as close to my mother. I think Virginia was the one that was close to my mom. To tell you the truth, even when I got my first period, I rather tell him first than I did my mom. I was just leaning on him. He was laying down, and I was just leaning on him and I want to tell him something but I couldn't. I sat in the toilet since after school and I don't know how to word it. Finally I went inside and I sat by my dad, leaning on him. Finally I told him.

I said, "I got my period."

"What you got?" (laughter)

"I said I got my period."

"Go tell your mom."

I said, "No, you" (laughter). So I waited, so he did. She explain it to me, but she kind of explain it in a rough way, you know, just, every woman do this, every woman is like that. You know. All the woman, even me. It still didn't register I guess so I just didn't want to tell her. But, my dad did, you know.

Jennie: You didn't do any kind of seclusion or anything like that, but your aunt did, who's about your age.

Vera: Mmhmm. My auntie, I remember she had a black scarf or something and she was in a tent all by herself. Gee, it was so odd for me. And my father is totally against that. That's the part I was scared of. I thought my mom was just going to shove me in a corner in a little thing and I can't come out and all that kind of stuff. That's why I didn't want to tell her. After I told my father he said go help her and she said, "you going to stay home for one month."

And I said, "no, I'm not."

And she said, "you're not the boss," you know. "This is how they do it."

But my father said, "no, she's only going to stay home five days and then she can go back to school." And there they go, arguing, see. But, my father won. He made her understand that long time ago it was very harsh for game and they don't want nobody get bad luck, but this day, today, it's different, he keep telling her.<sup>57</sup> That's all. I didn't need to stay home for one month. I only stayed home for five days. But, my auntie had to stay home for one month. She was in a tent all by herself. We can't even go in to see her. Well, I'm goofy too, you know. I put a little stick in there and I poke her now and then (laughter).

"Ouch! I'm going to tell on you," she'd tell me and I'd say, "I don't care."

"You're foolish," I'd tell her.

She went through the whole basic of it. Not me. I just stayed home for five days and I went back to school. My mom told me that I have to take care of myself better than that now. I need to work for my money, so she let me go out and babysit. So I can make my own money to buy my personal stuff: shampoo, Kotex, and all that kind of stuff. But, she got to know where who I'm babysitting for. I learned something from her there again, see. She told me you got to earn your stuff like that.

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<sup>57</sup> Puberty rituals appear to have been disappearing among Alaskan Gwich'in at this time (1950s and 1960s) and its loss is viewed with some ambivalence. Although anthropologists tend to emphasize the "negative" purposes behind puberty and menstrual seclusion – the protection of the community from the power of female menstrual fluids – elder Northern Athabascan women's narratives emphasize the positive educational and social aspects of the puberty ritual (Carlo 1978:15-16; Cruikshank, J. 1990:98, 214-215, 314; Herbert 1982:122). Annie Ned attributes her good health to the fact that she underwent the ritual and believes that the loss has negatively impacted young girls. "All those things I did. That's why I'm old woman and still I'm good yet. Do you think these young girls going to learn something? This time they go in bush, can't get anything" (Annie Ned in Cruikshank 1990:314). Similar to Vera's experience, Poldine Carlo's Grandfather decided that she would not undergo the ritual although her grandmother asked about doing it (Carlo 1978:18-19).

Jennie: In the five days that you were home did your mom talk to you about anything?

Vera: She tried to teach me how to sew, but in the back of my mind I'm not interested. I keep telling her I'm not interested. I rather pack water or cut wood or just do other chores, you know, instead of just sitting to her and trying to sew beads because I wasn't interested in it. But she told me "just go ahead and finish this." And that's the time she taught me how to make Indian dolls. And I forgot it! Virginia, she picked it up just like that. Me, I like to perm, I like to cut hair, you know. Stuff like that just came natural for me.

My mom died October 7, 1965 with childbirth, with my baby brother Richard. I was in Arctic Village. I went up there to work and at the same time I was going to school. I was working in the kitchen as a Cook's helper and then I was going to school and I was staying with Margaret Ross. Later on she was Margaret Wiehl. Anyway, I went up before the school start. Robert, Mildred, and Sherry and the rest of the boys went with my father to Canyon Village<sup>58</sup> and she stayed in that little house in front of Myra Francis with my sister Virginia. After she had the baby they were going to move to Canyon Village.

So I work in that school kitchen as a helper. That teacher, Mr. Edgar and his wife they had seven kids and they have living quarters on one side and then that schoolroom is on the other side. You could just walk right through to their house. Margaret Ross was the main cook and she teach me how to make bread and stuff. She was a very good mentor. I learned quite a bit from her.

And me and Donna write to each other and she wanted to come up. The school needed a classroom aid too so I talk for her and she came up and she got the job. She stayed with Josie

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<sup>58</sup> Canyon Village is located on the Porcupine River and was last occupied in 1971. It is a now an abandoned village although attempts have been made over the years to revive it. The village council (not federally recognized) maintains a PO Box in Fort Yukon.

Peter and Kias Peter, that's Joanne's mom and dad. It was just a small little village, you know. Population then was about 82 people. We got this old phonograph and we play all these (sings) "my boy lollipop" you know (laughs), that kind of song and we do lot of activities with those young kids too and they really like us.

Anyway, they used to have a CB radio and somebody was calling and they said that there was a emergency for me. Murray Trelis was flying up there to pick me up: death in my family. Oh my gosh, I was just wondering what was going on then. Titus was a preacher up in Arctic and Titus is the one that told me that my mother died. That was pretty sad.

Jennie: When your mom died was she being attended by a midwife or was the hospital here?

Vera: What I heard from my sister was that they called midwives and Margaret Cadzow came. While she's getting ready my mom start hemorrhaging. The baby was born and then after that she start hemorrhaging and that's when Donald Young<sup>59</sup> was living next door and he did CPR on her but she lost too much blood.

So I came down from Arctic Village. Went down to my grandparents. Some people were drinking! I couldn't take it, you know, so I told Myra that I just don't feel happy being around them. But my father prefer that we all stay together so we slept at Grandma and Grandpa's and I hear my father just crying away during the night. How sad, you know, grieving. So after the funeral we rented a house from Stanley Jonas because they were all in Canyon Village. It was that house where Sonny and Dianne is at. That's where he had a log cabin house. So, I decide not to go back to Arctic and I got stuck with my brothers and sisters. I tried my best, you know. We were pretty poor, but along with my dad being there it was ok. My father was getting heavy on his drinking, but still he was there with us.

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<sup>59</sup> Don Young was a teacher in Fort Yukon before he was elected to Congress in 1973.

I was watching my little newborn brother and I was going to school. Come home, and then I'm taking care of him, and then I go to school. Finally I had to quit school. No choice. And here my father was reported that he's drinking too much and his kids are not really being taken care of. I was there, but they won't listen. So, I had to go to the judge and I told the judge about what's going on. I said, "you have to listen to me because I don't want us to be separated. My father doesn't want us to be separated. Why don't you give my father a chance? Just send him to Venetie where my grandma is at because there's no drinking up there." My sister Virginia was no help because she was pregnant herself so just me, me and John. So, he took my word, Magistrate Carroll. And so they gave him like seventy-two hours to make a move. So we packed up and went up. We all went up. Grandma was happy to see us.

And then whew, what a relief. When they got up there, oh, they were all happy to be up there, my brothers and sisters. From all these people heavy drinking and then all of a sudden we're just back in a place where it's so normal like, you know. And it was happiness. Big happiness. I could just see it in their eyes, my siblings. And my grandma was there. So my father did his daily thing, cutting wood to make his living, and he took care of Grandma and Grandma took care of the kids.

So I went back to Fort Yukon. I tried to go back to school, but I was already way behind. I stayed with Nina Russell. That's Lillian Garnett's sister. I felt comfortable staying with her because she was a very nice lady and she was a woman I look up to. I felt safe and comfortable there. She counseled me about life; "you're still young, you've got to think ahead. Life has to go on." So, I decide to go out in the states: to go to school. So I fixed paper and I got accepted to school in Madera, California. I was going to a beautician school. I don't know why I choose that. I still want to do it, too.

I was on my way to Fairbanks for orientation and I was supposed to meet a lady there and she's supposed to take me shopping and tell me what to expect. I was supposed to leave that night, I don't know, about seven and all of a sudden it just hit me. No, I can't leave my brothers and sisters. And I keep looking at their little faces. I was just crying away in the bathroom. I was just hysterical. I came to Fairbanks and I thought that was a big city. I felt totally lost. No, I'm not going. I want to go home. I want to go back to my brothers and sisters. No, I can't have this, I can't do it. And then I call my friend Darlene Herbert. I went to her. They were staying at that old Birch Park. "Come over," she told me. So I went over there with a Checker Cab (laughs). And I was crying with her and she say, "you don't have to go. Just stay here with us for the summer. You'll find something," she told me. But still, this lady, she said, "just stay and I'll get you a job and try it out, see what happens in Fairbanks." So I did.

That's how I end up at Cooperative Extension and that's where I work. First I work at the library and then they have no more funding so I move to Virgil Severn's office and I was working there. I did a lot of filing and office work. His secretary was really nice. I talk to her one day and here I found out she was originally from Venetie too and her name is Virginia, Virginia Dows, and she used to be Virginia Fredson. That's John Fredson's daughter. That's Lula Young's sister.

So, I got to meet her and she look at me and she said, "every time you smile at me that smile remind me of somebody." She ask me, "where you from?"

I said, "Venetie and Fort Yukon," you know.

She said, "are you related to Maggie?"

And I said, "yes, that's my mother, but she died," I told her.

"I knew that smile! I know it since the day you walked in, that smile, I seen it somewhere. So now I know. Your mom, I remember her," she said.

So, I got to work with her. You know. She taught me a lot.

All summer I work there. And Darlene and Patty Tritt were right below me at BLM. She was Patty Ketchum at that time. They both work at BLM. They were makin' these C-ration boxes. They get it ready to go out on the fire line. So, lunch time we all get together at Dairy Queen just to eat ice cream and we all meet each other right in that place. And then Patty graduated that spring and she got a car, so I got nothing to worry about. The apartment they got for me was out on Turner Street, 2011 Turner Street. And it's a big building and there was lots of people my age staying in there and they all have jobs. It's just like a training thing. They teach us how to be on our own. Oh, I liked it.

But now and then I go in the bathroom and I cry for my brothers and sisters. I wonder if they're well taken care of and all that, you know. There's no phone, just letter. So I write to my father and my father has to take it to Clara or Jessie so they can read it to him. And then he write back and he said, "I'm so happy what you're doing. Keep up with what you're doing. You need it, you're young, need to learn. Don't worry about your brothers and sisters. They're fine up here with Grandma and I." So I feel a little better, but I still miss them. All summer on weekends we go out to parties, but we don't drink. We just go out here and there and just ride around, had fun. We do that all summer. I work Monday through Friday, weekends we go out. Until the fourth of July came and I'm going to go home for the weekend. That's the plan. I came here to Fort Yukon and then I was going to go up to Venetie, but I only went as far as here. Here comes Gene, my ex Gene. I never left Gene. I never went back.

### 6.2.2 Dad – John Oliver Erick

*Vera's father, John Oliver Erick, was born December 19, 1925. He and his sister, Jessie, were born to their mother, Natalie John, prior to her marriage to Paul Erick and were not his biological children. They had several younger half-siblings, but only three lived into adulthood. Although Paul Erick provided for John and Jessie, their parentage was clearly a source of conflict and pain. Vera was particularly close to her father and describes him as loving and easy-going except when it came to defending his children.*

My dad, he was a very loving person. He always call me "my first baby." *Shichi'* means daughter in Gwich'in. He never call me by my name. Just *shichi'* 'til the day he died. And it doesn't matter if he's drinkin'. Sober or drinkin' he's the same, but he has a temper over his children. Nobody can bother his children. He fight over us, my father, with anybody.

He was a loving father to every one of us. I sometimes ask him, you know, as I'm growing up, "who's your favorite Dad?"

"There's too many of them, I forgot," he said. And then he'd say, "it was you, and then it was to Virginia, and then John, and then..." you know, down the line. "I love every one of my eleven children just like one." And that's how he kept it.

And when he comes in the house, "whose daddy am I?" he'd ask.

"Me!" we all say.

"I don't hear nobody."

And we have to scream and say, "ME!" you know (laughter). Every time when he come back from trapping he ask us, "whose daddy am I?" and we'd all say, "Me," every one of us. I just love him for that, you know.

He was really patient with us kids. When we get in trouble my mom would say, "go talk to them so it don't happen again," and my father just repeat after her, you know, "go talk to them so it..." Oh, that gets my mother mad (laughs).

"Just be easy, be easy on them, just take time, just don't get mad at them" he used to say. "Just be easy," you know.

And she'd say, "I've been easy long enough! They don't listen. They're not gonna go anywhere!" You know, on and on and on.

But my father always say, "be easy with the children. You don't need to get so mad."

He had a hard life himself. My father never went to school, you know. He was just like an orphan. My father was raise by Paul Erick and his mother is Natalie. A couple of times he was almost given away, but that didn't happen, thank God. Paul Erick was very strict and boss him around. He had to do it, though. If he don't do it who is there to do it? He won't get nothin' if he don't do his work. He won't even get food on the table. He's gonna get hungry so he gotta work for his meal.

Jennie: Was that because he was not Paul Erick's natural son?

Vera: Part of it, yeah, he pick on him a lot. According to what my dad told me, he was a slave, but he had to do it in order for him to live. He was ten years old when he has to go out and check 80 traps for my grandpa. Jessie is his oldest sister. She was 12 years old and my father was ten. They went around and check all his traps and they have to reset it too. That's a lotta work. And then they bring it back and Grandpa skin them and they have to help him. And a lotta times they're not dressed warm. That's why my father, in the eighties, he was barely walking from all the arthritis problem he had. In spring they go out and they kill all the muskrat and then they bring it back. Then they gotta skin it and then they put it on stretchers. And then

they go to town and sell those, you know, and then they come back with all the supplies. Same old thing over and over. That's what he did. "Tough life," he said. But they have to do it. That's their chores and that's how he was raised. Good many times he told us, "my candy is Bannock and piece of fish or piece of meat. Lucky to get that." Grandpa Paul Erick made a good working people out of them, but children needs love too, you know, and I don't think they had that from him. But he provided.

Jennie: Your Grandma Natalie was the one from Tanana area?

Vera: Well, she's from Circle. She's from Circle and then I heard that her mother is from Nenana or Minto and her name was Selina and her father's name was Timothy I think. She had a lot of kids and most of them died.

Jennie: So how did she and your grandfather get married? I mean, did they just decide to get married or did somebody decide they'd be a good match?<sup>60</sup>

Vera: Well they said that they pick out a man. They travel with a steamboat and she got off here and they said they got a man for her, her parents did. So that's how they did it. Introduce her to Paul Erick and next thing that was her husband. And she had my father and Jessie. I heard that word, "you dirty bastard," since I was a little girl. So when I used to get mad I'd say, "you dirty bastard," until my mother told me never to use it again. Never, it's a bad word. And I ask her what it mean she said, "it's a swearing words," you know, and she never really brought it out to me what it mean. She just told me it's a cuss word.

But later in years Jim Erick, my uncle Jim Erick is the one that told me that it means that, "your father is not really my full-blooded brother; he had a different father."

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<sup>60</sup> I knew from previous conversations that Natalie and Paul Erick's marriage was arranged and not a particularly happy union, which I believe provides insight into Natalie's character as a grandmother.

Oh gosh, I had a headache all day. I ask my father how come he look different all the time. His hair is wavy, you know, and his hair is brown, nice lookin'. And I always ask him, "how come you look different than Jim and Sarah?" And they all just ignore me and he ignore me too, my father, every time when I bring up that subject.

And then he told me, "I'm just a dirty bastard, ok!" he just told me.

So there's that word again.

"John, you don't have to put it that way," my mother said. "Tell her."

"Go ask your grandma," he tell me so I went up and ask my grandma.

My grandma said go back down and ask your dad (laughs). All over.

Finally that's when my father said, "I'm just a dirty bastard, ok!" he just told me. But still, it don't register.

Finally my father say, "go back up and you tell your grandma I sent you here."

So my grandma said, "your father, your Grandpa Paul Erick is not his father."

So I went back and I said, "well, who's your father?"

"He died!" he told me.

But my father told me, "don't ever ask me that question again. All I know is your Grandpa Paul Erick raise me and that's your grandpa." That's what he told me. So it was that way all my life. But later in years I found out his father was Joe (Jack) Boyle from Circle. And that's it.

My mom died in '65. My dad died in '85. He lived with us for twenty years. All that twenty years he tried his best with all his kids. He never gave up on us. Our house is just like a hospital with rows of beds. Nothing fancy in there. I help out as much as I can with laundry and stuff. They have gas washing machine that you pull on it. We put gas in there and we pull on it

and start it up every Saturday. I'm doing nine loads at a time and then I hang them. Nobody bothers me when I do laundry. I have everything in order and I tell my little sisters to hang up their little socks and my father never try to get in my way. So I do laundry every Saturday for my brothers and sisters. But then later my father, he told me, "how else can they learn. They need to do their own now so let them do it. They're all big enough to do their own," he said. So I respected that.

And then the house gets so darn dirty too, tools and snow go parts and all that kinda stuff all over the place, you know. I don't like it, but he told me, "I got patience with them. Don't worry about the dirtiness. We'll clean it later. This is the only way your brothers are gonna learn." You know, "just let it be. Don't get mad about it. I'm gonna ask you nicely if you know where you can get a house. You get your own house and then you can live how you want to live. If you don't like it go find yourself another place," he said, "where you can live fancy." And so I did (laughs). But I never did live fancy in my life.

Still, every Saturday I go over and I say, "you want me to do anything Aba?" You know, that's how we call him, Aba.

"No, your brothers can take care of it."

And I look. I make face (laughs). And then there's little Robert, "Aba, she's makin' face behind your back."

"I'm not makin' face at him. It's just the way I am."

And, "lie, lie, lie, Grandma always said not to lie and you're lyin'" (laughs).

So I moved out with my kids and there too my father made sure I had water and wood all the time. And we come by the house and visit with him and it was a good life. So every Saturday I go there do my laundry and I tell them, "get back to where you're snow go parts is.

Work on your snow go parts and don't bother me." We just don't bother each other. I did my own thing and then they all work and cook for each other. That's how they live. There's nothing fancy in their house.

My father drank a lot. It's like what Velma Wallis talks about in her *Raising Ourselves*, about her mother drinking. Goes out on a bender and then she comes home and stay sober for a long time. My father did that. My dad won't drink for like about nine months to a year and then pretty soon I notice when he start piling up the wood and getting all the meat ready. That's when I know. Uh oh, he got plans again. You know he's leaving. But I don't say anything. So if he leave in month of July we won't see him again for a long time. He'll stay around here and drink until Grandma say, "hey, you boys. Go get your father." So, the boys come down and get their dad. We all have heck of a time. We have to put him in the boat, you know. In the summer time it's easier because we throw him in the boat and we tie him. "Let me go!" he says, but we won't let him go. I've got to be there or sometime Jimmy got to be there, and John. We got no choice. He get stubborn like that. And then when he gets to twenty-five mile fish camp where the water is clear from Chandalar that's where he say, "boys, wait a minute. I gotta try some of this holy water." That's that Chandalar water and he drinks about two cups or three cups. "Take me home!" he say. So that means they can untie him, so they untie him and they go back up and then start all over again from scratch. That's the kind of thing he did.

He drank for so long we couldn't even take him home. He got so sick. He started having DT's. So I took him into Fairbanks and he went in the hospital and I stay with him. He went to detox and as soon as he got there they found out he's a good cook so he got a job as a cook

there. And for a while he was doing good. I remember when it was the North American.<sup>61</sup> A lot of people used to go over in those days, you know. A lot of people go over for North American. That whole Second Avenue is just packed with people from all over the villages. It was a lot of fun. I remember I was with him and he went and he told me, "let's check out the Mecca Bar." I walk with him and he was sober. I was so happy to see my dad being sober and he look so nice. As soon as he seen Charlotte Peter, she grew up with my father, that's Jim Peter's wife, he pretend he was staggering, you know, pretend he was drinking round her. "Ah, cut it out John Mo!" she said (laughs). He do stuff like that around them. It went on for like about nine months and then he hit the bottle again. He start going to Second Avenue. So I went to Fairbanks and I said, "I came to pick you up. I want you go home with me. I don't want you to be here." He had a long black coat on and he was living on the streets, you know. "No, I'm not ready yet," he told me. "I'm not ready to go home yet."

Well, my sister and Wally were living in Fairbanks so I didn't really worry, but I want him come back. As long as he's around here I'm happy, you know. But, he didn't want to go so I left. Then the night before we heard the news I had a funny feeling. I just went to my Aunt and I said, "gee Jessie, I want to go and get my father but I'm short. I worry about him. It seems like he's not ever going to sober up. We just have to bring him back," I said.

"Well, if you want to go in the morning I could help you with one way," she said.

So I said, "ok," and I came home and that night, that's when we heard the news that he died.

He died in 1985, August 2. He got killed by a 22 year-old guy from Dillingham over one stick of cigarette and a pint of whiskey. My father, I know him. He always have a little drink

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<sup>61</sup> The North American sled dog race in Fairbanks.

save for him tucked away underneath his jacket somewhere. The guy beat him up so bad he tore his main artery to the heart and he died. That's how they found him in Fairbanks. And there was a lot of pain. But me, as the oldest, I had to talk to my brothers and sisters and told them, "don't ever try to do anything bad to anybody over this," you know, because Dad would never want us to do anything like that.

My grandma Myra, she died 1986, September 16. She was ninety-five. My father died August 2, 1985. She didn't talk for like one week, my grandma. She just didn't know what to say. She was so broken hearted. And then in January 1987 my grandma Natalie died. So it's just like we lost everybody then.

My dad, he really touch many heart when he died. He was a very good man in his own Native way. He will never say no to anybody. Even if it's the last what he got he'll share it, give it to you. That's the kind of man he was. And a lot of these elders that died in the past all remembered him and always said a lot of good things about him to me and I really cherish that and that's what I want to share right now to this young people. I hope they make a good use out of it because we're a strong people. We're a strong Gwich'in people and we should be proud of who we are and that's what my father taught me. He always taught me, "be proud of who you are. Don't be ashamed of what you are. Education or no education. Your grandma and grandpa work hard. They really work hard with their hands, bare hands. There was no such thing as chainsaw, not even a hammer," he said, "but they work. They built the school, they built that Venetie and I was young in those days but I seen your grandpa, he was really working hard." And that's why I'm always proud of who I am.

### 6.2.3 Great-Grandparents Isaac and Rachel Erick

*Vera's paternal great-grandparents were Isaac and Rachel Erick. According to 1910 U.S. Census records for Fort Yukon "Isaac Eric" was born in June of 1878 and his wife, Rachel, was born in December of 1887. At that time they had two children, Vera's grandfather Paul Erick and a daughter, Mary. In the 1920 census Paul, Mary, William and Joseph are listed as their children.*

I remember my great-grandpa Old Isaac Erick. He was still alive. At that time I think he was like 90 years old. He was living down at the thirty-third in a little log cabin beside my grandpa and grandma's house. He used to have a lot of these can stuff from NC. They used to call it NC store, Northern Commercial Company. He goes down there first of the month. "Oh, I got my relief check," they used to say in those days. He get all these canned food like can of spam, corned beef hash and corned beef and those kind of stuff they buy. So he's always stock up with those kind of food in his house. He's so old he can't hear and he can barely see us. I remember I was so amazed with what all he got hanging in his house. All the old way back stuff like the lucky charm, in Gwich'in they call it *avii*, but in English it's those white little weasel; the small one with the pointed nose. Those are the good luck charms and he used to have those and they belong to my grandma Rachel Erick.<sup>62</sup> He was married to Rachel. If I remember right Rachel was from Old Crow, Canadian side, and she was a real strong medicine woman. That's what I heard. She knows about wolf.<sup>63</sup> And there's all kinds of animal skin hanging in his house, my grandpa, Old Isaac Erick.

And I remember him, when they get their relief check (laughs), in those days they call it that, he buy alcohol. You know, he buy wine. In those days everybody drink wine. So Grandpa

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<sup>62</sup> The weasel represents luck in Gwich'in and other Athabascan cultures.

<sup>63</sup> Meaning wolf was her spirit helper.

and Grandma's playing fiddle all night while he [Grandpa Isaac] sits over there too and when he gets feeling good they bring him home, put him to bed. How foolish. He likes to party, as old as he was. He just died of natural cause. He was so old he just went to sleep, never woke up.

But his wife, my great-grandma, is the one that delivered me, Rachel. My Grandpa Paul told me she was a loving woman and loved children, but she had only William Erick and Paul Erick and they were married to two sisters, Natalie and Leah. They had those two boys and maybe more children but I never heard of them.<sup>64</sup> All they do is work. She's always tanning. She was very strong woman in tanning and she took care of a lot of sick people and she delivered babies too. They say that she smile a lot. She has the most pretty smile. I seen her picture. Donald Peter found a picture in Juneau and sent a copy to Margaret and I guess maybe Georgie made a copy of it. We were playing bingo and she brought it in and told me, "this is your grandma and this is your grandpa." And I looked at her and she, she had lots of black hair, long black hair and its part like this. Like in old way, you know, and she was in a tent. My grandpa was sitting by her and she was right there. She had a scarf on and she must have been a nice looking woman when she was young. I remember Old Erick, but I don't remember her. She delivered me and then about less than six month then she died, I think. She had pneumonia.

#### *6.2.4 Grandma Myra Robert*

*Besides her mother, the most important female influence on Vera's life was her grandma Myra Robert. According to Vera, Myra was one of White Eye's<sup>65</sup> daughters and was born December 25, 1893 (the year was provided by the 1910 Census). She married James Robert, one*

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<sup>64</sup> 1920 United States Census records for Fort Yukon indicate Isaac and Rachel had at least two other children, Mary, born c.1906, and Joseph, born c. 1912.

<sup>65</sup> An important Gwich'in chief from the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Schneider 1976:203-206).

*of Old Robert's sons in 1916. Old Robert, also known as Robert Shoh Vat T'oo, Gamen, or Sakhot'oo,<sup>66</sup> was married to Annie Dazhyaa and was the founder of Venetie (known previously as Old Robert's Village or Chandalar Village) around 1895.<sup>67</sup> James Robert died September 10, 1947 two days after his daughter Maggie married Paul Erick. This narrative is in two parts. In the first section Vera tells a variety of stories about her grandmother, some serious, such as how to handle and treat meat, and some comical such as her scolding of her son-in-law Paul. The second section contains stories of her grandmother's role as a midwife and healer.*

My grandma from Venetie, Myra Robert, she was married to James Robert who had seven brothers. My mother had seven boys and my grandma was very proud of that. She used to really enjoy this movie called "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers." She used to take them all to that movie and they'd say, "gee, Grandma's taking us back to that same movie again!" And my grandma said it just reminded her that's how they're going to be when they grow up: seven brothers marrying the seven brides. The way she said it was very funny in her Gwich'in (laughs).

The way she told me was they come from a hard working people and my grandma is a hard working woman. Even her words, how she talk, it's very truthful. She was a good grandmother. She's very serious and when something to be done it got to be done. She'll look mean, but she's really not. She is a very good grandmother and I learned lots from her. My grandma explained a lot of stuff to me and I still got it with me. And I believe it too, because I see the changes. I seen what she told me. I seen it today.

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<sup>66</sup> Sakhot'oo, a contraction of Shoh Vat T'oo according to Peter Raboff (2001:128) probably explains why the entire family is listed under the surname "Sato" in the 1920 United States Census for Chandalar Village.

<sup>67</sup> More information can be found about Old Robert in McKennan (1965), for whom Old Robert was a source during his 1933 fieldwork, and Peter Raboff (2001).

Grandma Myra don't drink, but boy she sure can chew that Bull Durham, Black Bull. The way she chew, Grandma, she make me want to chew so bad. The way she does it look like it taste so good, you know. So I tried it one time. I stole a little piece from her and I went in the outhouse. I put it in my mouth and I was so dizzy I even staggered into my house. My mother just laugh.

I told her the truth, I told her, "Grandma does it so good the way she does it, like it taste good, so I want to try it," I told her.

"Well, you learned your lesson. Don't do it again." So I never did it again.

And she was a good teacher. She taught all my brothers and sisters how to fish for grayling. She taught all of us how to make a fishing rod out of a willow. My brothers Ernest, Earl and Dennis used to get like 400 graylings (laughs). She talk to us about how to make a living and how to survive, not only to me but to all my brothers and sisters.

And my brothers taught her a lot too. My brothers, they speak English. They understand Gwich'in, but they speak English and she used to say, "boys, Grandma come" you know, from her side of the house. We had one big log cabin house and she stay in the back and we stay in the front. You could hear her. And so, they all run out the door.

"Huh, sound like Grandma got her check," they say.

So they all run up to her and she say, "boys, what I go for store?" She got broken English, but they all understand how she talk.

And they say, "Grandma, get tuna and get some cracker jack and get some marshmallow, hotdogs."

And she say, "ok." And then right after school she'll always yell back down there, "boys, Grandma popcorn, cracker jack, hoona," she say.

They all laugh (laughs).

"Hoona" and "wiener roast" she say. And that's her way of talking, you know, and they all run back there. She make sure she had enough for them. They all get a bag of goodies. They know Grandma got her check first of the month, you know, and they have these little goodies like that all the time. I used to enjoy it.

You know my father really kept up with my grandma and make sure that she was never to worry about wood and water. My father had plenty of that for her, all the time. And he also did that for blind Enoch John and Effie and Stephen Fredson. He took care of all of them. He make sure that they all had wood and water. And that's how he make his money to help to raise his kids too.

I remember one time my grandma was very upset. All morning she was just bitching because my father went out drinking.

"He knows..." you know, she say it loud enough for him to hear it and he's hung over, he's layin' in bed. "He don't need to do this to his kids when they got to go to school the next day." Over and over. "I'm so pissed off and those bitches that give it to him shouldn't. They got their own family and they should mind their own business. My son-in-law is doing so good. Doing all the work that he can and then they screw him up with this rotten home brew and I could smell it from way back here because I don't drink and I do not appreciate something like that goes around here." On and on and on and on.

And then that night, you know, after the kids come back from school and then they eat and she come in. Loving voice. "My son, here's your cigarette and here's your canvas boots." One carton of Pall Mall cigarettes and canvas boots.

"Yeah, you've been chewing on a bone all morning now you come here with a nice kind sweet voice." But it sounds funnier in Gwich'in than in English. "*Van datthak tth'an tr'a'aa k'itihnyaa chan ye'ee dants'uu.*" That's what my father was telling my grandma.

Oh, gosh, I just get a kick out of it. I hide my face in a book and I'm just laughing to myself. That's it and then she goes out the door. She's saying she's sorry for what she said. So, she pay him back with a carton of cigarettes and a canvas boots.

My grandma always talk about the crows. "Huh' gonna be warm today" she say and the crow is makin' that "tl, tltl, tltl." That means it's going to be warm. And then, another day, you know, she'll hear the crow "Ach Ach Ach" you know, making all that funny noise. "Oh, it's gonna rain today." And sure enough, it's rain. You know, she use the crow for weather report. My father used to tease her. "Well, did the crow tell you where the home brew is at?" (laughs). She get mad, she don't answer (more laughter). If you're out in the woods and if you see a crow, one crow flying in the direction they're looking, that mean they spotted a moose and you go that direction and you are going to run into a moose. That happen with us. My father, he followed it and sure enough he got a bull. So, I think it's true, you know. And when it's going be windy all the crows are fighting with each other. I learn all that from my grandma.

And, as you know, when we were all little kids we go up river. We go grayling fishing. There's a lot of grayling. Certain time of the year, like in fall-time, you know, we go out to grayling and my grandmother always carry a little plastic bag. "Put your trash in there. Don't put it in the water," you know. And she don't like it when a woman go in the water, go swimming. "Get outta that water," she used to tell us. "You gonna ruin the fishing." She said, "respect the water." She don't want us in the water. "Fill up the washtub and go use that.

Don't go down the bank." But we sneak back to swim. Oh, she gets mad. She think that all the fish will disappear.<sup>68</sup>

Young girls [at puberty], they used to stay home. They stay in a tent for one month and they can't eat hot food, just cold food, and no fresh meat. They can't even look at a man, and can't even touch their stuff. And you can't go near meat. They won't let you go near it. You can't even step on the blood. That's really disrespectful. And I'm always like that to this day. If my son bring a moose meat I make sure there's no blood around and I really prepare it good for us to eat it. And I give meat to people that respect it, too. My grandma used to be so, so careful about stuff like that. She always say, "don't give bloodshot meat out." When a man bring a meat back, if there's a widow or a poor family, you know, try to give them the best and not to give them a bloodshot meat. That's no good. Don't show no respect like that. And the head, moose head, I wouldn't eat it until after I start having kids because my grandma told me that. "Don't eat it. You give a bad luck to your brothers." So, I just respect that, you know, what she told me. I respect it and I never try to eat moose head and the guts.

And then my father always told us, "that's a B.S!" (laughter). Yes, that's exactly what he said. He said, "in those days they were poor. They barely get something," you know. "No shells. So they think that they'll get bad luck," you know. But he said, "no, I'm not into that kinda thing. My kids will eat what they want to eat." And my mother just snap her eyes at him (laughter). Yeah, really. But still, I remember what my grandma said so I respect it and then as I got older, without mother, I was there and I was teaching my sisters like that. Oh, my father was getting mad at me. He don't want me to do that. He said, "God prepare it for us to eat it.

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<sup>68</sup> Gwich'in women were traditionally taught to avoid anything to do with fishing or hunting during the menstrual cycle.

Those are the good stuff, they just wanna save it for themselves, that's why they say that."

That's exactly what he told us. "They just want to save it for themselves," and, "just never mind. Let you sister enjoy it," you know.

I still really believe in those kinds of stuff. I still to this day and I respect it too. I try to take good care of my meat. I don't try to rot anything. If we're not going to use this, if I have too much, you know, I share; I give some away. And then whatever is bloodshot, you know, I put it in a plastic bag and take it out to the dump. But, I don't leave it around where it will rot and then maggots get into it and all that kind. That's the kind of thing that she don't want, my grandma. And she talk to us about that: to be clean, to be clean about stuff like that. Even the fish. Make sure maggots don't go on it. We have to check. Go underneath the cache and check every little corner, every little in between so the maggots won't get to it, you know. Well, it was a hard life. There's no refrigerator, no freezer in those days. So, you really got to keep up with those and you got to eat it. It's a winter supply so you've got to take good care of it.

And she's real careful about the environment too. If we build fire along the bank she'd say, "just watch what you put in there in that fire." You know, "don't put cans in there. Don't throw any cans in there. Take it home with you and then throw it away," you know, to the dump, "but don't put it in the water." That's what she used to tell us. And in the summer when they slide down the bank she said, "slide down in the good place." Don't slide down where things are growing. Don't break any leaves. She's always telling us stuff like that. Now I know why she say that, you know. We're ruining everything. She don't want anything to be ruined. People, they've got to respect that, you know. No matter who it is, they have to respect that. Got to keep doing it. We've got to keep reminding these young people, I guess. It's the only way they learn.

And my grandma, she don't think it's right for a woman to be a priest or deacon or whatever. Well, from way back traditional, from way back, they were all against that. I remember Reverend Albert Tritt talk about that too. A woman should be like Mary Magdalene, how she bathed Jesus. So they think that it's wrong for a woman to be a priest in the church. It's not right. It should only be a man preacher in those days. *Ginkhii*.<sup>69</sup> So, my grandmother was very upset when a deaconess came to Venetie in 1967. Her name was Marilyn Snodgrass.<sup>70</sup> She was a missionary from way in the states that was brought in by Bishop Gordon, William Gordon. She was living in Venetie in the missionary house. We don't have a preacher then, so every Sunday she had service. Oh, Grandma was against that. But still she went to church. And she said, "I go to church for myself, not for her."

So, my little brothers, they're going to go to church or Sunday school and my grandma always ask them, "where you going?"

"I'm going to go up to see Deaconess Snodgrass," they say. (laughs)

And my grandmother say, "I do not want a woman preacher."

Then I finally told her, "I don't think you should talk to them like that Grandma because remember you told us that there's one God and we all pray to God."

And she didn't say anything. And then later, about a week later, she thought about it and she told me, "yeah, you were right. I'm not going to mention it anymore." So, Deaconess Snodgrass was her friend after that (laughs).

But, you know, as we were all growing up, as I was growing up we were very traditional and we have a rich, rich, life. The people were pretty strong. And we live rich. Even though it

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<sup>69</sup> Priest – literally "he talks."

<sup>70</sup> A photo of Deaconess Snodgrass can be found in *A Century of Faith* (Episcopal Diocese of Alaska 1995:103).

look like we're poor but still we were rich, you know. If you went by what Grandma was teaching us you never got stuck. She always told me "work for your living." And that's what I did. Then you won't be stuck, you know. Then you won't have to bother anybody. That's what she always tell us too. I really believe all the things that she told me and what she taught me because of the way she, her living wise. She raise nineteen kids even though her husband died in September 1947 and she had all those kids. She did pretty good.

#### *6.2.5 Grandma Myra and Healing Practices*

I have two grandmas that deliver babies and I think they both delivered a lot of children in the Yukon Flats. My great-grandma Rachel delivered me and I was, according to what my father told me, I was the last one and then she died. And then my Grandma Myra delivered babies too. She said she delivered like 81 babies. The first one she delivered was Martha Flitt and then the last one she delivered was Peter Erick. Peter Erick was born sixty-seven below in Venetie. She had me boil a lot of water just in case she need it. And then there was some afterbirth, placenta, left inside of her. She would have died if my grandma didn't take it out. There's no hospital so she had to do it. First she made her hands all soapy and she went inside and took that piece out. She get a five gallon gasoline can and she clean it out real good and then she boil water in it and then she put some spruce boughs and then she took it out and then she put another water in it and she sterilize that, boiling it, and then she put my sister-in-law on top of it. She sat on it for I think half an hour, wrap her around with blanket. Lots of blankets and she was just sweating away. And then she put her in bed. And she make sure that she save that afterbirth, like how they do it in the hospital, they check it out, and then she took that little piece out and put it on there, make sure it fit so nothing was in, everything was taken out. I seen her do that.

When I was going have my first child she came and stayed with me for about a month and she taught me how to take care of a baby, but I feel like I already know because I did it all those years! I've been a mother and father all my life. But it's good to learn from Grandma too. She did explain a lot of things: how to take care of a baby, how not to spoil the baby, and not to over feed a baby, talk to your baby all the time and explain things, don't yell.

My grandmother always say, "don't yell. Talk. If you start yelling that kid will yell." So I try to never yell. "Explain things. How else would they learn. That's why you're a mother. You're a mother; you're supposed to explain things to your kids." That's what she told me.

Jennie: How were you supposed to take care of yourself when you were pregnant?

Vera: Well, way back my grandmother used to tell me that women's cannot bend down because the baby could, you know, breach baby. So, women's don't try to bend down that much unless they have to. I never had a mother when I was pregnant so I learn everything the hard way. I didn't want to tell anybody I was pregnant, but my grandma found out and she told me, "don't drink too much tea or coffee and try to walk lots, but drink lots of water. And walk." And when you go to bathroom, you know, try not to push too hard. That's not very good for you. And she said, "careful of what you eat. Don't eat too much fry food and try not to eat 'til your full," she told me. Just eat food three times a day. Eat a good solid food, but don't over eat. And then she said, "don't wear heels," because you could easily slip, fall down. All those kinds of stuff.

She told me that the baby that weighs seven pound is a healthy baby. If there's a baby that's too big, well, it's the size of the woman too. That's what I was told. And I'm tall, you know, so my kids were all big except for my little girl. But, she said try to have only seven pound kids. How would you do that? Just watch your diet.

My grandmother, she delivered four of her grandchildren: Ernest, Earl, Dennis, and Mildred. And we were all there and they just put a curtain over that way and not even a sound I heard. My mom, she just told her exactly what to do, my grandma. And she pop out the babies and they were like seven pound. Most of them were all seven pound. I think my father said I was five pound, but, that's just a guess (laughs). And I think most of them, they were all seven pounds.

And women cannot drink alcohol. That's what she said. Not even cigarette. She's totally against that, my grandma. Well, in those days there's no drugs around, you know. She don't like it. "Oh, poor kids. Poor baby is suffering inside," she used to say. She used to see some women drinking and she used to say, "oh, my gosh, they're just suffering their child already." And we're seeing a lot of that now, today. FAS.

And when we're sick, Grandma Myra, she said, "long time ago nobody ever get sick," you know. And when we used to have a cold, flu, she used to just bring in those spruce boughs and she boil those up on top of the stove and just leave it boiling. Keep putting fresh ones in there and that scent, you just breath it in. It makes you feel, you know, when you feel decongested? It just clears it up. And then she had us drink pitch juice. She give us one tablespoon of that and she tell us, "hold it and just take little swallow at a time and swallow it slowly. Don't gobble it," she said. And then we just take little sip at a time. And she said that clear up your chest, too. And then she let us drink lots of water, boiled water that's cooled off. I remember in her house she used to have lots of jars of clear water. She let us drink all that and it cure you. And then another thing is when you get bumble bee sting, she just chew up a willow leaf real fast and just put it on there and it takes out that needle, that needle that's stuck in there. It takes it out. She just tell us to clamp it on.

And pitch is the main thing that was being used by my grandmother for cut. If somebody has a real bad cut she just pour water in there. Lots of water in that cut and then just kind of put it together like that with something real thin. I seen her use a mosquito net. And then she put the pitch over it and then moose skin, and she wraps it up and she say, "don't bother it for three, four days until that cut's healed." She leave it loose too, off and on. She untie it and then if there's the red going around she'll take it off and soak it. But as long as it's not like that she just keep it that way and it heals up good. And I seen her stitch my father with her hair. She put that hair in the water and she sew him up. He had cut himself real bad while he was cutting wood and she just let it bleed. Let it bleed, and she keep putting clear water over it and then she hold it and she was sewing it. She used ice and she pinch. My father must have been tough. She burned that needle at the end and made it real black, that's sterile, and then she bent it a little and just sew two or three little stitch. Huh, I watch that too and I was just sitting there just sweating and tears coming out of my eyes. But I seen that done.

And then if anybody has a headache, they cut right here little bit [at the temple]. This is done by Nena Robert. She did that for people. She cut her right here and all the blood came out. You see the difference too, that black blood. Pretty soon it's turning to red. That's when they close it. And then the headache is gone. And that's what was done in front of me.

My grandma was really a good nurse. I felt comfortable by her because she took care of a lot of sick people. Not only her. Nena was just right there with her too; Nena and Julia. They all help one another by taking care. If somebody's really sick they all come together and help each other.

### 6.2.6 Grandma Natalie Erick

*Vera's Grandma Natalie was born to Timothy and Selena John c. 1902. She and her sister Leah were married to the brothers Paul Erick and William Erick. The marriages were arranged by their parents over the objections of both girls. Vera's relationship to grandma Natalie was more relaxed and informal than with her Grandma Myra and Vera did not tell many stories about her.*

My other grandma, Natalie Erick, she's a beautiful little old lady. I think of her like a little hillbilly granny. She's a silly little old lady. She was my grandma and she was my friend. I was her buddy. And Grandma drinks. She likes to drink. All her life she says she been in jail (laughs) with Grandpa and then after Grandpa was gone she said, "I finally came out of a jail" (laughs). She's just silly old lady. And she's another good teacher too. She explain stuff good to us. But, she's more silly. I think I'm like her too. Goofy. I know she likes to party. She don't cuss but she always say, "oh deary!" "Oh for goodness sakes!" (laughs). That's how she talks all the time.

Grandma Natalie was a very strong woman. She worked alongside my Grandpa Paul and they did everything together out on the trapline or in fishcamp. They go to church together every night. I remember never a day went by that Grandma and Grandpa didn't pray in Takhud. I used to listen to them and I thought that was very good.

She try to teach me how to sew beads and I told her I'm not interested. "When the time comes I'll learn, Grandma, so until then, bug off," I told her (laughs). "I just like to sit and chat with you and just be your friend and have a little nip with you. You don't mind?"

And she said, "not at all, grandchild" (laughs). But I was in my late twenties when I was talking to her like that. So she never did try to teach me how to sew beads again. But if other

grandma tells me that I'll be respectful and I'll listen to her. And I never talk back to both of them. Even if I know they're wrong, I still never try to talk back. And I'm like that to this day. Even if I see a person saying the wrong thing. I know they're not right but still I won't say nothing. I'm lucky I had a two very good grandmother.

### 6.3 Narratives of Place

#### *6.3.1 Alone with Dad*

*When Vera was around five her mother was sent to Sitka for treatment for tuberculosis. Vera and her siblings Virginia and Sonny stayed alone with their father for two years while she was away. Tuberculosis was rampant throughout rural Alaska and many people who were sent away for treatment never returned. The annual rate of infection of tuberculosis for Alaska Natives at that time was 25%. The rate fell to .3% by 1970, the most striking decreased in annual infection rates ever recorded and testament to the great effort put into eradicating the disease among Alaska Natives (Seaton and Leitch 2000:488), although Alaska continues to have one of the highest rates of tuberculosis infection in the United States (third highest in 2008 (State of Alaska n.d.)).*

When we were young, my mom was in the hospital for TB and we were just all over the place, me, Virginia and Sonny.<sup>71</sup> We stayed with my grandma up in Venetie for a while, but my father miss us too much so he brought us back down. We live down in fish camp and then we come back from fish camp to Fort Yukon and we stay with auntie for a little while because my father goes back down to fish camp to work on the wheel. We stay home by ourselves while

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<sup>71</sup> The Hudson Stuck Memorial Hospital had a sanitarium for TB patients, but Vera's mother went to Sitka for treatment.

auntie is out checking net at Joe Ward Slough or getting wood. When my dad comes back we just tell him we don't want to stay there so he take us back down.

My dad only had a canoe to check the fish wheel. He goes way across while the three of us wait for him. And he put in a washtub and a washboard and put water in that washtub. Just enough so we wash our socks and shirt and entertain ourselves like that while he check the net. And he ties Sonny to the bed with a string so he don't crawl out of the tent. He say, "don't you dare untie your little brother," and, "don't let your brother go near the water." Just so far that little string (indicates distance). He told us not to untie him so he won't fall in that tub. And then, just so far to the doorway of the tent so he can look out. He tie him up pretty good. I don't know how many times we wash my poor little brother's hair over and over (laughs) and we do the same thing to our hair too. We always play with mud pie, too. We put mud all over my little brother. Just cover him up. And then we put him in the tub and we give him bath, clean him up. We think we clean him up, but maybe we don't do a good job. It sure look good at that time, though. Yeah, he had a rough little life there. That's so we can keep ourselves busy while my father do his chores like cutting fish and cutting enough wood for the smoke house and then for our tent. There's always work to do. And while he work we play in the dirt by him and just entertain ourselves all the time.

Once, while we're sitting there, Virginia just happen to look out and a bear came out of the island on the other side. My father is going this way, heh. And she starts screaming and I start screaming and my brother was crying. We couldn't stop.

We told him, "there's a bear," and he turned around, coming back real fast.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, there's a bear, but it went back in the bushes" (laughs).

He's mad. He said, "anything you see across the river you don't have to panic," you know, "you don't have to get scared. Nothing is gonna happen. The bear don't swim that fast."

So he goes out again. Then he comes back with the fish. Sometimes he make three trips. Canoe's too small, you know. And then he cut fish and we try to help him.

And one day Virginia was going to bathroom. She scream while running back. "There's something on the tree. I see a bear or something!"

So my father went back to look and here it was a porcupine (laughter). Virginia is always finding something and she's got the loudest voice screaming top of her lung, and it was porcupine.

And then we help him, too. I help him hang fish sometimes, the lower part, you know. The fillets I hang for him, but my sister and my brother are not allowed to go in the smoke house because he's afraid they might fall in there so just me could go in there. And I help most of the time with him, as much as I can anyway. I love work. It's just no problem. It's just new things for us all the time so we enjoy it. There's never a dull moment where I remember it's boring. No such thing. I don't even know what boring is, but now days you hear a lot of these young people say, "I'm bored."<sup>72</sup>

And then when he has to work on the wheel, putting it together and getting it ready for fishing, he take us down there with him. Right above the bank he tie my brother again to a tree where he can go so far and we play with rocks and put it in the hole. You know, throw it in the hole and just entertain ourselves. My father always got something for us to do while he work on

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<sup>72</sup> Gwich'in people from Vera's generation frequently mention that there was no such thing as "boredom" when they were growing up. As with other Americans raised before the advent of mass entertainment they found enjoyment in work play (either actual work made into play or play at future adult skills). It seems the more "entertainment" is available the more is needed to keep people entertained.

the wheel. Then he say, "ok, get your brother ready. We're gonna go home now." So, down the trail we go, go home. He pack him most of the time. Then he cook. Boy, the best part I like is when I'm makin' a bottle for my brother because I know I get to taste it (laughs). Make him a bottle and then give it to him. If there's no milk my dad boil rice. He makes it real thin and then that juice. That's what he drinks too. And he put a little sugar in it, but not too much. And that's the kind of life we did at fish camp when we were that small. There's always work to do.

He take us out berry picking. He say we're gonna go pick high bush cranberry and I say, "Oh good we're gonna eat some," and I started to pick and I started eating. "That's not what I mean," my father said. "You pick it and then we'll take it home and then we're gonna make *tloh tloh*." That's gravy, you know, pudding. He even pour it over the rice and we eat it like that. Boy, it taste good. And then he teach us too, at the same time. How you boil it and then strain it with an old mosquito net. He wash it and then he use that for a strainer and then he put little flour, he mix the flour with water, get all the lump out, and then he pour it in slowly while he stirring it with the other hand. Then he mix it all and it get kinda a little thick, just like a pudding. He say that's the best vitamins. So, that's how we eat.

And then sometimes, when he cook fish half dried, he cook it on the low fire and that's what we like to eat too. Or he fry meat. He dice it up, fry it, and put a little flour in it and stir it up and then he add water to thicken it up. That's how we like to eat it, too. And, then he say, "ok, we're gonna go to Fort Yukon now," so here comes Grandpa and Grandma coming back and then we rotate.

Jennie: How old were you when your mom was gone then?

Vera: I was five and Virginia was four and John was two, yeah. Boy, we were small. I remember all that. Sonny was just turning two, I think, but I remember we pack him. We always pack him,

me and Virginia. Put him on my hip like this. Skinny little girl takin' care of him all the time. If we're gone he'll cry for us so we have to be right there with him. We're always takin' care of each other (laughter).

When my mom came back from the hospital I call her Mildred, like my aunt Mildred. But Virginia ran to her and said, "Mom." Sonny don't remember her. She was gone from us for two years. What a life in between that time. Hard time.

### 6.3.2 *Living off the Land*

*Vera and her family moved between Fort Yukon, Venetie, K'ahts'ik (Fish Camp) and other seasonal camps all during her childhood as part of their seasonal subsistence activities. They utilized territory from both her mother's and father's families. Dimitri Shimkin describes the "trapping, hunting and fishing" economic complex in which the majority of Yukon Flats residents were participating in 1949, the year after Vera was born. "To gain a livelihood in this fashion, a household must control a trapline of 20-100 miles in length (60-200 square miles) and have access to lake and marsh areas for catching whitefish and hunting moose and muskrat" (1955:228). As was common at the time, Vera's father shared a trapline with his grandfather and father. Vera's father's family trapline (great-grandfather Isaac Erick, grandfather Paul Erick, and father John Erick) is included in Shimkin's map of the Fort Yukon trapping area (1955:230). Due to this joint trapline, Vera's family frequently made their base in Fort Yukon because it afforded easier access to the trapline for her father. In this segment Vera describes some of the subsistence activities they participated in, how the entire Erick family shared resources at Fish Camp, and some of her experiences moving between Fort Yukon and Venetie.*

We go back and forth, you know. In the summer time we live in the fish camp with Grandpa and Grandma, Paul Erick and Natalie, sixteen mile down the Yukon. That's where we

live every summer for fishing for our winter use. They call it *K'ahts'ik*. That's fish camp.

Twenty-five miles. There was a cabin there. My dad takes us down there every summer and kind of rotate with my Grandpa and Grandma. And then there's Jessie and her family and Sarah and Neil, we all go. And there's also Grandpa, Old Isaac Erick, that's Paul Erick's father. He lives in a tent frame by himself and Grandma and Grandpa got their own tent frame and then us family, we had our own tent frame and then Jessie and their family has their own and Neil and Sarah with their children. So there's quite a bit of tent frame there.

We go there like third week of June or sometimes a little early, and set up the camp for our summer fishing for king salmon and silver salmon. My dad takes care of all the work for them and gets everything ready and then we go back. It's up to my Grandpa Paul Erick to say how many days we could be gone, too, because that's his boat. It's called six-eight. It's the kind that go "toot, toot, toot, toot, toot, toot." It takes us three hours to go to Fort Yukon, but coming down with the current it goes back down in one hour. Coming upriver it's slow. We all take turns at fish camp taking care of Old Isaac Erick. Then we get to stay in Fort Yukon and we do all the stuff my father has to do, get some groceries and then we all take a bath and put on clean clothes and go and visit our relatives. They're just right there, you know. Play kick the can and all kinds of stuff. Then, if it's two days we got to go in two days so we go back down and then there we go again, cutting fish, smoking fish, just for winter use. We just prepare for our winter food.

They go out to get moose and we dry that and then bundle all the fish, good eating fish. We hardly freeze any because we don't have a freezer so we just have mostly dry fish or salmon strips. And then we dry meat. Prepare everything. I remember sometimes when my father shoot a moose and we have to camp, like two days, to make sure the meat is dry, taken care of.

While that we sit in the bank and make boat out of those dry cottonwood, you know. We carve boats and then tie little string. Well, we don't have any string so we have to use my mother's thread. Oh, she get mad at us (laughter) and we make some floats or little sail boat. And sometimes we go there and there's whole bunch of graylings. You could see lot of graylings, you know, you just put your hook in there. Sometimes we'll catch about four hundred of them. Don't do that anymore, you know. There's hardly any grayling coming through. We live there from all the way through the fish seasons and until we get a moose and then after that we come back and go to school in Fort Yukon.

It's just all work, but still, there's always new stuff too and we enjoy that. As children we all have chores to do all the time no matter how small you are. We even stayed there one whole year, like three years one time, and we just live off the land. We all go out and we live down in twenty-five mile back slough, *K'ahts'ik*. My father go trapping in the winter and in springtime he goes out ratting. He stays out all night. He comes in early in the morning and there's piles of muskrat to be skinned and I help my mom. As small as I was, I remember I used to help my mother skin muskrat. And then we dry the meat, we smoke the meat and it's good to eat. And we used to go ice fishing. My dad make a pole, fishing rod, for us out of a stick and then we catch pikes. We have lots of pike all frozen right by where we go fishing. We have all kinds of pikes to eat. You take the guts out and fry that up. Boy, that's a delicacy. There's just only us family there all winter. Just my mom and dad and the kids and then farther up there's the Kelly boys. There's John Kelly, Robert Kelly, Bo, and sometimes Roy and Patrick comes, but they were pretty young so they don't stay very long. But, us, we have to stay 'til the break up. And when break up comes, Grandpa come and get us and we go back to Fort Yukon. In those days it seems like it was a very hard life, but come to think of it, it wasn't.

So, this is the kind of life that we do in the winter and in the summer. Summertime we go fishing, get enough salmon. And then in winter my father go trapping. And then in the spring he go ratting. There's never a boring day for me because there's a lot of work to be done. I keep saying this over and over but that's all we do. Just work and sometimes we play outside.

And sometimes we go back and forth up to Venetie. We stay close to Grandma all the time. We go from Fort Yukon all the way up to Chandalar, you know. From Fort Yukon to the back slough where twenty-five mile fish camp is, where that back slough ended back down to the Yukon. That's where the Chandalar is coming down and the Chandalar water is clear and the Yukon water is muddy. From there every bend I have a lot of memories as a child because that's how we travel. I remember my father had a twenty-five horsepower and we all get in the boat and then we stop at *Tahts'an*, they call it *Tahts'an*. It's a halfway on the Chandalar. It's a stopping place from way back when my grandpa James Robert used to be alive. That's where he stop with his boat and they still use it to this day. And then little ways up another bend there's Steven Fredson's place; Steven Fredson and Effie Fredson and Dimitri. They used to have their cabins there too. It's a nice place.

Anyway, there's a trail going back to that Martin Creek. It's only like about half an hour walk and there's a cabin there. There's a fish trap there. We live there the rest of the spring and we dry whitefish and just live off the land. And there's other families too. They just come and go. No jobs or nothing, you know, and that's how we get by. Just go here and there to live off the land and that's how we live. And it's so beautiful then. I wake up early in the morning and I run up little ways to check my rabbit snare or ground squirrel traps and I bring them all back. I know what to do, you know. Singe it, clean the rabbit, and then early in the morning my father's already doing the work on the fish trap. And my mother didn't want me to go in that

water because she think all the fish will disappear and my father was just (makes a disgusted face),<sup>73</sup> of course, but that's how she was, you know. Still I rolled up my pants and I go in there and I help get all the fish. I remember we used to hear all these birds singing early in the morning. You hear the loon, you hear all kinds a ducks, you hear frogs, you hear bumble bee. Everything. Nature. It's not like that now. We're losing that too. There's hardly any birds anymore. I don't hear that, you know, last year when we went down. Early in the morning I don't even hear it like how it used to be.

As it got a little more modern I remember Cliff Fairchild used to fly down to twenty-five mile. One time when we were staying in Venetie my mom said "the plane is going down to your dad. I'm going to send him some more groceries." She boil beans and she put beaver tail into the beans and then she freeze them and that's what she send down. You know, all the food, and she also sent a lot of biscuits.

So I said, "if that plane is going to come back I wonder if I should go down?"

She say, "yeah, go down for a ride." So Cliff Fairchild said yes. It was ten dollar one way from Venetie to Twenty-five Mile. So I jump the plane. I went down and my father's supposed to have muskrat meat and there's moose meat on the bank, all that stuff I've got to take back up. We landed there and my father wasn't there so I went in his log cabin and I remembered he had bannock. How come my mother send him bunch of biscuits when he had so much bannock in that one corner on a shelf? So I took two of his bannock and I put a note. "Father, I took two bannock, Vera." My father had to bring back that note. He don't know how to read, you know (laughter). He bring it back about a week later and asks my mom "what is this?"

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<sup>73</sup> As Vera discusses elsewhere, her mother held to the traditional ways of puberty seclusion and restricting girls in order to ensure future access to game, but her father was against those traditions.

And my mother read, "I took two bannock" (laughs).

I forgot my father never learn to read. I always forget about that because he's smart, you know, and I forget that he doesn't know how to read and write (laughter).

And then I remember we used to travel with a dog pack too. One time there was just no food in the village. Everybody was out in their muskrat camp and just few people in Venetie. My mother had all the kids and my father was out muskrating. He was around twenty-five mile and we have to wait 'til almost the breakup time for him to come back. In the meantime we ran out of food so they took me along with them [to get fish]. Of course I cried to go. So we had to pack the dogs with our food and whatever we need, tent and stuff like that. We took two dogs and we went from Venetie to *Tsuk k'oo*. We hold the dogs and we walk. On the way I remember we kill a porcupine and we singed it. They hit it with a stick. They hit the head real hard, you know, and then they knocked it out and in the meantime Eunice built fire and they singed it. Cleaned it, threw it in some bag and when we got to *Tsuk k'oo* there was just lots of whitefish. They smoke it and dry it; just cache full of it. That's what we were going for. To bring some fish back up. I remember I said, "gee, I want to take some of that porcupine home for my mom."

"It might spoil with you."

And I said, "no, it's not going spoil. I'll boil it."

I was like about ten years old, I think. We boil that whole thing and I remember I save some for my mother and she really enjoy it when we got back. And then we took whole bunch of dry fish back. It took us eight hour walking down. And then maybe longer, back up. Sarah and Walter John came back with us with their kids. We pack the baby, all three of us taking

turns going up. There was like 12 dogs with them. They had to carry all our stuff. That's how we were traveling back to Venetie.

Boy, when the dogs are starting to bark they know there's somebody coming. So everybody was kind of excited when we all came back. Everybody just got their pots ready to boil that dry fish and I think Walter brought back a few fresh one too. My mother was just frying fish away and boiling fish. Oh boy, what a day. They never seen a plane too for long time because the airport was no good. They had to clear it off and in springtime when it's melting it gets bad. They don't have no grader or anything like that. Got to wait 'til it dries so there's nothing at the store. That's when everybody was just running out of everything. That was a long trip for me.

### *6.3.3 Work and Play in Venetie*

*Although Vera's family mostly stayed in Fort Yukon because it was closer to her father's trapline, they also spent time in Venetie living near her maternal grandmother, Myra Robert. Venetie was smaller than Fort Yukon, continued Gwich'in traditions of social control (over children, for example) and had less access to alcohol than Fort Yukon at that time. Here Vera discusses some of her memories of living in Venetie as a child including their holiday traditions.*

My mother made sure we all had something to do after school. I have to go home to wash dishes and my sister will fix the bed and sweep or mop the floor. We always got something to do. After we do our chores, then we can go outside and play. Boy, when we go outside and play we make snow angels and then we play house. You know, we dig the snow out and make a round little house like and we just put everything in there. I remember my sister Virginia had the most beautiful little house. She even had a couch (laughs). She make her own stuff. Oh, we just play like that. Nothing bother us. And then, if we get tired of doing that then

we run up to the hill and we go slide down. We all take turns sliding down and we're just in our glory, having fun. And then, at the mission house there was this lady called Susan Carter, she was a missionary there in Venetie, Episcopal. And at night we have this Girl's Friendly Society. They call it GFS and we make little hats and we make lot of little knick knacks and we sit together and we eat cookies and drink juice. We learn how to sew and we learn how to do this and that. Sometimes we bake cookies. We did a lot of things there.

In those days I would say the teachers were really creative too. They were very patient teachers, I'll tell you that, and we learn lots from them. We always had something to do at night. We're *always* doing something. Sometimes my mom would give us a little piece of skin and we all share. We all bring stuff from our house and we all share stuff and the teacher is the one that teach us how to make little stuffed doll and all that kind of stuff. And for holidays we're always at the school making stuff out of a glue and scissor and thread. We make our own ornaments. There is no such thing as store bought stuff in those days. We make our own paper chain or we made popcorn on that old stove, you know, that wood stove they have. And then we string those popcorn and put it on our tree. And then we do a lot of paper stuff out of crepe papers, you know, and we make ornaments out of those and we decorate the school like that. Nothing was bought from the store. Except candy cane (laughs). That's why to this day I like to eat candy cane. And then we have Christmas birth of Jesus pageant at the school and then we also do it at the church. And they have midnight service.

In Christmas time before the pageant we all have new boots, brand new beaded boots and our hair is braided, you know, with a fancy ribbon. We're all dressed up. Boy I thought that was the nicest. Every kid has either a brand new canvas boots or a brand new calfskin boots or a brand new caribou leg skin boots but it's always new boots. Every Christmas is like that before

our play. And then after the play everybody gets together and they have a snack like, you know, peanuts and candy and juice and stuff like that at the community hall. Then the mothers and fathers all get together and they cook all night. They just have everything ready. Early in the morning at six o'clock they ring the church bell and it's time to get up. So one family start out. They knock on the door in next house and that family catch on. Everybody is holding hands. The line is long. Every house like that.

"Merry Christmas" they all say to each other. Door to door and they all follow in with us. We're all holding hands. Long line, I remember. Everybody! If somebody is sleeping they grab them and throw them out. They got to get dressed and follow us. And then they all go to community hall and they have breakfast. Everybody is just joyful. Nobody look mean at each other. I don't remember anybody fighting, not even a dirty look. Everybody is so happy with one another those days. So that's how they do it.

Then for one week they have potlatch, go home, dance. New Year, everybody's shooting up in the air with a gun. Same thing six o'clock in the morning: "Happy New Year!" Everybody got powder. They'll powder your face or throw you out if you're in bed. That's the way they do it and then there they go again, form up that long line. Everybody saying "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!" just clapping their hands. Everybody's just happy. Then we all meet in that community hall. Music going full blast. Everybody's eating and we're all in our glory. It's a new year. And when they have dances at night girls my age like to babysit. Or sometimes we go there and we all sleep under the table. Well, there's no alcohol, no drugs. Everybody's sober. They're all having a good time. And I remember these teachers, they're married and they love to dance jitterbug. I remember they were teaching everybody (laughs).

And we have movie once a month. Boy, am I happy. I know we're going to watch Roy Roger and Dale Evans. Oh, Roy Roger and Dale Evans coming in tonight! And then the airplane comes in and there's that movie. We know how it look too, you know, and we can't even wait. Everybody's lookin' around for work. It cost quarter, twenty-five cents to watch a movie. So here we go, going to elder's homes saying, "can we pack water for you?" Oh boy, we make our little quarter and then go to movie. And after the movie, we go straight home. We cannot go somewhere else. That goes for not only us, the whole village does that. We just go straight home. But before we go to the movie what we do is we get these long brushes, big long brush, we cut them off and then we leave them all on the side of the school outside. So we all get our big long brush and we put it between our legs and pretend we're going home on the horse, "didilee, didilee, giddyap, giddyap," you know. Every one of us kids do that; pretend we're riding on a horse. And one of those kids, "I'm the Zorro! Didilee, didilee, didilee, didiling, didiling" he used to say (laughs).

In those days it was very popular, that movie. Even the elders go. And Grandma Sophie John, she was an elder, she got her cane with her. So, every time when we watch movie we never try to sit close to Grandma because if there's a man and woman kissing she would tell us, "don't look!" and she'd poke us with her cane and we all have to go like this, cover our eyes. Some of them are like this (peeks through fingers), you know (laughs). And we say, "we're not looking," and everyone of us got to run away. Oh gosh, we get a kick out of that. All those years Grandma Sophie was at the movie she used to do that. So later in years I did that, you know, when I seen man and woman kiss. Even when I got older I used to do that. It's just a habit. So, we try not to sit close to Grandma Sophie John when we watch a movie.

And then we have to go straight home and get ready for school the next day. There's so many of us in the house so we have to get ready at night. We all get our clothes ready. We put it by our bed so in the morning there won't be any fuss about, "where is my socks, where is my jacket, where is my gloves." My mother always taught us to put our canvas boots in one place and then our jacket and scarf and mittens in one place and our clean clothes by our bed. So in the morning, "time to get up," that's all she need to say. One word and we get out of bed, get dressed and then we eat. We do our own cooking. We cook cornmeal sometimes or sometimes mush, that's it. Or pancakes. No complaints, nothing. Just walk out the door and then go to school. If we're no good at the school they notify our parents right away and then we sit right there and it's solve, you know. You meet with the teacher and the parents right there and the problem is solved.

And if somebody don't get along together, even kids, that's when the village council get together and they have a meeting with them. Just like a marriage counseling, you know. If a man and woman is not getting along and fighting or something they have a meeting right there with them and meet with them. And they put them back together again and then there's good life again. And then if a kid's acting up, if a kid's did something, they'll have a meeting with them right there with the parents and the kids there. Then it's solved. That's how they used to do it.

In those days, children are calm. I don't remember kids being hyper or running or they lose patience, you know. Like these days you see kids just rushing you. They have no patience. In those days it's not like that. It's very calm and they respect an elder. I seen it through my mom and dad, how they respect their elders, and I caught on real fast and a lot of those kids were like that. We are never to talk back to anybody. If I do they'll tell my parents and my parents will correct me on that. That's how they do it. There was a lot of respectful people. So I

learn to respect my people through my mom and my dad. My father, how many times he took off his hat and bow his head like that to an elder, you know. So, a lot of the kids were like that in those days. And if a kid at home is not being well taken care of, if I have an extra pair of boots my mom will ask me, "can we give this to that kid," and I would say, "yes, go ahead." A lot of these people used to do that. They try to help. We all help each other. Well, to start with, from way, way back we come from a strong people, a hard working Gwich'in people.

And so that's the kind of life we had in Venetie.

#### 6.3.4 Elders

*In this section Vera talks about her experiences and memories of the elders she knew in Venetie and Fort Yukon. She remembers elders and community leaders being directly involved in young people's lives, meeting with them when they were behaving badly.*

I remember there was a lot of elders back then. There was a lot of elders all over. Up in Venetie there was Grandma Sophie John, Henry John, Silas John, my grandma Myra Robert, Johnny Frank, Sarah Frank, Ambrose William, Steven Fredson, Effie Fredson, Daniel and Nena Robert, David and Ellen Henry, the whole place was just nothing but elders! Right now we got only one elder up there and that's Grandma Ellen Henry.<sup>74</sup> She's in her mid-nineties. But today there's hardly any elders.

Jennie: And they had something to say about you kids. I mean they, the elders, paid attention to you.

Vera: Yeah. Always telling us this is no good to do or it's ok to do that. We always pack water for all the elders on Saturdays. After we're done with our chores, my mother tell us, "go check on your grandma." So we check. Grandma said, "it's all full," you know, "everything is full".

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<sup>74</sup> Ellen Henry passed away in 2008.

And then we go to Grandpa Enoch John. He's blind. We don't even ask him, we just look at his barrel and we all do that, not only us family but the whole village's kids. We all help each other. They don't have money to give us, but they give us biscuit or bannock and sometimes its dry meat. It's a good treat. And then we all go up to the big hill and just slide down and just do our thing. Then my mother come outside, "you guys gotta come home now!" Good life, I'm talking about. And then they go up on the mountain, my father and the village men go out on the mountain if they see caribou tracks. The whole bunch of them go up. They just make a good killing and then they all divide it up among each other and bring it home.

If there's a marriage problem they'll get them together. They'll sit with them, talk to them. Try to get back together. They talk to them and try to make the marriage work. And then if somebody drank in the village they get together too and they warn them they cannot do that again. If children are being neglected they take them and put them with another family, you know, and make sure they're well taken care of. They even did that here in Fort Yukon. Everybody just help one another. That's how they used to do it and that's how it should be done today.

I remember a lot of Nina Robert, too. I remember they came down with a skin boat. They made their skin boats and they float down in two of them; her husband in one and her on the other one. They'd come back with load of dry meat. Some of the meat was kind of half dried and there's mold on the outside and, "ugh, how could they eat stuff like that," I thought. But, you know, it's aged meat. They cut around it in the inside of it, they slice it up. Honestly, that's the best taste I ever had. I seen a lot of that from Nina and Daniel Robert. Daniel was brother to my mother. They'd come in with like five gallon of bone grease. They eat boiled meat with it or dry meat (laughs). My mouth is even getting watery here. Those kinds of food

they come back with and Nina, she put little out for everybody. She share, which was very nice. I couldn't wait to eat her dry meat. I don't know how she cut her meat but the way she cut it, it's not tough. It's just nice thin dry meat. Nice good smoked dry meat. It's not really smoked real full of it, you know, it's just little smoke on it. I don't see anybody make that kind of dry meat these days. But, the way she does it, it was beautiful. And the way they dress, too, it was good. I remember he was wearing canvas boots and it was just hard on the bottom. What she does was she melt candle and put it around it so when they come down in that skin boat his canvas boots won't get wet.

My grandma Myra, Myra Robert, and her sisters, I think their maiden names were Whiteeye. She had an older sister named Sophie John. Grandma Sophie, we call her grandma, was married to Henry John. I remember they used to have seven cats. They're all laying all over the place. And she talks to them in Native and they understand her. *Tsj' tsj'* is the one that's the precious one to her. *Tsj' tsj'*.<sup>75</sup> That's the name of that cat. "*Tsj' tsj'onjii neehindii*," you know, "get away." "*Dinjii khanigwin'aii kwaa!*" "Don't bother people, go away" (laughter). They just mind her very well, all those seven cats. When we come in the house they all watch us. They're sitting around, you know. They have poles in their house by the stove and then by their kitchen, just like a real typical Native living from way back, where she'll dry meat. She'll bring it in and hang it over the poles. Then they have big long wire across to the other end and they have curtain. We never used to have rooms. It used to be curtain all over. So that's how they live. That's how we live too at our house. But Venetie was pretty well known for curtains after curtains (laughs). That's how they make rooms.

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<sup>75</sup> Tail tail.

Lois Verny, she used to be Lois Druck, she lived with them. She was just a little girl. We're same age, you know, and they raised her. Lois and I play dolls together. And then Grandma Sophie, she got three caches outside. There's one high one, and there's two to the ground. And we used to go in there and she have boxes and boxes of clothes. She used to say, "this is Emma's dress." Emma Robert. "Oh, this belong to Emma," and, "Oh, little Ginnis Golan gave me this." Ginnis *tsal*, they call him. That's Annie Christian's father. His little britches; she had all these old stuff in her cache. Me and Lois and bunch of other girls, we look through it. We almost died laughing because of the old clothes. She got all that and all kinds of ribbons that they used to braid their hair. Oh, she's "*lagwadoo*." That's what they call material. And Grandma Sophie John is so crazy for clothes. As old as she was then, I remember she always try to dress fancy. Henry will be laying over there in the bed and he's quiet, you know. He smoke his long pipe. Big, long pipe. And he's quiet and we play and we do our own thing while Grandma is just busy over there with making her biscuits or her frybread. Oooh, I used to just love that. And she makes such a nice, soft frybread.

But I remember all those cats are there. "*Oodee deedhindii!*" You know, "get back up there." They're all going to go back up there and they're all going to sit like this and watch us. Except for *Tsj' tsj'*. *Tsj' tsj'* is the only one can get away with it. Follow her. "*Oonii neiindii!*" You know. And, "*nitsii vits'ihindiii,*" you know, "go back to Grandpa." He'll just walk over there to Grandpa Henry John and lay by the foot. Boy, they had seven cats, but they were not crazy. They were really good cats. So, now and then they go outside. There was no mice in their house, too. They go outside. "*Daatsoo keen'in!*" She tell them. "Go hunt for mouse." They all go outside and in those days we live in that old village below the hill. And there was nothing but brush. And there's a trail there that people put rabbit snare out or ground squirrel traps and

every cat, one by one they were getting caught and they die. Oh, she was broken hearted. She end up with only *Tsj' tsj'* at the end and when *Tsj' tsj'* died Grandma was so lost. I remember she just cried and cried and cried. But for me as a kid it shows love. You know, it shows love for me. I seen the love between the cats and her with Grandpa Henry there. They're just loving. They love their animals.

And then on Sunday at church Grandma Sophie sits right here at the corner. And then there's my grandma at this corner. And Enoch John is the one that does the service. And Paul Tritt Sr. is up there with him, and they have service all the way through in *Takudh*. And we sit, us young ones. There's John Fred Roberts, who died. There's Lincoln Roberts, me, Louise Frank, and there's Lois. We all sit way in the back and when Enoch John is not there, Ginnis Golan, he do the service. And he has a little visor, he always wear that. We ask him how come he wear that, he said medicine man told him to wear that all his life. He is not supposed to take it off. That's what he told us when we were kids. So he wear that. And he gets very excited, fast, you know. Oh, he's silly little old man. "How-de-do my partner (singing)" he used to sing that and he used to dance around in the community hall (laughter). We get a kick out of that.

So in the church when we know Ginnis going to have church we all go way in the back. That was later in years, but still we're supposed to be quiet. If we make noise (smacks hand together), you know, so we don't say nothing and we sit. So we all sat way in the last pew in that church and we make face at him (laughter). We just try to distract him. "Oooh" (warbles) you know, in Gwich'in. "*Nyiwhot ttyi zyeh zit ni kwilnjik*,"<sup>76</sup> ooh ooh," you know (warbling). He get mix up and my Grandmother Sophie is there and there's Grandma Myra there and they both

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<sup>76</sup> Part of the Lord's Prayer in Gwich'in. I use the liturgical orthography developed by Arcdeacon McDonald as that is what is used in church.

say, "Ginnis, quit being silly!" or, "Ginnis, say it good!" in Gwich'in. "*Gwinzji t'iinyaa!*" they say (laughter). And we were way in the back and we make face at him, you know, just making face (laughs). And then he start over again. "*Nyiwhot ttyi zyeht zit ni kwilnjik. Nyorzi rsinjochootinyoo,*" you know, and, "oooohhh," he'd say (laughter). And we'd just ...(laughs). My grandma and Sophie they just keep getting mad at him. "Ginnis, *gwilii anhaa kwaa tsa' gwinzji t'iinyaa!*" "Quit being silly and say it good," you know.

Then my mother found out about it and we got in trouble. That Annie seen us all making face at him so she told on us. They had meeting with us, the council. And every one of us that was making face to him were sitting in there. And little Ginnis was over there. "Ok Ginnis, who was making face at you?" Point to every one of us. And then they told us not to ever do that again. See, that's what they do, the council in those days. If a kid do something they put them in with their parents and the council member and they talk to us.

Oh, we bother him lots too. He got little log cabin house too. And we wanted chew tobacco. Well, it's not me that wanted tobacco. I was just tag along, you know. Those other kids chew that Velvet. "Ginnis hurry up!" And they got long pole, you know, to his airhole, and they "come on, Ginnis. Hurry up, please." "Mama Myra and Mama Sophie going to get mad at me," he kept telling us. He's just a tiny little guy, too. Just comical. We keep begging him and begging him and pretty soon the door just flew open and he throw out that can to us. And then we all just dig enough, you know, eh, get enough then we throw that can back inside. We're not supposed to go in his house because we cannot go into anybody, a single person like that, into their house. Not us girls or young boys anyway. So, because we bother him too much, there it goes again. They had meeting for us again. "Who teases you the most?" I thought he was going to point to me but he didn't. He didn't point to me but he point to the other three, you know.

Oooh, they were in court with the council. I got out of it so I know my name is going to be good at my house, you know. Boy, I'm going to get beaten up if he point to me. Thank God.

And my mother said, "do you chew?" and I said, "yeah, I did it two times." I told the truth. I did it two times.

"You go back down even 50 yard away by Ginnis, you going to stay home for two weeks," she told me.

So, I don't like that happen so I never went around again (laughs). Poor little man. He's reading Bible too much. I think that's what they were saying. He died. He shot himself. As I was growing up in Venetie then, as we were young, I was young, he kept up that place in *Tsuk k'oo*. You've heard of *Tsuk k'oo*, right? You've been there before? Martin Creek? He kept that place going. It's on a little hill. There's a log cabin and he live there and he's the one that make that fish trap every time and he do the fish traps and muskratting and all that. David and Ellen Henry, that's where they go and a lot of people go there. Sarah John, Walter John. Us, we didn't live in *Tsuk k'oo*, but we live farther down. Like 15 miles away there's a cabin there too. They call it Martin Creek. It's a creek, you know, and there's a cabin there and that's where we used to live.

There used to be a lot of elders in Fort Yukon too. There was a lot of elders living way downtown in main Fort Yukon before the flood. Well, after the flood too. I was born in '48, pretty young. But I remember we used to live right along the Yukon, you know, there's an old house there, that's where we were living. And by us was Louise Alexander and John Alexander and Sarah Alexander. She's an elder. "I wanna to go back to Englishoe bar," she used to say (laughs). That's how she call that place, that camp where they used to live. "I wanna go back to Englishoe bar." Me, I wanted to go to Englishoe bar, too. I don't know what she meant but I

sure wanted to go there because she sound like it was fun. And then behind us there's Chief Robert and Charlotte and then next was Moses Sam and Jennie Sam and then behind them was Chief Esias Loola and his wife Katherine. And then way back was Julia Peter and then on the side was Reverend Albert Tritt and family. And then there's Mariah Thomas and David Collins. That's David Collins' mother. And farther down there's Sophie William. There's an old lady there, her name was Fannie. Old lady, she was blind. And there's Moses Peter living up around there.

I remember I used to go to Grandpa Chief Robert's house. Boy, that house was just lace. They got lace curtain, wallpaper, fancy wallpaper like you see in the movie, like those cowboy movies, you know, you see the wall papers. Nice, it just look so nice in their home. And they have long table and all the food is underneath in the can. When we go in there Grandma Charlotte open a can and dig out cookies. Call it *Łuh gqij fqq*, that's cookies. And I remember that another can, I want her to open other can too, and that's orange and apple. That's the kind of home they used to have. Fancy wallpaper with lace curtain and her chair was even fancy, her table cloth was even fancy. Well, he's the chief so he must have really been making good money with trapping and all that because their house looked really nice. I used to just go there and just, "Huh, when I grow up I'm going to be like that. I'm going to have this kind of stuff." I just dream about it.

And then our house, our house is just a plain jane house. Nothing fancy in our house. So is Paul James' because they got big family, you know, Paul James family is living right next door, and that's how I got to know that Agnes Marie James, that one that recently died. And then, Moses Peter, his house was nice too. Grandma Julia had a nice place. And then Mariah Thomas, she always got beadwork in the summertime for the tourists. And she always dress herself with a silk dress that she make herself. Dress up. She's an old lady and her house just

look nice, you know, all these wallpaper. But there's nothing like couch or anything like that or propane stove. But the way they decorate their house in those days just really nice (laughs). You probably know what I'm talking about with wallpaper and they make their own stuff, you know.

Jennie: I've seen pictures I think of Margaret Cadzow's place, or maybe her mother's place, that was fancy like that, in a book.

Vera: Reverend Albert Tritt, their house was like that too. Oh, it was just beautiful, their house. I remember they had a one room like this. One big house room and then there's another addition and then there's a little smaller addition and when I went in there I remember there's just wallpaper, you know, nice in there. And they got these big pots. Heavy, heavy ones, like cast iron, but it's a white lid; white with black rim around it. Those are the kind I remember I see in their house.

Chief Esias, I remember they had a potlatch there and I was a little girl. I went in there and there's just a lot of people in there and there's two gasoline lamp lit in there and nothing short, a lot of food to eat. And I forget who was playing fiddle, but they were all dancing and I remember I seen Olive dancing and I turned to my mom and I said, "Mom, when I grow up I'm going to be just like her (laughs). I'm going to dress like her. I'm going to have that kinda hair do." I remember I was just telling her because she look so pretty for me. I think she just came back from school or something and she was dancing. Everybody was just clapping for her and people are just happy; always happy with one another. They all shake hands and they always have that joking around with each other. They were all doing that. I think that's why I pick that up. You can't do that these days because they'll get mad. They take you serious, yeah, so you gotta watch what you say. I gotta watch what I say, you know. It's not like the old days.

### 6.3.5 Life in Fort Yukon

*As noted previously, Vera's family moved around quite a bit, but eventually settled in Fort Yukon. Here Vera describes some of the changes in her life after moving to Fort Yukon, including experiencing prejudice and an increase in alcohol abuse in her family. Unlike Venetie, which was mostly insulated from the problems of alcohol abuse during this time (1950s and 60s), Fort Yukon had the character of a frontier town with easy access to alcohol and less emphasis on the types of social control Vera remembers from Venetie.*

And then we came back to Fort Yukon. After being in that kind of life where there's no alcohol, you know, nothing. No violence. Boy, we're being laughed at. They're making fun of me because I was only speaking Gwich'in. I was a little embarrassed, you know. And people drink. And my mom and my dad drink. Wherever we went there's alcohol and then my mom started making home brew. Boy, I used to hate that and in the back of my mind, I used to say to myself if I ever grow up and I have my own kids they will never go through this kind of life. And I made sure they didn't either. Well, they did, but not the same way it was with us. So, in the morning we do everything ourselves, early in the morning we get up, we build fire, we do our own cooking again. A lot of times there's no milk, no sugar. We have to have straight cornflakes. I just throw the water in it and just eat it like that. Eat a bowl of that and just run down to BIA school so I won't be late. We all had to do that, my brothers and sisters.

But still, we have to come straight home from school. We had chores to do. My mom never let us lay around. We always got to cut wood, pack water, do our dishes, make sure our clothes is clean for the next day for school. And then on weekends we go down to show

house.<sup>77</sup> And we could go down there and watch movie but we could just stay 'til only certain time and we have to come home right on nine o'clock. If I'm gone after nine I can't get to go out that next weekend. I have to follow that rule.

I remember one time when we were kids we used to stop at NC, they used to call it NC store, and I remember one time I stole a box of marshmallow and my sister Virginia stole a package of gum and my little brother was with us.

"Wait 'til you guys go home, I'm gonna tell on you."

"No, you're not gonna tell." She gave him stick of gum and I gave him marshmallow.

We told him, "don't tell."

As soon as all three of us walk in, "Mom, Virginia and Vera stole one package of gum and box of marshmallow" (laughs). While he was chewing gum! Oh my gosh, he just gave us away. Every day after school at BIA school we're coming home we stop there and we see other kids do it so we thought we'd try it and we got away with it, we thought, until we got home. Oh gosh, my mother just spank me.

She ask me, "where's that marshmallow?" and I told her I ate it and she ask Virginia, "where's that gum?"

"Sonny ate some too."

He thought he was going to get away with it, but he got spanking too, so we were happy. He ate all our stuff and then he gave us away (laughs). So, we never trust him again. He was one honest kid, I'll tell you that. He's still like that.

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<sup>77</sup> The show house was owned and operated by William Carney. In addition to the show house, Melville's (1949) pamphlet on Fort Yukon describes several commercial enterprises operating in Fort Yukon in 1949, including Eunice Carney's dress shop and novelty store, James Carroll's general store, the Northern Commercial Co., Nina Peterson's coffee shop, Gilbert Lord's roadhouse, and the Melville's café. The current state of commercial enterprise in Fort Yukon is less than half of what it was in 1949.

My mom, she wasn't a heavy drinker. She drinks so much but then she makes sure that we're eating, that we have our dinner and we did our chores. Then we could play around the yard. Oh, there's whole bunch of us. We always had something to do outside. Playing games, hide and go seek, or just games that we create ourselves in the neighborhood. That's what they call Thirty-Third Street down here. Thirty-third kids they used to call us and there's a lot of kids. Nellie and Tommy Carroll had eleven and they were next door. There was eleven of us. And then Margaret Horace and them had ten kids and my Aunt Jessie had about thirteen and then Jemima and Isaac Fields had about thirteen. So you see how many kids we were. That's why we all know each other to this day. There's always something going on around that Thirty-third.

My old great-grandpa Isaac Erick, he stays in a little log cabin house. He was like mid-nineties. And my grandpa all night "tsu, tsu, tsu, tsu," he play his fiddle. They're all dancing up there. At first it start out good. We're all sitting around on the bench like that, us little kids, and we watch. And sometimes I dance. I love to dance. I go out there and I dance with all these big people and I just enjoy myself, you know. And we behave. We behave and we sit there and we watch. Until my grandpa get jealous of my Grandma Natalie when she dance too much. We used to hide our grandma. But they were good grandparents. Especially my grandma, she's a really beautiful little old lady. We love her so much. She never talk to us bad. You know, she's kind hearted. And my grandpa's like that too, but if he gets mad at my father he gets mad at the whole family there. So we know that.

It was really different life then. We're poor to begin with. We were a poor family and there's too many of us. But, you know what? I don't call it poor because we all had one another and we do things together and we all love each other. My mother used to patch our clothes all the time and the other kids make fun of me and I go home and I tell my mother I refuse to wear

patched pants, but she told me, "we can't help it. Let them make fun of you. That's all right. You're not gonna be like that all your life," you know. "It's just for now because we can't afford to buy you clothes." Oh boy, when there's a rummage sale around this town they all go crazy. They go there before each other. Some of them even pull on clothes, pull on a sweater from each other, you know.

And I didn't have very good English. I had heck-of-a time at school. Like when I say, "I want to go to school," or, "I go to school" I say "I'm gonna make school"<sup>78</sup> and a lotta these kids just laugh at me. I figure it out myself why, you know, and then I correct myself. And to this day I still have a broken English. That's because I speak Gwich'in. I'm a very fluent speaker and I'm proud of it, you know. I wish more young people could speak Gwich'in these days, but we're losing it too. I'm very thankful for my dad to really fought for us to keep our Gwich'in language.

So, anyway, we start living here and then there's home brew being made at home. Everything was just changing all of a sudden from the life we had up there in Venetie into Fort Yukon. I seen a lot of alcohol. My mom and my dad would fight, especially my dad, because he gets very jealous over her. Oh boy, I didn't like it. So I get mad at my mom.

I say, "don't make that home brew again. If my father can't control his drinking don't make it."

But she sell like one gallon to two gallon to her friends so she can buy one pound of ground beef and potatoes and ten cans of milk and something for us to eat while my father is gone. Sometimes he goes out trapping with Grandpa Paul and they're gone and we're really down with nothing. That's when she used to do that. It's ok then, well, it's not legal, but it's for

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<sup>78</sup> The Gwich'in verb for going to school is the same as for making something: for example, "School *attsii*" (I am going to school) and "*Łùhch'yaa attsii*" (I am making bread) (Garnett n.d.)

us to eat because my father is not there, you know. So, I seen a lot of alcohol in my family after we came back to Fort Yukon. I seen my grandpa drink. I seen my grandma drink. I see the whole neighborhood drink. Every weekend it's just a little Dodge City. In my days as I'm growing up I seen a lot of people raising hell and next day they all act like nothing happen. Us poor kids, we all stay around and see all these change.

And then we stay up late, sometimes all night around the neighborhood, and everything changes for us. I'm tired from lack of sleep from taking care of my brothers and sisters and going to school. Sometimes I'm just sleeping like this (puts head down). Teacher wakes me up. I'm so dead tired I can't even learn, really. That's from lack of rest; people partying all night down the house. And I was miserable. Miserable life, I'll tell you that. I wish I was never been born, that's how I think, because I'm always worried about my little brothers and sisters. I was a mother and father all my life. Just miserable life looking at all these drunks all the time. How many times I lay in my bed and I think when I grow up I'm getting the hell out of here and I'm not coming back. And I'm going see to it that my children never have that kind of life. But you know what made me stay? Because my mom died, so I stayed. I'm still here. I'm pretty sure it was the same with a lot of families. With a lot of families that I seen, there's alcohol. And they're nice people, too. They're really nice people. They shouldn't do that to themselves, but still they did it. Yeah, good many times I was tired, lack of sleep. But when they're not drinking it's a good life.

One thing I never noticed was child abuse in our family. I don't see that, thank goodness. I know my mom is very strict, very disciplined, but I won't call that abusing. There's discipline and there's abusing. Different. Like when a parent slaps their kids in the face or pull their hair. That's not the kind of thing I seen from both of my parents. I mean, they're going to

sit me down and if I did something they're going to make me talk. One time, though, I told my mom, "Why don't you quit drinking then?" you know. I talk back to her. I never did that. I never talk back to my mother and she was surprised.

Later I was in bed and she was telling her friend, "I think I gotta quit doing this kinda thing now. My daughter told me why don't you quit that boozing." You know, I heard her telling her friend that. So I guess I made sense into her. So it went on like that. That's the kind of life, but like I said I don't see any abuse in our family. All the families living around us I'm talking about like that. I don't think I seen any kind of abuse, but there was a lot of discipline.

So, anyway, I seen a lot of alcohol and other homes like how we were. My father got picked up too, because he was drinking. It hits him when he drinks. That's where I catch myself; a real John Mo<sup>79</sup> there. You see how I build myself inside and then I go out and I try to fight back? That's how my father was. When he drinks he brings it all out and then he raise hell with every one of them. Once he went to jail for five days. They had a jail downtown. We go down and take food down to him. Ooh, I didn't like it. I just wanted to cry to see my father sitting behind there. It was just sad, you know, but I take food down to him.

He ask me stuff like "what your mother is doing?"

"She's home taking care of all of us."

"You guys got wood? You guys got water?"

I said, "yeah, we took care of that."

You know, we just know how to do it. We go across that island we get wood, me and my sister Virginia and my brother John. We hauled it back. It's just no problem.

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<sup>79</sup> John Erick's nickname.

Jennie: How come you decided to live in Fort Yukon instead of Venetie?<sup>80</sup>

Vera: My father wanted to come back because it's better for him to go trapping. He has more help from my grandpa. Just my grandma is up there in Venetie, you know, so all he does is just haul wood and sell wood. That's the only living he make when he's up in Venetie. It's too far, you know, from Venetie down to where his trap line is. It's shorter this way. So that's why he came back. We all came back.

### 6.3.6 Potlatch

*Funerals and potlatches are the events that most clearly demonstrate the people of Fort Yukon's solidarity and commitment to one another. For as long as I have known Vera she has been one of the primary organizers of the potlatch when someone dies. This is one of Vera's most enduring commitments to the community. Every year she should "retire," but somehow she continues to take on the responsibility, along with many others who can be relied upon to cook, clean, and provide comfort and support. Here Vera talks about how she got into working with the potlatch and the different types of potlatches she has participated in.*

I have a lot of respect for Addie Shewfelt, who taught me lots about volunteer work. She's the one who got me into this community involvement. She taught me how to do it. She was a great mentor growing up. I did lots of volunteer work in this community. I volunteer my time a lot with Spring Carnival, Christmas and New Year's activities, and all the holidays. I did a lot of radio DJ-ing from 1993 'til January 2006 and I also served on the KZPA board since 1995 until 2006. I also participated in the Athabaskan Fiddle Festival from 1992 to 1998 and sang country and western music.

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<sup>80</sup> Since Gwich'in were traditionally matrilineal with a tripartite clan system and frequently matrilineal residence, at least in the early years of a marriage, I was curious why, after a relatively traditional courtship Vera's parents would choose to live patrilocally.

I remember from way back when I was a little girl there used to be a potlatch. For example, when they have new election they used to have a potlatch in the village for the new chief and the new council. Also for a holiday, I remember they used to have potlatch for one whole week for Christmas and New Year's. I'm talking about potlatch with real traditional food that they prepare. They make Indian ice cream out of moose meat and they use marrow. They boil the bones on the campfire and they take the grease and they keep filling it up in a can until it fills up. That's what they call *ch'aghwah ghwajji* and that's bone grease. They eat it with dry meat. And then this Indian ice cream was from the backstrap. They cook it on the campfire real slow and then they chop it up with anything heavy, like a heavy rock, and they hit it until it get very moist and soft and then they pour this bone marrow in it. They save all the marrow and they put that in there and then they mix it. They keep mixing until it has enough in there and then they put it in a pan or they could make it round, just like meatballs, you know, and they freeze it. They make lots like that and they store them. And then they make gunnysacks full of dry meat. Then they save all these good part of moose. They continue like that all winter and then they bring it back and that's what they have potlatch with. That's the kind of potlatch I seen. All kinds of Indian food! Not only moose meat, but there's caribou meat and there's geese and there's ducks and there's porcupine. They even roast lynx. It's roasted all night and they slice it up. It tastes like a chicken (laughs). It tastes so good. So, they prepare all these ahead of time and then when they come back to town one whole week of that potlatch goes on along with a dance.

They also have potlatch when people die. In those days some families used to pull sled around with a big blanket inside and people just put stuff in there. They go around door-to-door, collect food and that's what they cook for the potlatch. Sometimes they send out a couple

of guys to kill a moose for the potlatch. Like, when my mom passed away I remember they ate at Myra's. You know, people just bring whatever and everybody just eat; come and go. That's how they used to do it. But, some families prefer having it at community hall. If I had my way I don't think I would want to put on a big potlatch like that. It depends on who it is. If it's a young person I would want their friends to take care of it. But, I can't change it.

I'll talk about some of the potlatch that I did. Boy, there's so many potlatch that I did in my life. When I was a very young woman I did that up in Venetie. I prepared, I help, I make some biscuits, and I'm just all over helping out. Pretty soon people start noticing that I got a lot of interest in it. So, people call me up every time somebody die.

"Vera, can you take care of the potlatch?"

So I said, "Ok, I'll do it."

So when I came to Fort Yukon, same thing. Certain people will say, "hey, we got all this stuff here. Vera you want to be in charge?" and I say, "yes."

And they say, "you want to make the grocery list?"

And I say, "ok, I got that too." So, that's how I do it from like about 1970.

In those days nobody get any burial assistance, so it was very hard, and we go door to door and we just ask people to cook this and then they call us up and we pick it up with a snow machine. But now there's burial assistance to buy food and trucks here to pick it up so all I do is I make a food list. I even know how much you need. I know who makes a good potato salad. I know who makes good macaroni salad. I know who fry chicken good and who likes to cook turkey and who likes to cook ham and I know who likes to make macaroni and cheese and rice-a-roni and I know who likes to make bread or biscuits. It's just nothing new for me anymore. I've been doing it so long. I make a grocery list and say, "hey, this is for the potlatch."

So, the family get somebody to get the food in town and I always tell them, "make sure you get the small box of these, small mayonnaise, small pickles, small," you know, so when we pass food it will be easier. If you get a big container you have to dip it out and put it in another container and that's just a waste of time so it's easier just to get the little mini ones and then that way you pass it out easy. And I know if I pass to 27 people that will take care of it. Twenty-seven to 32 people can cook and that will take care of 300 people. Being here that long, I know that. Now days it's easy. A long time ago, when I was 18 'til 25, it was kind of hard because there's no vehicles, no phone, but it was still a lot of fun doing it then. I enjoy doing it even though there was a lot of sadness in me at times.

And just to make you guys laugh, Belva is good at making *tloh tloh*, that's blueberry or cranberry gravy. She's good at making that. And Margaret and my sister Virginia will make good biscuits. I always give rice-a-roni to my sister-in-law Alberta because she's good at making that. And I always give jello to Loraine because she's very good about making jello. It's not so hard, and it's not so soft. She makes it pretty good, you know. And then Suzy, she's one of the best person that I know can cook a turkey. And Diane she knows how to cook her ham. Elaine, she's good at making macaroni salad and Ellen is good at making potato salad. And Linda, she's good at making macaroni and cheese. The person that cook on the grill is Grafton Solomon. And the person that cleans up afterwards is Yukon Ron. He's there and he mind his own business and he cleans up the whole place and I'm thankful for him. And then the person that loads the trash away all the time is either Eddie or Johnnie. There's a lot of them, but there's certain people that you see do it all the time, and Johnnie, I see him always going down with his truck and hauling trash after the potlatch. Everybody has different things to do and I know, being there

that long, who all cook what. So I know who they are and I just say, "give this to that one." I just make a list and that's it.

Anyway, the potlatch is a lot of work. But, like I said, I been doing it for so long there's just nothing to it for me. But now that I got heavier, it's hard on my legs and every time I get so tired after the potlatch is over and I go home and I say, "I've got to retire now. I'm not going to do it again next time. And I hope we don't lose any more of our people," I say. And I say, "no more." Just recently, I did quit, you know. But, when somebody calls you up and it's your friend, you cannot say no. "Ok, I'll do it," I said. For two days I couldn't even walk, but I did it again. And that's for Betty's family. Afterward I went home and I said "no, I can't do it anymore. This time, for sure I retire," I said, but we'll see (laughs).<sup>81</sup>

#### 6.4 Narratives of Childhood and Young Womanhood

##### *6.4.1 Going to School*

*The Bureau of Indian Affairs operated a school for Native children in Fort Yukon between 1904 and 1957 and the territorial government operated a school for non-Native or mixed children beginning in 1926. In 1958 a new school was constructed that took all students. Conflicts and rivalries between students who went to the BIA and Territorial schools are said to continue to affect Fort Yukon politics and family alliances today.<sup>82</sup> Vera talks about how her parents were forced to move to town to put their children in school, some of the difficulties she faced as an outsider and Gwich'in speaker when they moved to Fort Yukon, and the inter-community rivalries the dual school system encouraged.*

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<sup>81</sup> As of September 2009 Vera has not retired from the potlatch.

<sup>82</sup> In his life history, *Kaiiroondak: Behind the Willows*, Richard Martin (1993) tells of how he was initially denied entrance into both schools because neither school felt he belonged there: his biological father was non-Native but his step-father was Native.

I first entered school at my right age when I was six years old. I went to the BIA school in Fort Yukon, but I don't even know how to speak English. I don't even know how to say I want to go bathroom in English. Just all in Gwich'in. So I sat there and peed in my pants. I was crying so hard. The teacher just spanked my hand with ruler and told me, "you don't have to do that!" You know, yelling at me, and I was so scared. I was so broken hearted. I went home and I told my father all about it and he got mad. When I went home my hands were all swollen and my father got really mad and he said, "you're not going back to that school again. We're going back to a better life." So, he told us to pack up and we took off. Never went back to school for two years. Then, the Marshal came with a paper and said that if he don't bring us back to register his children to school in the village he's going to go to jail. He's going to get in trouble, so we all had no choice but to come back. Mr. Wilson was the Marshall. He warned my dad and gave him so many days to come back so we had to come back. He also did that with another family too. So, we're not the only ones. There was another family that's living down at Sixteen Mile on the other side from us. So, we all came back and had to enter school.

What really helped me with school was I end up with a TB in my leg when I was nine and I was in the hospital for nine months. I was in the Anchorage Alaska Native Service hospital for nine month and just like that I pick up the English and that's what really help me (laughter). I still have a big scar on my leg. I almost got my leg amputated, but the good lord was with me.

I hardly talk because I only know Gwich'in. Everybody come and talk to me, but I don't know how to talk. I don't know how to speak English. So, I shake my head or, you know, and then I point to stuff (laughs) and they have to show me soap and towel and they go in there and they showed me how to do this and that. I don't even know how to turn on the faucet. I didn't grow up with stuff like that, you know.

And then this lady from the church, Episcopal Church, her name was Myrtle, I remember she reads to me after naptime in the hospital. And the more I hear it the more I was picking up the English. It was pretty interesting. I was the most quiet girl, but then I got hold of a scissor and I start cutting patients' hair (laughs). I did that to this one girl in the hospital and I got spanking for that. I cut her hair. That's how it is when you're oldest. You want to take care of everything. Even to this day I still know myself that if somebody out there do something wrong I'm just right there and try to correct that person. It's a bad habit I got.

So, I learn quite a bit while I was in the hospital and I picked up that English pretty quick. When I came back I was just, "blah, blah, blah" (laughter). My little brothers and sisters were all so happy to see me home. They just wanted listen to me over and over and I was teaching them English words. When I came back my parents were living in Venetie and so everything was just different for me. In that short nine month I learn how to use the inside bathroom instead of going outside. Oh, I couldn't get used to it for a while, but one month later I forgot about it again and back to my old self. How I used to live, how we used to live, you know, and that's in Venetie.

Jennie: So, when you got back to school what was the school like? What were your teachers like?

Vera: Well, Mrs. Wilson was very mean and we cannot speak our own Gwich'in. Otherwise she'll hit us with a ruler. We've got to say, "yes," "no," "thank you," and she make us say it, too. She had this harsh voice. She was my teacher for about three years. We only had one teacher. We were all in one classroom. You remember "Sally go goes puff, puff, puff, see, see, see?" That's what I start with. I never forgot that book. "See, see, see, go, go, go, Sally run, Sally run." And the only activity we used to have was outside. For PE we played kick the can or we played

baseball. And then the inside they let us play jacks. We play games on the board. Do you call that a school?

And then there's Territorial school. It was right across from Margaret Carroll's. I didn't try to go around there because I'm being made fun of all the time. If I'm gonna go past there I'll have to run because I'm either called "dirty Indian" or they make fun of me. And it hurts too. I don't know what was the cause of it and most of the kids that I knew that went to school there I grew up with them. And I think they were just doing it because of the older kids. They're not like that anymore, you know. I mean you won't believe they were like that in their young age. Now they're different, you know. But they had so much hate for Indians. I don't know what it was, but it seemed like that. Like, I grew up with a patch up clothes, handmade boots. Everything is hand made from my mother. We can't afford store bought clothes. So I'm being laugh at from uptown and downtown always call me "savage" or "Venetian." You know. "Venetian, you *Neets'qjj Gwich'in*." I don't know what they mean so I go home and I ask my mother.

"Oh, they're just jealous, let it be."

Still, I don't get it, you know. "Why? What it gotta do with it?"

My mother and my grandma explain it to me. They said it's the name of the people. I'm from *Neets'qjj Gwich'in*, it's the mountain people. *Teetsuuch'in* means downriver people. And *Han Gwich'in* is upriver people. That's what it means. It's not a bad word. But, that's what they call me around here. They call me Venetian and they call me *Neets'qjj Gwich'in* and savage, you know. For all I know we're all Natives, you know, and here they do that. So I just cry to my mother and she says, "just don't listen to them. It's not a bad word." It was just terrible! If I tell

you who they are you look at them now and you'll say "them?" (laughs). They're not very much different than me, you know.

I think there was eight of us that graduated from eighth grade. I can't even afford a dress. I remember my mother was just sewing beads real fast so she can take out my dress.<sup>83</sup> Oh, I was so nervous because I had to put on a dress. I keep telling her I could just walk up with my jeans, and she said, "no, you're not going to. You gonna wear that dress." So, I had to put it on and there's a cancan underneath it (laughter). And then my hair, I curled my hair with an Old Velvet can. It's a tobacco can. I cut it into strips and then I cover it with paper and I roll my hair with that to curl my hair. That's the kind of curlers we used to have because we can't afford to buy it from the store. But, boy, my hair look nice for me at that time (laughs). I think that was in 1962. I think it was Regina Varner, that's Michelle Peter's mom, she graduated then and then there's Mary Thomas. Yeah, I think there's Sammy John, Donald Peter, and Sampson Peter Jr.. They were the first senior class to graduate here.

Of course, everybody's drinking home brew in those days. So I had a taste of it from my friends. I got little dizzy. I was fourteen! I mean, imagine, I'm just a kid, you know. But, all my friends were doing it so I'm doing it. But, in the back of my mind, I still think, "Vera, this is not right, what you're doing." But still I did it. And I was just throwing up when I went home. My mother want to know what was going on with me. And I told her I drank home brew.

"You know you could get poison from that stuff?"

"Well, how come you don't get poison?" I told her (laughs).

She was trying to scare me, but she made it too.

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<sup>83</sup> They ordered the dress COD.

#### 6.4.2 Singing in the Church

*Singing and music have been a big part of Vera's life, but this is the only story about singing that she told me on tape.*

One time we had a choir at the Episcopal Church. Mr. and Mrs. Kent were there at the time and Mr. Kent, he was a leader for the Boy Scout. He had Boy Scout going and Mrs. Kent was doing GFS: Girl's Friendly Society. Oh we make these little hats and we wear those and every meeting we make stuff (laughter). And then we had the choir. Every Wednesday we go there and meet and of course I'm the loudest one, and she puts me way in the back and I felt kind of out of place because I don't like to be way in the back. So I somehow slip in the front again. Then she gets me again, "this is enough out of you Vera." Put me way in the back. "You're doing fine with your singing," she told me. "You sing very beautiful." You don't need to sit in the front," she told me. And that makes me mad, but she puts me in the back again.

And one day she explained it to me, why she was doing that. She said I am doing very good in my singing. I don't need to be in the front. She wants to hear the rest of them, the ones that can't sing, because she can't hear them. So she puts them in the front. I don't need her help so that's the reason why. I'm doing good as it is, she says. So then that make me feel good, but still I'm going real loud and she told me, "you don't need to be that loud Vera. You're loud enough. You don't have to yell and sing. Just sing like what you did before. Now just sit back and just sing." And, that's why I got to know all that music in our church and I could sing in Gwich'in too. I learn to sing out of that *Takudh* from Reverend David Salmon. He used to do all that vowel sounds with us like de-ya-da, de-yo-do, de-yu-da. He taught me that so I picked it up and that's how I started to sing in *Takudh*. As I sing over and over it got easier for me too. This was in Venetie. In those days we didn't stay one place. We're always moving. Sometimes we'll

go back up to Venetie and we'll stay there for a while. David Salmon was there at one time and he was the one that taught us. I picked it up pretty fast. I even went to his bible studies after my mom died and when I had those kids with me. I went to his service and to all the class that he was teaching. So, that's how come I know a lot of that *Takudh. Ch'ilik dehtly'aa*.<sup>84</sup> To me it's *Ch'ilik dehtly'aa*.

Jennie: So, all of your family by this time was Episcopalian?

Vera: Yes, we were all Episcopalian. The elders, if they find out the baby is not being baptized within a month they say, "hey, your child gotta be baptized". So here comes all of us. My mom says that I was baptized by Reverend Wilford Files. He's the one that baptized me when I was a baby. So, all of us got baptized. And then they do the same thing for confirmation. You've got to be confirmed. And the age is 12; can't be over 12 or 13. But, I don't understand it. My mom said, "go up to the church, you gonna get confirmed." So I go to church and I sit in the toilet (laughter) until the church is over. And she finds out I'm not confirmed again. Well, the point is I don't know what I'm getting into. I don't understand it, you know. Finally I told her, "why am I going to get confirmed? Do I have to get confirmed?" She said, "yes, that's our traditional." It don't make sense to me. She didn't explain it to me very good. So, I snuck away, three times I did that I think. I stayed in the toilet. I pretend I'm going to church and I stayed in the toilet all that time. Finally, I was confirmed when I was 25 years old by William Gordon.<sup>85</sup>

Jennie: So she gave up.

Vera: Yeah, she gave up on me (laughs). Stubborn.

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<sup>84</sup> Hymnal.

<sup>85</sup> William Jones Gordon Jr., third Bishop of Alaska from 1948 to 1974.

### 6.4.3 Boyfriends

*The station was part of the White Alice Communications System (WACS), a United States Air Force telecommunications system constructed during the Cold War. Fort Yukon's station was completed in 1958. The station was eventually closed and the Air Force leased WACS to RCA Alascom in 1976. The original radar towers, a prominent feature of the landscape and landmark for local pilots, was demolished in 1999. Many local women had relationships with, and sometimes married, men posted at the Fort Yukon Air Force Station during the 1960s and early 70s, creating tensions between Gwich'in women and men of that generation.*

The first time when I seen the GIs, I seen white man, you know, coming into our camp, it was three of them. They were driving boats and we're just young little girls playin' around. My grandpa really like visitors, you know. He always like visitors so he entertain them. And he knows how to do it so he made GI friends. They come by, they go around fishing along the Crazy Slough or Back Slough. They do that on weekends. Some of the GIs go through there and we live at 16 Mile Camp, Grandpa's fish camp. He start being friends with them so every weekend they would come by with different guys, you know, and feed them fish. As we got older, I remember they used to come to his house, just stop by to visit. But, nobody interfere with them. So, that's how I knew that there was GIs up there.

We're not allowed to go anywhere. We always got to be around in our yard and if we want to go to show house we have to do our chores like I said earlier. So, when we go to show house I see lot of these girls, older girls, holding hands with these GIs; all these girls out holding

hands, kissing away with GIs. And then I remember those older Fort Yukon guys, most of them died. They used to want to fight with them GIs.<sup>86</sup>

When I graduate from eighth grade I entered that new school and all these trucks with GI's go by. I was fifteen and I look at all these GIs driving their big trucks going down to the airport to load, you know. Ooh, my eyes just get big and ooh, all those handsome guys go by (laughs). Not only me. There was other girls that were doing that. And then we go to this church, where that CATG<sup>87</sup> is, that used to be a Baptist Church, and there's a preacher named Don Rollings and his wife. They have church there Wednesdays and Sunday. We go to that church, us bunch of girls, just so we can see all these GIs going to church (laughs). They don't even look at us, I don't know, we just want to look at them, flirt with them and then my mother found out about it so she won't let me go back to that church again. "When you go to church you gotta go to church to praise God, not go to church just to look at GIs!" she told me (laughs).

Anyway, in those days what we do at the base was, they call it 7th 0 9th Squadron, and top of the north or Arctic Circle, we could go up there at seven to watch a movie on Wednesdays and then I got to go home. If I go out to movie I have to be home by ten on weekdays because they have a curfew. They were pretty strict on that curfew, the City of Fort Yukon police were. We had a curfew at ten o'clock and then on weekends its twelve o'clock so weekdays when I go up to movie I have to be home at least by ten. Even if I got caught at ten after, five minutes after ten, I'll get fined. And they add dollar on it every time, if I remember

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<sup>86</sup> In the "Air Force" days in Fort Yukon a local person had to have a pass (through an invitation from someone on base) to attend base parties and visit the base bar and bowling alley. Of course, only local women got invited. Local men were unable to compete with the wealth and access to modern technology of the GIs. I have heard of Gwich'in men barricading the road to the base trying to get the girls and women to stay in town. When the base was closed and the Air Force allowed any resident to attend their final "party" the Gwich'in men reportedly trashed the bar.

<sup>87</sup> Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments.

right. If I got caught the first time it would be dollar, the next time two dollar, three dollar, like that. And, I wasn't fully taking it serious, but I had to, you know, because it's the law and they were very serious.

And then our elders around here knows there is a curfew and if they see kids after that hour they think we're running wild. We're being wild kids, you know. My friend Darlene and I, we like to visit each other so we sneak to her house or she sneak to my house and my mother didn't approve of that. She said, "no, cannot do that. You gotta follow the law." So we go to somebody else house like Mary Jane Alexander. Oh, that Mary Jane was a lovely woman. There would be like 12 kids at her house she still wouldn't say anything. She's just a nice, kind hearted woman. She likes all the children. I wish I could just say more about Mary Jane because she was, I don't know what word to use because she was such a darling person and she was a good mentor. I went to her house and she'll always ask me, "what can I do for you Kitty?" That's how she used to call me, Kitty.

Or she'll say, "there's something to eat on the table."

Or I'll say, "I don't want go home because Gene is being mean."

"Well, there's a bed over there, go to sleep over there." You know, that's the kind of just nice warm hospitality even though she got tons of kids with her: her own children. Most of them are grown up, but I was a friend to couple of her boys and friend to her daughter.

Oh, my mother was just upset with me for staying out late.

"The elders will think you're running around wild!"

And I don't know what that means because I'm not running around wild. I'm just growing up: a young teenager who likes to stay out. So, anyway, that's how it was. If I go to movie I have to go home right at ten o'clock. We have to rush down. A lot of kids around here,

we all do the same thing. You know, we go to the base, come back, and then go around to other places, but I'm always watching the time (laughs). I know I've got to go home. A lot of times I end up spending the night with Mary Nathaniel. I ask my mom if I could spend the night she say yes, just so I could stay out (laughs), stay up longer, you know. Oh gosh, I got to go through this and that, this and that with her first, though. Red tape (laughs).

Jennie: Red tape with your mom (more laughter)

Vera: And so when I was sixteen I met this guy. His name was Mike, Michael Lovell. I don't know how it happen, but I end up with him (laughs). So, I start going out with him, but there's not much we can do, either, except go to Margaret Robert's coffee shop there and the guys just want to fight him, so we don't go there. These local guys around here do that all the time. They form a gang and just want to beat up these GIs and a lot of these girls just don't go to places like that with their GI boyfriends. So, my mother said I could bring him to my house. We just sit around. We play jacks and I act like a little kid with him (laughs). Well, I am young, you know. I would say I went with him about eight months.

I start working at the FAA at that time. A whole bunch of us put in applications and we all got hired. There's me, Artha, Sarah Knudson; a whole bunch of us. They call it summer youth program; dollar seventy-five an hour. Boy that was lots of money for me. They choose me to work at the FAA. I filed, answer phones and boy, my first paycheck I bought myself a whole bunch of clothes. I was so proud of myself, you know, and I was saving money. I saved money and I bought my mother a whole moose skin. I was just so proud of doing that, too, because she couldn't afford to buy it.

One time I try to sneak back to Fairbanks with him. I wasn't getting along with my mother and I was staying with my mom's friend, but I don't like the atmosphere. There's

alcohol. I'm frustrated. I'm always taking care of my brothers and sisters. I never have a break and I just refuse to go home so I stayed at her friend's for a while. Then I went home, went back, tried it out again. A lot of times I just wish I didn't even have parents because we were so poor, you know, just struggle, taking care of children, that's all. But still, I'm going through that stage too, myself, as a young person, I wasn't listening to my mom. I think I know it all. So she let me stay there but I know she told her friend that, you know, she has to keep an eye on me, which she did. And then I didn't like to stay there anymore so I went home.

So anyway, that guy had to leave and I was trying to sneak out with him. I went to the airport and I was going to sneak in the plane. My mother's wise. She already told Richard about that, Magistrate Carroll. My mom told him, "make sure Vera does not go on the plane". So, there I was. He was going in the GI plane and I'm going on the regular plane and he's going to meet me in Fairbanks. I was really for it, too. How stupid.

He [Richard] said, "no, you're not going in the plane."

My face drop. I was just bawling. Oh my gosh, all the way down I told her, "I hate you." I thought I just hate her. She was so strict with me like that, see, and I'm thankful for it today because I would have been a widow if I stuck with that guy. He got killed later on in Vietnam. And so that's forgotten, oh, about two months later. I'm young, you know. And then here I met this RCA<sup>88</sup> guy.

That's where Tom Knudson used to work too. And there used to be Regina Varner's husband working there. There's about five, six guys there and he's one of them. He was twenty-two year old and I met him. His name was Harvey, Claude Harvey. Honestly, I'm

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<sup>88</sup> RCA Service Company, a private contractor that ran the White Alice Radar station in Fort Yukon.

seventeen and he just fell in love with me. My mother have to eyeball me again. She watch every move I make, which I'm thankful for today.

He and this other guy, they rented a place down here behind that old house they say that Velma bought? Behind there, that cabin, that's where he was renting and his other friend was there with him. His name was Cherrytree. He goes crazy, that guy, when he drinks, so anyway, he grabbed the pistol from him and he didn't know that gun was loaded and he got shot. He shot his leg by accident. So, they medivac him with one of the GI planes and then I found out later he call for me. One of the other RCA guy pick me up and took me up and he want me come over [to Fairbanks] but my mother wouldn't let me; only if my Aunt go with me. So that's what happen. My Aunt had to go with me and she told me when she got on the plane "if you want to sneak with him, go ahead," she told me. I almost did but that Harvey told me, "just feel good about yourself, go home, talk with your mom and then you can come down to me." He was from Knoxville, Tennessee (laughs).

So, here I am a young girl and I was going to school and he's telling me he's going to buy that house over here. It was a neat house. That's going to be our home. We're going to raise kids. He gave me a ring. I sent it back to him one month later. I sent it back because my mother died.

Well, I think I was a nice person. But I can't handle liquor. I know that in myself a lot of times because if I hate somebody it just comes out. I can't talk about it, but I'll talk about it when I'm drinking. And then my mother died so I just forgot about him. Well, at first I miss him. He send me a Bolivaro watch: sending me this, sending me that. He wanted to take really good care of me. But, I didn't go for it because there goes my little brothers and sisters. After my mom died everything broke loose. Everybody turned to alcohol, even my brother John. Me too,

once in a while, but I know I still got responsibility. Who is there for them if everybody is drinking? So I just quit fooling around like that.

### 6.5 Narratives of Love and Loss

*Here Vera tells stories of her adult life, particularly her relationship to her husband, Gene Englishoe, and the loss of two of her children. These narratives were the most difficult to record because they evoked many sad memories, but also lessons about strength and survival that Vera feels show her Gwich'in character and hopes can be helpful to others suffering similar traumas.*

I first met Gene when I was about 16. He goes to school in Mt. Edgcombe, come back in the summertime, and I see him play basketball. He's always trying to get my attention and I'm friendly with him, but my mother told me, "I better not see you with that guy". I don't know what it is but I kind of think it's because he drinks. Margaret Robert used to have coffee shop and that's where he hangs around. If he sees me he'll just try to get my attention so I just run away and I always remember what my mom said. So I started going with Gene off and on when I was 18, but I'm not really fully serious with him until my dad went to jail. My dad was being harassed by a local guy and he shot up in the air but they took it like he was trying to kill him and he got 18 months for that. I had to take care of my brothers and sisters all by myself and that's when Gene was there. He helped me when I needed help. And then Margie was there for me, too. That's Gene's mother. That's how we ended up together.

He comes from a good family. His mother was really decent; his father too as long as he's sober. His father got his own way of talking. He cuss a lot but that's just how he speak English. Margie used to tell us, "don't listen to him. That's how he speak English. He don't mean no harm to anybody." I understand that so it never bothered me, but other people will think that he really mean it. I know Margie really loves me since I been part of their family, you know.

She always talk to me. She accepted me. And Gene's father did too. And all the siblings there too, I think there was about 14 of them. What I notice about them is they really love their nieces and nephews and that's what I really like. And they did that to my brothers and sisters too. Just like their own, you know. That's what really kept me with Gene. Who else is there would do that? Nobody. Even my own family didn't come around us.

#### *6.5.1 Gina Lynn*

I had my little girl June 28, 1969. I just turned twenty-one June 9 and I had her June 28. I had her at Fort Wainwright and Gene was with me. I never told anybody, none of my family I was going to have a kid. My brothers and sisters they knew, though, and my grandma. Grandma Myra came and she stayed and took care of my brothers and sisters while I went in. My father was still gone. He didn't even know I had a little girl. I was in labor for only 6 hours and she was seven pound and eleven ounce and 21 inches long and I name her Gina Lynn. Oh my precious little baby girl. And I brought her home.

All my brothers and sisters just go around her and they say, "oh, her name is Jingleling," they said. People ask them, "what did Vera name her baby?" "Jingeling," they say (laughs).

And my grandma couldn't say Gina so she say, "Nina."

Oh, that just makes Gene mad. "They better not call her Nina," he say (laughs).

And so we had a baby there and it was good for like six month. Then my grandma went home and we're all alone. Margie takes care of her and then sometimes June while I work at the school. We used to have Headstart in the old fort. I was working there and then I go home, pick her up. I'm all in all the time. Cook for my brothers and sisters: Friday, Saturday, laundry. Gene drinks. Just miserable life and every time we have problem the family take Gina from me and they just won't give her back. They even lock the door on me. And I'm scared to use the

law because I don't want my kid to be taken away. So I go home and I do what I can and then I just got no choice but to have to get her back, you know. So I take him back in again. Ooh, it's just terrible, Jennie. He accuse me of all these guys. I don't even fool around. I was mother and father, that's all I did. Frustration. Depressed. He hit me. My nose was broken two times. Lucky he didn't break my jaw. He pulled my hair, you know. Let's just say there was violence. So I pack up my kids and all my brothers and sisters and I move back to Venetie. I get so tired of it.

But there he is; Gene followed me. So I live in Venetie for about six month and then I went back down again. Came back and that's when I used to live in that little old cabin near where Mike Mastel lives. My father came back to Venetie with my brothers and sisters so I came back down and I fix that little house up. I just doll it up. I fix it up so cute and I got my job back, too. I did good. I had good baby sitter and start working again and he was good too. He's out fire fighting. He's really good to his little daughter, you know. He's a really good father, but that drinking is the one that does it.

So this time I went out. I'm going out drinking and then I go home and he's fighting with me and I'm scared of him so I just grab my baby and run out. Go down to an elder, Martha Flitt, and I stay there for over the weekend. While that he parties in the house and I come back to a mess. Clean up (sighs). He give me money to buy what we need. That's the one thing that I made sure of. That I always had a lot of food, lot of diapers, lot of milk, a lot of everything. Nothing short around there like that. I mean nothing. I don't have an empty house. I had a home. I had everything I need. It just goes on like that until I moved out again. I pack up all my stuff and I move back up to Venetie. I had Anthony then, too. Anthony was a baby. I had him

January 8, 1971. There's no help for us, I'm on my own.<sup>89</sup> I did a lot of stuff in Venetie. I substitute for Jessie as a health aid and as a post master. She taught me lots. And then I worked in that adult basic education. I went out for training for eight weeks and then I came back and I'm teaching all these elders how to write their name. Oh gosh, they just had fun. I was doing that for all winter. And Clara was the director then, I think, Clara Johnson from Fairbanks, and Roy Corral was my supervisor. We do school at night for anybody that want to come. They all enjoyed it, too, and that's how I made my living. And, on the side I was teaching my daughter because there was no kindergarten. I just did it on my own and Sherry helped me. We all play games on how to count money and how to read and I always read to her. So she was ready. I had a smart little girl.

She had a doll called Mrs. Beasley and Anthony used to tell her "Gina, you know what, you never even fed your Beathy Beathy yet" (laughter). "Are you going to feed your Beathy Beathy?" he used to say. So, life went on like that and Gene was good.

Jennie: He came up to live with you?

Vera: Yeah, and it was good, until we started making home brew there too (laughs). I did it two times, but the other people were making home brew and they were sneaking it and once in a while I have a beer with them. Him, he just get totally ass drunk and then he goes to Fort Yukon and he stays down here, fooling around. I hear about all that, but I don't say nothing because I don't see it with my own eyes. My father always told me that "see it with your own eyes before you believe it. Don't just listen to gossip".

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<sup>89</sup> As Vera discussed previously, traditionally, the chief and council would work with a couple to help them get along. By this time that was no longer happening.

So we had rough life and I tried, but you know one good thing about myself is that I never once took any free money. I work for my money for my children. I didn't get no food stamp or AFDC check or welfare check or ASAP check or whatever. I work. I work for my kids, and I'm proud of it to this day.

### *6.5.2 Losing Gina*

We lived in Venetie until Gina was five years old. We moved back down because I didn't really care for the school then. She was the only one that was going enter school as a first grader there and I didn't want that. I want her to be with other students too, so I came back to Fort Yukon. I moved back in June and moved in with my sister, Virginia, and went to work at the pre-school. By that time my brothers and sisters are all older now and the young ones stayed with my grandma. Grandma took really good care of all of us. She did everything for us. She make sure we have food to eat, make sure my brothers are all going to school and all that kind of stuff. She was always there just teaching us how to be: how to be proud of being Gwich'in.

I entered Gina at school as a first grader. I thought I was getting away with it. I knew she didn't take kindergarten, but I let her go into first grade and they found out at the school. About one week later they put her back into kindergarten. Boy, oh boy, my little girl was so broken hearted and she came home crying.

She said, "it's all your fault, Mom. They took me out of the school and they put me with a bunch of little kids. And I am so broken hearted because I cannot be in the same classroom with Donna." She was crying away.

And I said, "look, we're going to go up to the school. I'm going up to the school tomorrow and I'm going talk to the principal. The reason why they did that to you is because you didn't go to kindergarten."

But she still won't go for it. So I try to do her a favor. I say, "let's go to the store. You can make cookies and I'll get all the stuff." So, we went to the store and she was so happy, you know, got that off her mind. She was making cookies. I'm there and she's doing it. She was smart little girl.

So I spoke with the principal and they gave her a test and she had a level of second grade. So they move her back to first grade and she was farther ahead than most of those kids. She was so happy she's back in the first grade.

That was in the third week of September and then my baby got hurt October 18th. She fell off that ladder in the Center Gym. They go there every Saturday and a chaperone was supposed to be there. They have chaperones there with the kids. She went up with Kathy Ann Joseph. They're good little buddies, those two. And they go up and they do a lot of activities with them. That was Saturday. October 18th. She came home. Somebody pushed her and she fell. She had a head injury. I always say she fell off the monkey bar to make it easier, you know, but it was really that ladder they push around to reach things.

What were the kids doing by themselves? Where was the chaperone at that time, you know? She walk all the way home. She knows she got hurt. She was just crying and I was holding her in my lap and I was talking to Hilda.<sup>90</sup> I took her down on a snow-go driving with one hand. She had a big bruise on one eye and the plane couldn't come in because of the bum weather. I was just hysterical. Finally, they got this army rescue plane that came in for us, but they couldn't land in Fairbanks so they landed in Elmendorf and from there they put us in an ambulance and then they put her in the Alaska Native Hospital.

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<sup>90</sup> Hilda was the nurse at the clinic.

I keep calling her and when she came to one time to me she said, "Mom," you know, "Mom, are you here?"

And I say, "I'm right here by you. You're in the hospital."

That's the last time she talk. She had a crack from all the way back like this and her brain swelled up. Never came back. She died October 24 (pause). Boy, I was broken hearted (pause). Oh god, it was so terrible (crying). There went my life. I just didn't care.

Anyway, we took care of her. Brought her back. Buried her. And still I just kind of ignored Anthony, you know. I love him and everything but I'm just hurt. I'm too mixed up in my life. I went into shock. I can't even get pregnant. Nine years I never got pregnant. At night I was just hung over. I'm laying there on the bed and then one day Anthony came to me and he said, "Mom, I miss my sister," he told me. That was like about four months later but I just didn't care. I drank and even then I manage to work. I work and I manage to take care of Sherry and Anthony together. It was just a bad life then. Gene's beating me up more and more and I just said, "I had enough of this," you know. I had my dad stay with me. But he drinks too. Finally, I just start thinking about it and I think, gosh, I can't do this to myself. It's no good for my kid. So I quit drinking with Gene. I found out I can't do it. I just stayed away. When he drinks I tell him, "out, goodbye, get out. Come back when you're sober. Just stay away from me." I don't drink like month at a time and I manage to work every day, but the hurt is with me all the time for a long time. I just walk in circles around this town.

So that's how I kept it after that. Now and then I go out and visit and I bring Anthony with me. We do things. But he miss his sister too. I remember one time trying to take that school picture. I had Nellie Carroll make me a nice black parka for him and put a ruff on it. I took him up there to get his picture and he said, "I miss my sister. I want my sister to sit with

me." Stuff like that, it hurts me, you know. He was like that in that picture (frowns). He was just sad (laughs). But he's the only one I have.

### 6.5.3 *Carrying On*

Anthony and Ribbit were good buddies since they were small. One weekend he spend the night at Belva's and then on another weekend Ribbit will be spending it at our house. He just got close to that family. And Kimberly was there. Kimberly was always like a motherly type to them. Boss them around, too, at the same time. "Kimberly told us not to do that, remember!" they used to say. Kimberly this, Kimberly that. And I just stay home and work, stay home and work. I go out once in a while with other friends and have a drink, then go home. When Gene is sober he comes back and then he try to raise hell with me, but no, I don't listen to him. There's something different, not like how it used to be. That's because we're all grieving for Gina.

And whenever I drink by myself I'll sit there and I'll just cry and cry and cry. I don't think I ever cried for my mom that much because she left me with too many kids. I never had time to cry for my mother because I had too much responsibility and too much to think about, you know. So I think I'm crying for my mom too because if my mom was alive she'll be with me and we'll have each other, I thought. A lot of times I don't know who to talk to. Every person I go to they're drinking. I go to my relatives but there's always alcohol involved. That's when I go to Margie, Gene's mother, and sit with her. She's a very understanding person. And then sometimes I go to Nina and Addie. They're pretty good, you know, but still it's just like, no more happiness. And then my sister's grieving too, same time, for her family and nine months later my brother Earl's baby died, their first one. His name was Wayne. He died of SIDS. They woke

up and baby was gone. Oh, there it goes again. That hurt came back. That short time in '74 and '75 was a terrible time for all of us; all the family.

I try to talk to different people about it and I try to make myself better. And I keep saying to myself, "I don't want to get into alcohol. I don't want to get into alcohol." I never was a heavy drinker in my whole life. I'll drink on weekends once in a while, but that's it. I didn't drink every night like a lot of people because I seen enough of it in my family. I see them, they want more drink and they go around and they bum and they sell all the little stuff they have or what money they make they drink it up and I'd just rather just not do that. So I have enough. I provide for myself. That part was good.

Monday through Friday I work from 8 to 5 and then on weekends I try to catch up on my laundry. That's what I always been doing because that's what I was taught. I do my laundry and I fix up all the stuff for the next week, like what we're going to eat, and then try to do little things with my kids. Me and my sister, we used to put out rabbit snare with our kids. There's me, Leon,<sup>91</sup> and Virginia and her boys, we go way out and we put in a snares. There was no dump back there then. The kids do it themselves. We go around that one little trail and then next day we go out again and they check their snares and some of them catch rabbit and some

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<sup>91</sup> Leon is Vera and Gene's third child. A year later Gene's drinking caused Vera to decide to give up their fourth child for adoption. This was a very painful episode in her life and perhaps the only decision that she continues to question; her one real regret. This is what she later said about Winston. "I just want to say a little bit about Winston Erik Smythe. He was my son. He was born August 24, 1979 and he was 10 pound 4 ounce, 22 1/2 inches long. At that time, Gene was drinking so much and I was lack of everything. I was barely taking care of Leon and Anthony so I talked to my dad about this. It was a very hard decision I had to make, but I want the best for my son and I gave him up for adoption to Roy and Sharon Smythe and they adopted him one day old. And then, it kinda hurt. There's lotta things that went along with it, but I know I did the right thing. Gene was drinking so much, but he said it was ok. But I did ask my dad and my dad said "you're old enough to make your own decision." So that's what I did. And Winston came home when he turn 20 years old and he live with us, but he's not the only one. We love him, but he made his choice. He's into that alcohol, which I don't like, but there's nothing I can do about it because Winston is old enough. And some day he'll tell me "Mom, I made my choice. I'll be sober." That's what I pray for today."

of them lost it. At first, of course Leon was crying because he didn't catch a rabbit and I said, "No, don't feel bad. You'll catch one. You see, you did it too low," I told him, "so the rabbit jump over the snare. "

So he stop crying and I said, "make it a little higher." Stuff like that we did with our kids, me and Virginia. And sometimes we went way out to that Sucker River where they go ice fishing. We used to do that too with Beverly, me, Virginia, and our kids. And we go out there and we fish and we cook to the fire; their marshmallow and their hotdogs. That's our social with our kids. Sometimes on Saturdays they go down to the gym, but I've got to make sure who is there because I'm nervous about that place after what happened to Gina. I make sure that Gene or somebody is there all the time. And so we are in this new world. It's changing from how I grew up. It's changing fast.

#### *6.5.4 Losing Anthony*

In 1988 my son, Anthony, died. He was murdered. There it goes again. Oh my gosh. It just built up in me again. That was November 23, 1988. And that guy that killed him only serve 8 years in jail, but I told them in the court that I do not want him in Fort Yukon as long as I live here and they took my wishes. It's not going to happen. Anthony was going to graduate that spring in May and I was really looking forward to that. I sent him to Mt. Edgecombe for one year and he made honor role there. He was a basketball captain. I was so proud of him and I bought him a leather jacket. He was so proud of that leather jacket. He likes to dress up, you know. He always dressed up and my father used to tease him, "you're the only Indian I know that got curly eyelash" (laughs). He got long eyelash and it curl. And so we're looking forward for him to graduate in May and this happen.

And I just sit there and even crying won't even do me good. I just raise a healthy boy, young man, and one day he was taken from me. I felt so cheated, you know. It hurts. There I go again drinking. I had Leon then. Leon was born July 31, 1978. They're eight and a half years apart. I try to live here, but too much memory for me. I sold his motorcycle and I sold his snow-go, all that I bought for him. I was so proud that he's doing so good, you know, and he was a good kid. He was really friendly. He never talk back to me, never. Never put a fist to me. He was a very good kid. I'm proud of myself for raising him like that. I cried and cried for him.

Nothing was good for me until I was at a home where they were doing drugs. I was 43 years old. I never took drugs in my life. I don't like drugs. I don't even smoke cigarette. And they showed me how to do it.

"Try one, see how you feel with it."

I should have said, "hell no," but I didn't. First I went like this (gestures); all splash and they all cuss at me.

"Bitch! You know that goddamn thing cost a lotta money!"

And I said, "well, I don't know what you guys are doing."

"Like this," he told me (sniff), "like that."

So I did. Pretty soon I'm just running around. I was washing dishes. I was just laughing. I never felt so good.

"Cripes, I'll take another one."

Pretty soon it went on and on and on. Two years. I thought I was cute. I wasn't even grieving anymore, you know. I felt good. That's what I thought. Until the bills start piling up. Everything was piling up. I started to lie to Gene. I'd say, "I'm going to pay this bill." But I

wasn't paying it. It all (sniff). See how bad I went? I got addicted to it for a while there, but I thought nothing of it.

One time I was on my way home and I ran a stop sign and Louie pulled me over. Boy, I put up a big fight with her. I grabbed her citation book and tore it all up. And I was going to hit her, beat her up I don't know, but another cop came to me, tried to hit me with a black jack. I was high, you know. I grab that black jack and I was going to hit him, but I threw it and I ran away from them. And I thought, I'm going to face it sooner or later and so I just came out. So I walked back to them and I told them, "take me." They put me in jail. I was hysterical crying.

I called for Wally. I said, "he's going to bail me out." So they trusted me with Wally. I had hundred dollar fine and I told Wally to pay it for me.

I went home and told them, "hey, I'm going to behave. I'll just go home," I said.

I went inside my house and Gene was there and I said, "you get the hell out. This is it. I mean it. I had enough of this kind of life. I'm going to start out good for myself and you're not going to screw it up for me again. I want you to get out," I told him.

"Just get out and don't ever come back to me again. I'm not going to accept you no more. Everything that I did, it's all on account of you too," I said. "I don't have a home. I never had a good life, all because of you. You abuse me, you accuse me of this and that. Everything was dirty about me," I said.

"I'm going to clean that up because of all that verbal abuse. That's all you did to me," I said. "Twenty-three years, now you get the hell out of here," I told him.

### 6.5.5 Recovery

The next day I said, "I want to go to treatment." So, I talked to Suzie Peter. "I want to go," I said. And I'm on insurance so I went to ANARC.<sup>92</sup>

I told Leon, "I'm going to go in. I'm going to be gone for one month or maybe six weeks and I'll have Donna take care of you. I'm going to make sure that you have money and you're going to go to school good and she'll take good care of you."

And he said, "ok."

So, before I left I just took care of everything and then I went down to Anchorage. Big lump right here. It hurt so much, but I said, "I'm going to be strong. I lost my two children. I don't want to lose a third one. I'm going to help myself."

Louie made a complaint for me, but they threw it out because she didn't write it good and then they just got me for a misdemeanor. But that's not even going to bother me.

"I'm just going to work on it, I'm going to do it one day at a time," I said. So I did.

It's hard. As I'm getting ready to leave Gene was already gone. He put himself in treatment too. I really meant it; I'm not going back to him. I'm going to find my good life. Oooh! You should have seen me at the treatment. I was so miserable from head to toe. All my life, alcohol. All my life I was a mother and father. I was very heavy inside. But when I'm walking out of there I felt good about myself. I felt like Vera Erick. I didn't feel like I was dirty. I said to myself, "I'm never going to bother this alcohol as long as I live."

It's not only alcohol that did it to me, though. It was everything that happened to me. Everything just fell in on me. So six weeks I was gone and when I got off the plane in Fairbanks I only had twenty-one dollars in my pocket. That's all and I had to go to court. So, I spent the

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<sup>92</sup> Alaska Native Addictions Recovery Center.

night with my friend Darlene and I went to Bingo with that twenty-one dollar and I won a thousand dollar (laughter). Boy, was I happy. I shop for Leon, all the things that he wants. I talk to him on the phone all the time. My poor baby. Always miss me. But Donna did good by taking good care of him. And, then I went to court. It was only a hundred dollar fine. They just drop everything.

Even after treatment you still have twelve steps and then you got sponsor. Titus Peter was my sponsor. I talk to him all the time, you know. And they gave me my job back. Back to TCC again, but this time I felt good. Then Gene wrote me a long letter and I read it. He writes a good letter, that guy. As I'm reading it I was even falling in love again. You know, I love him. I love Gene. I really do. He's a good man when he was sober. But he wasn't a good man when he was drinking. It's the alcohol that does that. When he came back he walk in the house, he hug me, and he said, "I will never abuse you ever again. I will never hit you again. Never again." And that's how he kept it.

#### *6.5.6 Marriage*

In 1990 Gene came back from detox. He came back and that's the last time he drank. He went in for detox in 1990 and he died May 3, 1999. But, we really had a good life together between that 1990 to 1999. We had a good life together. We had Leon and so I began to enjoy everyday life. I enjoy what I was doing at home. I was working Monday through Friday. I don't wake up with a hangover. I don't have to worry about Gene coming home drunk. I just felt good. It was a good life. And then he got a job as a camp manager down at the alcohol recovery camp. It was down at Bo Kelly's. He had land down there at twelve mile and that's where they made that camp. He was with that job for two years and he also work in Valdez. We bought a boat and motor. Then we bought a snow go. Things that we never had, you know. And then

life got better and better. He did things with Leon, took him out, and I did my thing, taking care of the house, taking care of this and that. I seen the behavior of Leon change too. He's happier. But then he got in with his young people, you know, drinking and stuff like that. Oh, me and Gene, we just suffered through that too. He was following us, you know. That really upset Gene, because he said he look back and "he's following my footstep" and that's what he don't want. But still, he never give up on him.

So we had good life and we enjoy each other until 1997. He was just going to head down to Anchorage to get his knee surgery and I told him, "do you need an escort? I'll go with you."

He said, "no, that's not what it said on my paper. I'll be ok." So, he was leaving and before he left he just kind of talk funny for me.

"If anything happen to me make sure Leon get his boat and motor." He talks like that. He never used to talk like that.

And I told him, "oh, don't talk like that. You're too young to even think about dying" I told him.

But when he went down every time he eat something he was choking and he got to eat slowly. So he thought he'll have it checked out and he went to the clinic and that's when they found out what was going on. I even had to go down that night. They want him to stay down there so I went down. They did all these tests and here he had esophagus cancer. He had radiation and chemo both for three months. We stayed down in Anchorage and all that time he treated me really good and I did the same thing for him. I took really good care of him. First class, as poor as I was, I took good care of my husband. And then they said there's no more cancer cells so we came back. Then about six month later he start having pain on his side and

then he start coughing. The cancer came back into his liver and his lungs and that's when the doctor told us that he got six month to live. I cried and cried. You know, it hurt so much.

And sometimes he'll be in a good mood and other time he'll be in a bum situation. When he's like that I just stay away until he calls for me. And he keep telling me, "I want you go to health aid training. If I'm gone, don't be sitting around here crying for me. I know how you are; you always like to cry for every little thing. So don't cry for me or sit around here and miss me. Try to do something. I really want you to go to health aid training," he told me. "The way you took care of me, you really done a good job. You really did a good job" he told me, "and I'm proud of you. And I'm sorry for everything. All the things that I did to you Vera, I'm sorry." He keep telling me that.

Day after day he keep telling me how sorry he was. "If I could do my life again you'll live like a queen" he told me (laughs). Well, it's never too late. And then he talks about Leon. He talks about Winston. He say, "Winston, he's going to be stubborn, I know it, but Leon is going to come out of it." And that's what he told me. He say he's going to get out of it and he's going to be a man. "I know it," he said.

When Gene got sick he told me, "at least I want to do it right. Vera, could you please marry me?" (laughs). "I want to do everything right," he said. So, that's how we got married. We got married October 25, 1997, down in Anchorage while he was going through chemotherapy. We got married in the Seventh Avenue Episcopal Church with Norman Eliot. We did it real private because he was going through that chemo and he couldn't stand crowds. He wants to be alone, you know, so he said it got to be private. So we didn't invite nobody, but when we walk into church there's thirteen people. Carolyn Peter and Donald stood up with us and I said, "I don't know who's going to walk me up the aisle."

"Well Vera," the preacher Norman Elliott told me, "for a couple that been together thirty years I think it's no problem for you to walk up alone" (laughs).

So I said, "Ok."

And then, "who give this woman away?"

And Sally Herring, she used to be Sally John, was sitting way in the back, "I do!" she said (laughs). So Sally gave me away.

We said a quiet ceremony, but still they cook at her house. They had all kinds of food, but Gene can't eat a lot of food because of his treatment. The more I don't see him eat the more I didn't want to eat so I just pick a little bit. They even have a wedding cake and everything. Then Gene said, "I want to take off this suit now. I want to get back in bed." So he crawled back in bed. But it was good, you know, to see these thirteen people. That was people that mostly work with him at that recovery camp from TCC. Victor Joseph was there. Gene couldn't even tie his tie, you know, so Victor had to do it for him. And I was tying his shoes. We were just dressing him up because he's so weak. But everything turned out good. My husband died May 3, 1999. I think about him all the time and I sure miss him.

### 6.6 Advice

Jennie, I want to talk about drugs and alcohol. In my young life I always notice there was alcohol around, even when I was a little kid. All my family had drinking problem as I grew up. First I seen my grandpa, grandma and then a lot of cousins, a lot of relatives, just about all my relatives. We just grew up with it, me and my siblings. My grandpa, he's the discipline type, serious type. You know, life has to go on, we can't just do whatever. If he got fish for the winter then it's for the winter and we cannot bother it. Stuff like that. But if he's drinking then we'll say, "Grandpa, can we have dry fish?" Boy, he'll take it out for us. You see the difference

between when they're sober and when they're drinking. But my grandma, in both ways, either sober or drinking she's still nice. She know how to say yes, she know how to say no.

And then for my dad, the way he grew up my dad was kind of abused. So after he was older when him and my mom got married he don't take no crap from anybody. But when he drinks I hear him talk about it and a lot of times I even hear him cry because he been abused. My father, he's a good man. He's a very good man when he's sober, but when he's drinking he wants to pick a fight. And for my mother, she's almost same as my grandma. Sober she's nice, drinking she's still nice. But sometimes my mom really discipline us and she's very strong on it. If she asks us to come home at four o'clock right after school we have to do it. And then we have to do chores at home and only after we're done with the chores could we go out, like to the show house. But, sometimes when my mom is drinking we would say, "oh, she wouldn't mind," you know, and I'll just say, "oh, there was no clock so we didn't know." But we make sure we came home at ten because it's curfew. And that way we get away with something like that with my mom sometimes, through drinking.

Then I met Gene. We were together thirty-three years and out of that thirty-three years he drank for twenty-three years and good life was ten years. But in that twenty-three years I seen a very different man when he's drinking. He's evil. He's mean. He accuse me of this and that, what I don't even do, and he beats me up. But when he's sober he's a very gentle man. Nice man. I know he loves me and I know he love his children. One thing about him, he never did abuse his children. He always talk to them with love no matter if he was sober or drinking. But with me it's different. He picks on me all the time when he's drinking. Jealous, I think. And that runs in his family too because his mom and father did that too. There was a lot of alcohol there. So we both grew up with alcohol in our lives very bad. So, you know, that alcohol really

abuse us, all my relatives. I mean, we do things crazy in our drinking that poison. And I still drink once in a while, but still, I know it's wrong. Even one cup is still wrong from what I learn. But it's not easy to say, "no thank you."

Drugs is another thing that's really abusing this whole community in our Yukon Flats. Drugs wasn't in my young life. I seen it through my friends, but me, I didn't get into until I was 43 years old with that cocaine. I was grieving for my son and it just hurts, you know. Nothing could satisfy me. That pain is always there until one day a friend of mine told me try it. For two years I was using it. But it got to where I wasn't paying my bills. What I said earlier about my Grandpa Paul, that he's very stern and a disciplined man, that's exactly how I am. I've got to make a living. I can't just have nothing. I work. I make sure I have money to provide for my children. But that cocaine takes a lot of money so I finally quit. But now, it's addicting our whole Yukon Flats and it's very sad. That's where all the money is being spent. If we don't have those two, we could be rich and Native pride would be strong today.

I hate to say this but sometimes when I lay in bed I think about all that. It's education, you know. Education is very important and we hear that from our elders. All our lives I heard it. It's very important, which is true. You've got to have education now days in order for you to have a good life. If not, you won't make it. You've got to have that education. The reason why I talk about it is because of this young generation coming up now. They're lost because of us; because we didn't teach them. For one we lost our Gwich'in language. Very few understand. The next generation it's gone. And even the food we eat will be gone. This kind of stuff is very important to me because I was taught that way through my grandma. She always talk about respect, trust, obey, have love for one another. Be like one. Unite together. And we're losing that. I lay in bed I think about all this. I just toss and turn. I just bother my mind about it. What

is going to happen in this next generation? They're going to lose it. I hate to say that, but it's true.

Gwich'in people are very strong people. Strong mind, strong body and they don't give up. That's what we need to think about. It's never too late to reunite together again. It's never too late for anything. It's never too late to get your education. You know, I heard that good many times. Be strong in your mind. Be proud of who you are and just keep going. Make it work for yourself. There's all kinds of education. Look at David Salmon. He said, "education is everything. My education was I became a priest and then I went all over and I preach the word of God. And still, that's not good enough for me because I want to teach the young people what kind of tools we used to have." And that's what he shared; the tools that he make. And that's very good, you know.

If David Salmon could do that, we could do that too. There's all kinds a ways you can do it. As you graduate from high school don't think that's it. Find something you like to do. People look up to you when you're like that. People look up to you. "Gee, I like that young man because he tries," you know. Don't give up, just keep doing it. Don't have that low self-esteem. Be proud of what you are. Be proud of what you're doing. Don't give up.

There's two good medicine: one is you laugh and the other one is you cry. Those are two good medicine in Gwich'in and then if that can't help walk or work. Get out of bed. If you're depressed say, "oh heck, I'm going to go out and cut wood." You know, those are good for your body, mind, and soul. You work. Don't think that you're the only one in this world that's like that. That's what make the world go around. You've just got to work at it. *It'ee*.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Enough

## Chapter 7 Reading the Narrative

That each individual would have their own “reading” of Vera’s stories seems to me both academically and culturally (for the Gwich’in) appropriate, although the choice of “dialogue,” “narrative,” and “reading” as a theoretical frame for understanding Gwich’in culture seems somewhat ironic, given Gwich’in emphasis on “doing” as a cultural identity marker. For Vera and other Gwich’in, culture is in the living not the being.<sup>94</sup> However, many readers may have the background for only the most rudimentary of readings. While providing that reading does not fit within the Gwich’in storytelling and learning tradition, it is important both as a part of anthropological convention and to provide a basis of understanding for readers who do not have prior knowledge and experience of the Gwich’in. It addresses Gwich’in concerns, including Vera’s, that their experiences may not be understood by a younger generation whose experiences are so different from their own as well as their concerns that their stories will be interpreted through the dominant stereotypes about their community and culture without additional voices and perspectives. The following discussion of Vera’s use of stories and some of the various dialogues that Vera’s narrative both draws from and engages, provides some of the background, albeit in a cautionary way, and can be seen as a part of my reading of her stories. To the extent that I can guide how people read the narrative, this section attempts to provide some additional directions and background for developing a broader understanding of Vera’s stories. These dialogues are intended as charts of a river that is continuously changing to provide some parameters for understanding how to read and evaluate the narrative, but take caution; the river changes and there is more than one navigable channel.

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<sup>94</sup> Thank you to Kathy Sikorski for articulating this difference in identity formation between Gwich’in and non-Native peoples.

### 7.1 Stories and Meaning: "Maybe an Answer is in There"

While Vera and I were in agreement about the themes of her story - discipline, hard work, strength, respect, affection, education, poverty, and substance abuse - we do not share the same approach to understanding her stories. While some traditional Gwich'in stories may have intended meanings, they are not explicitly stated and listeners are expected to find the meaning themselves.<sup>95</sup> Vera describes herself as a constant questioner, scolded by her grandma to "don't ask questions." Personal stories, although told in different ways and in different contexts than traditional stories, are also expected to convey meaning without overt explanation. If learning is expected without asking questions, then answering direct questions for explanations is certainly a culturally difficult negotiation. Indeed, stories don't need to be explained, they are the explanation. Like Angela Sidney,<sup>96</sup> Vera often responded to my questions about meaning by repeating a story. For example, when I asked Vera what she felt young people would not understand about her stories (one reason she wanted them to be more edited) Vera responded by referring back to stories about her growing up and only when pressed, summed up with more direct comments about her view:

When I was their age all I seen was people working. And on holidays everyone was celebrating together. Everyone worked together. If there was a problem, like in Venetie there were seven tribal council members, they would work with you. They worked with the people. I obey my parents and if I don't I get in trouble. Children are not taught like that today. There's too much TV. It's just

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<sup>95</sup> Phyllis Fast quotes Clarence Alexander's description of learning from his grandmother: "She would make me sit without speaking until I understood what she wanted me to know. She wouldn't tell me anything. I had to understand it myself" (Fast 2002:149).

<sup>96</sup> Julie Cruikshank writes: "Whenever I asked her [Angela] what it is that children actually learn from these stories, she replies by repeating the story for me. The message, she suggests, are implicit, self evident: the text, she would argue, should speak for itself" (1990:32).

getting to them. Kids just lay around, like couch potatoes, and you have to pay them for everything. When I was a kid I was happy to get a quarter for a little work. Now they want twenty dollars. And, there's too much junk food and that gives kids health problems, even diabetes. I never saw that kind of thing when I was a kid. This thing we're writing is not to show people how poor we were. In those days I never knew it was hard. I enjoyed it. I don't regret anything. People can still be like that today. We could still do that, help each other.

Vera's experience, as expressed through her stories, is different from what young Gwich'in people experience today. Without that direct experience she is concerned that they will not be able to understand her stories and perhaps even interpret them as stories about poverty instead of about hard work and personal and community responsibility. At the same time, Vera shows that you can successfully apply Gwich'in ideas about self-sufficiency, strength, and pride to any life situation. Her grandmother's words are not just useful for those living a traditional life, but are useful for those living a modern life as well. As Vera notes, "If you went by what Grandma was teaching us you never got stuck. She always told me 'work for your living.' And that's what I did."

As noted previously, experiential knowledge is important for Gwich'in and other Athabascan groups. Pat Stanley, the Director of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments from 1985 to 2002, describes early meetings that lasted days while each person told stories to illustrate their concerns.<sup>97</sup> I have also experienced storytelling in this context, as well as the unfortunate reactions of non-Natives. These stories, that for the teller form the core of the information they are trying to impart, are frequently viewed as wasteful (of time) and beside the

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<sup>97</sup> Murray (1910) makes several references to the length of Gwich'in speeches.

point by non-Native listeners. They want the meaning behind the story handed to them in abstracted (and short) terms; not the specifics of the experience, but the generalizations to be drawn from it. Again, for Vera there are no “generalizations.” Her experience can only be helpful as it speaks to other personal experiences, even while she worries that negotiating the divide between her experiences and the experiences of the younger generation will be difficult. The dialogue is between Vera and each individual person listening to or reading her story, not between generalized theories of how to live. Vera emphasized this when she discussed her focus on education for young people today and her own experience. “Education is important, but family comes first. That was my choice. I had to leave my education to take care of my little brothers and sisters so they didn’t get sent here and there. I’m not trying to say, ‘quit school and stay home with your family,’ but that was my choice.”

Through her presentation, Vera is also attempting to preserve the autonomy of each reader, although as she reaches elder status some of those constrictions fall away. As she says, “I try not to be a mean elder, but sometimes I just have to tell them off.” Even as an elder, however, her authority lies in her experiences and her ability to convey them through her stories, not on direct pronouncements of what is right. For me, this way of educating is difficult. I, like many non-Native people, am most comfortable with explicit direction and generalizations that tell me what to make of individual experience. Vera says of her story, “anyone can use it, maybe to help for their children, for education, or for behavior. *Maybe an answer is in there.*” That last sentence, “maybe an answer is in there,” I think captures Vera’s hopes for her life story as well as her idea about the appropriate way for people to find meaning. Vera tells her story in the hope that there are answers for others, just as her grandmother’s stories provided answers

for her. She hopes that I and other listeners will take what we need from her stories, but she cannot tell us what that will be.

### 7.2 Stories in Context

My own reading of Vera's stories includes a discussion of the various contexts in which Vera tells stories. I have experienced Vera's stories in both informal and formal settings, alone and in groups. I have also heard from Vera and others about the stories she tells to others in private, usually when they call for support during a difficult time. Vera is very cognizant of who her audience is and what kind of story is appropriate for the setting. Most of Vera's knowledge about traditional practices and knowledge come from information she received from her maternal grandmother, Myra Robert. She tells stories about these traditions, however, not in the abstract, but through how she has experienced this knowledge in her own life. My personal favorites are stories about how different raven calls can tell you what kind of weather is coming (difficult to render in writing, but we tried). Vera often told me about raven's predictive ability in the context of predicting the weather and she included those stories in her narrative as well.

Vera also tells what she learned about appropriate female behavior, traditional healing techniques, and appropriate treatment of animals, again, not as traditional stories or an abstract or generalized statement of practice or belief, but through stories of how she experienced learning the information. Many of these stories play out as a clash between the more traditional beliefs of her mother and maternal grandmother and her father's more relaxed viewpoint. We learn about puberty rituals and menstrual taboos through stories about her own growing up and her mother, grandmother, and father's different reactions to those situations in her life. We learn about proper female behavior from her stories of her grandmother's admonishments not to swim in the river or eat moose head prior to having children and her

father's response that, "that's a B.S.," as he feeds formerly taboo items to her younger sisters. Stories of traditional healing all come from events that she witnessed: her sister-in-laws difficult childbirth, her father's bad cut. Each story arises from personal experience.

Stories and knowledge Vera is most confident in are more likely to be shared in a public setting, while others she only told because I asked specifically. Vera does not like to speculate beyond her own experience and this is one of the reasons she did not tell me any traditional stories. Although she knew them from her grandmother, she didn't consider herself fully competent to tell them. Other reasons were that they had already been recorded, although not entirely to her liking, and they were, "nothing new to her." Vera's intention is not to preserve culture, such as the traditional stories that have already been recorded and rendered into writing, but to offer a view of living culture through her personal experiences and stories.

Vera tells many stories about experiences from her childhood and young womanhood. In her narrative these stories comprise the majority of the text from her childhood through the death of her mother. These stories often focus on people or things that she saw and information that she learned. During this time of her life Vera presents herself as an observer and a recipient of knowledge and experience through her parents, grandparents, and elders. She often alludes to what she now sees as her youthful misinterpretations during those times, particularly the differences between discipline and abuse and poverty and wealth. For example, as a child she interpreted her mother's disciplinary actions as mean, but later appreciates the restrictions she placed on her when she kept her from leaving with a GI boyfriend. She notes that as a young girl she thought they were poor and wished for "fancy" stuff, but looking back she sees the value in the discipline and hard work of her childhood when she learned to do and think for herself as a Gwich'in woman.

She also tells stories about her observations of the community events common when she was a child. These stories in particular are told in many settings. People love to hear about old time celebrations such as the type Addie Shewfelt used to organize for the Fourth of July in Fort Yukon. Vera has told these stories on the radio, to me privately, to friends during our Scrabble games, and to individuals feeling sad and nostalgic for the old days. Although Vera did not tell any Fort Yukon Fourth of July stories on tape, her stories about holidays in Venetie, where the entire community processions to the community hall, are in the same theme.

Vera's stories about her experiences as a wife<sup>98</sup> and mother might be considered her most "teaching" stories. These stories, of her life and choices after her mother died in childbirth, constitute the bulk of Vera's experiential knowledge: those moments where she is the agent of change and not the recipient. These stories are not shared in a group setting, although they are sometimes alluded to. Instead, their full telling seems to be reserved for private conversations where Vera feels the listener might be able to find something of value. I don't know how often or how in depth Vera tells these stories to a private audience, but she frequently receives calls from people who are experiencing their own difficulties and need someone to talk to. I know that for many of these stories the first time I heard them in full was during the interview process.

Women provide an important support system for each other within the community. Vera refers several times in her own narrative to the women she would go to for advice and support when times were difficult, such as Nina Russell after her mother died, or Mary Jane Alexander when she and Gene were having troubles. These women provided Vera with advice,

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<sup>98</sup> Although Vera and Gene did not officially marry until the end of his life, the term wife is most appropriate here.

comfort, and strength to carry on. Women today continue that tradition by calling or visiting Vera or other experienced and trusted women for support. The following is a brief example of the kinds of calls Vera receives. Although many people call when they are experiencing a particular crisis such as the loss of a child, this call was related to overall sadness and wanting to talk to someone who shared memories of the past:

Just couple days ago a friend call me up. She said, "Vera, what you been doing? I never see you around."

"I just stay home."

And then she said, "how you been?"

And I said, "I been ok."

"You know Vera, the attitude of our people is changing. Remember a long time ago when my mom was alive we used to just do lotta stuff. Every holiday we just have fun. She do lots and you were right there doing it with her."

I say, "Yes, it's not like that no more. That's because we're getting older," I told her. "First, we're getting older. And then these young ones are getting older now. So now they're trying to follow our footsteps. I remember how I grew up, so I try to share that but it don't do any good because that drugs and alcohol came in and make our people different. And not only that, but these young ones grew up with it so they're following footsteps there. I don't know what to say about it," I told her.

She said, "I just feel so down today and I just feel like I wanna call somebody and that's why I'm calling you."

And I say, "you just have to pray about it and just try to make your home happy. You just gotta try."

Vera told me this particular story when she was trying to articulate her feelings about the problems Gwich'in people are facing and the causes of those problems, particularly substance abuse. Without directing her friend to take any specific action Vera conveys her solidarity in fond memories, an understanding of the difficult changes that are making her sad, and encouragement to carry on by concentrating on what she can influence: her own home. The advice Vera gives at the end of her narrative about the importance of education is much more direct and appropriately so, as statements to a general audience (for example at a tribal meeting) are often more pointed than those made to an individual.

The kinds of stories Vera tells the most in a small group setting, but are all but missing from her formal narrative, are what I call "fond remembrances." These stories are short, and even shorter when the audience already knows the background, as most of her listeners do. Vera uses her talent to impersonate the voices and mannerism of people to create these stories. Sometimes just a word or a particular laugh can evoke the entire story. These fond remembrances were most often of people long past and remembering them in this way clearly gave everyone, including me, a sense of place and continuity, and the bittersweet feeling of friends and loved ones lost. Some friends have suggested she write them down, particularly her "Bo" stories, but we removed most of those we recorded from the narrative due to their intimacy and because their special blend of humor and affection is difficult to capture in text. The following is the only Bo story we recorded and was removed from the narrative because it didn't really "fit."

Bo Kelly is living up there in Venetie too. He lives in one of the little cabins and he's always around us too, Bo.

When my father died I told him, "Bo, you know, you got all these children too, you know, we're your children now. My father's gone so we're your children." Oh, he likes that.

"You're our father, you hear me," I said.

"Ok, Bo, you got all these kids to worry about so I don't want you to drink that much anymore."

"Ah right!" he said.

As with many of Vera's stories, alcoholism and the attempt to counter it with responsibility is a part of the context of this story, but the point of the story is, I believe, Bo's place in her memory and the memory of others as a kind and humorous man. The humor in this story comes from the way he said "Ah right!" something impossible to convey in text and the affection from Bo's willingness, even eagerness, to be considered their father, despite sharing his problems with alcohol. Only someone who knew Bo (as I did not) can *fully* appreciate the story or feel the emotion behind it, but these stories are especially important in creating community, even among those who do not share the same culture and history.

For myself, "Bo stories" and other like them (told by Vera and many others) make me feel most connected to the community. These stories are how I feel I know the culture: not through reading ethnographies or other writing about the culture and community, but through the little stories, the seemingly inconsequential comments that make culture real in our lives. Bo's duality as a funny and kind man and also a man troubled by addiction, the poignancy of that image, is a small piece of Fort Yukon's community identity. Each story, small as they are

individually, is a channel in the river and together they connect the community: even an outsider like me.

In addition to leaving out some of the fond remembrance that I believe are significant to creating meaning in community, there are two particular topic areas that are missing from this narrative that also inform my reading of Vera's narrative: Native politics and her personal work history. We recorded stories about both, but included very little from them. In the area of Native politics Vera felt her stories went beyond her personal experience in a way that she was not comfortable with since she had not been a particularly active participant in, for example, the land claims movement. The stories ended up being about what other people did and her family's opinions about them and Vera did not want her remarks and opinions about local politics to be part of a public record. The second topic area substantially missing from the narrative as constructed is Vera's work history. The importance and necessity of hard work, like issues surrounding substance abuse, is a context that runs throughout Vera's stories. In many ways we have captured that in her stories about her grandparents, parents, and her own growing up. However, although we recorded many stories about her work as an adult, most were not included except incidentally. The story of her personal losses became the central narrative and the backdrop, her near continuous work history, became muffled in the process of creating that narrative.

Vera uses her stories in different times and places to communicate to others important Gwich'in values and how they played out in her own experiences. The stories chosen here, while sometimes fraught with conflict and pain, are intended to uplift other Gwich'in people by illustrating how Gwich'in values of strength and determination and Gwich'in traditions of community aid have supported her through the trials of her life, and where it has not met her

expectations, showing how it could be done. Her path through a time of change is offered as an example that others might learn from in some way. She talks to us in the hope that her experiences will show some of the safe channels and hidden sandbars of modern Gwich'in life.

## Chapter 8 Dialogues

Utilizing a dialogic process to create a life history narrative might ideally involve collaborators openly sharing opinions throughout the process on all aspects of the project: theory, method, purpose, and product. Such close collaboration is the goal, for example, of Lawless' "reciprocal ethnography" where the ethnographer and collaborator "sit down together and begin a dialogue about what they each have written and presented and record their responses to this gathering of information" (2000:201). However, as Sawin notes, we must also "acknowledge that not every ethnographic subject will be willing to engage with our texts or even our entextualized versions of their words in a way that seems so automatic within the world of academic hyperliteracy" (Sawin 2004:19). I have given Vera every opportunity to review this text. I have pushed her in ways other researchers might not feel they could because of our long and close association. But the fact remains that Vera and I come from different cultures with different ways of gaining, understanding, and transmitting knowledge. While academic writing in anthropology continues to follow the conventions that meet Western criteria for assimilating and passing on knowledge, as it will,<sup>99</sup> the dialogues that Lawless envisions will only take place between collaborators who share similar cultural frameworks, knowledge and understanding. When they don't and a primary audience of their work is anthropologists and other academics, then the dialogue will always appear one-sided in the text

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<sup>99</sup> There is nothing inherently bad about these conventions. They are part of a culture as any others. As Abu-Lughod (1993:26-27) writes in response to attempts to revise the production of ethnographic texts: "Until we decide – or are forced – to move anthropology to new 'shopfloors' (in Fox's phrase), or to abandon it all together, we should perhaps be more modest in our claims to radicalism. At best, we are talking about reform - undertaken with as good a sense as we can develop of the world context in which we work. As long as anthropologists are in the business of representing others, the ethnographies through which they do so will likely remain a primary mode of anthropological production." However, we must continually challenge their hegemony even as we utilize them.

since only one partner speaks the academic language. As the “writer” in our partnership it is my job to translate our dialogues into a text that is recognizable to academics as well as to turn her oral narrative into a written narrative that will bridge the past to the present and future of her audiences.

Creating this bridge means supplying some cultural and historical context (provided immediately prior to and within the narrative), but the basic elements of “context,” important events, people, and dates are not enough, particularly for the time period Vera’s life describes. Rightly or wrongly, dialogues about “traditional” stories and lifestyles have reached a sort of consensus position both within the Alaska Native community and in academic circles; tradition is good. In part, this is due to many of these stories being stripped of their conflict and ambiguity by presenting a limited view into the past. Only when a traditional story, such as “Two Old Women” as told by Velma Wallis, includes conflict does it become subject to additional discussion.<sup>100</sup> Dialogues about modern Alaska Native life have reached no such consensus and Gwich’in and other Alaska Native peoples are keenly aware that dialogues about them have consequences in the political realm. Any reading of Vera’s life story will take from and enter into dialogues about modern Alaska Native cultures and these dialogues are not neutral, but value laden. We could choose the dialogues we prefer people use to read Vera’s stories, but such a directed approach would be both counter to Gwich’in and Vera’s ideas about how stories are offered and received and unsuccessful, as each reader will bring a variety of dialogues to their reading of the story whether we approve or not.

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<sup>100</sup> The conflict in *Two Old Women* (Wallis 1993) strikes at the heart of a common dialogue about Native people, that they revere their elders. By calling that ideal into question, particularly with a non-mythological story, Wallis stepped out of the “tradition is good” dialogue and into the political dialogues used to promote or refute Alaska Native claims to a higher moral authority.

In this section I offer a different kind of context, some of the dialogues or discursive frames that Vera, I, other Gwich'in people, academics, and non-Gwich'in people in general might use to interpret her narrative. It might be easiest to categorize these frames as Gwich'in, academic, lay and so forth, but such a system ignores the fact that our worlds are interconnected in a way that each area of discourse overlaps and influences the others. In some cases parallel, but conflicting frames exist. In others, a frame developed through one area of discourse has been adopted by another. So I have categorized this section by topic: dialogues of strength and discipline, dialogues of respect and affection, and dialogues of dysfunction. Some of these dialogues can be considered essentializing dialogues in that they attempt to ascribe characteristics that are essential to identity, either in a positive or negative way.<sup>101</sup> I lay out these various frames, their histories, and their impacts on the narrative and how they might impact possible responses to the narrative, but this is not an analysis of Vera's narrative. In some places, where I think I have something worth saying, I say it, but other dialogues are mentioned not to provide analysis, but to make the reader aware of issues within these dialogues that they may, consciously or unconsciously, apply to the narrative.

### 8.1 Interpretive Dialogues

Within Vera's narrative we have identified a number of themes: discipline, hard work, strength, respect, affection, education, poverty, and substance abuse. While a number of these themes are positive expressions of Gwich'in culture and identity, others are more ambiguous or negative in their connotations. These themes are expressed in discourses among and between

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<sup>101</sup> Brayboy cogently lays out the issues with essentialist thinking in his dissertation *Climbing the Ivy: Examining the Experiences of Academically Successful Native American Indian Undergraduate Students at Two Ivy League Universities* (1999). Essentialism can be both harmful in its ability to deny or constrict identity and useful in its ability to maintain identity. "The paradox for those of us who want to resist certain essentializing tendencies is how, then, do you maintain identity, because you've got to maintain identity" (Dyson 1995:347).

Gwich'in and other groups, but not always in ways that people are comfortable with. In particular, Vera, I, and other community members are concerned about how Vera's story will fit into existing typifying discourses about Fort Yukon and Gwich'in culture and how they will impact the way people read Vera's story. There are four typifying discourses that we are particularly concerned about: discourse about Fort Yukon as a dysfunctional community, discourse about Gwich'in culture as encouraging abuse of women, discourse about Gwich'in and Native people generally being defined by substance abuse, and discourse about Gwich'in people being "poor." The issue with typifying discourses is not that they are wrong so much as that they are not right, or that they, like typifying ethnographies, ignore evidence that does not neatly fit into their narratives.<sup>102</sup> Thus we recognize that Vera's stories could be taken as confirmation of these narratives and hope that instead they infiltrate them and broaden them into discourses more inclusive of and helpful to Native people.

Another issue to keep in mind before exploring these themes is how time and circumstances change how we perceive our lives, each other, and our communities. Just like our nation, many things can affect the "mood" of a community: an economic downturn; heating oil at \$6 a gallon; reduced school funding; several years of poor salmon returns; ever higher prices at the AC:<sup>103</sup> or, loss of leadership; an elder dies; an important family moves away or suffers a tragedy; a beloved preacher moves to another parish; a well-liked teacher to another school. When Vera and I first started this project our mood and the mood of the community was more positive. All three churches had strong leadership, community and regional organizations also had strong leadership, the schools, while not great, seemed to be improving, people seemed

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<sup>102</sup> As Behar notes, it is not so much the accuracy of these types of representations, but how they become "gist for the racist white imagination" that often concerns people (2003[1993]:277).

<sup>103</sup> Alaska Commercial Company, currently the only grocery and sundries store in Fort Yukon.

active and engaged. Over the last few years, however, Fort Yukon has suffered some of these things and the mood of the community, or at least our section of it, became less positive and more worried. At any given time our perception of the community is based partially on these external events and this impacts what themes and dialogues we use to understand them. How to negotiate between the messages of “we come from a strong people” and “they're lost because of us; because we didn't teach them?”

### *8.1.2 Dialogues of Strength and Discipline*

Two very apparent themes in Vera's narrative are the importance of strength and discipline as exhibited by hard work and endurance. Indeed, if Vera is directing anyone to a particular answer in her narrative it is that strength and discipline are key traits of Gwich'in character and will see you through life's trials and tribulations. Gwich'in people place a high value on mental, physical, and societal strength. Fast provides several examples of how Gwich'in use the term *t'aa* to describe the skills and strength passed down from ancestors that make Gwich'in men and women strong, including this quote from Marilyn Savage: *t'aa* means “their strength and the strength from ancestors before them that is carried through” (2002:159). A similar sentiment of strength and perseverance is expressed through the Gwich'in phrase “*khaiinji' ch'iidhat gaa nihk'it ahaa*” (he endures, suffers but continues on) (Peter, K. 1979: 48). These themes can both be found in traditional Gwich'in stories as well as present day stories and attitudes about both men and women. “Ko'ehdan”, or “Without Fire”, a traditional tale recorded by Petitot(1976[1876]), Cornelius Osgood (1936a), Robert McKennan (1965), and Richard Slobodin (1975) tells the tale of a man's survival alone in winter, even without fire, an

important commodity in the northern winter.<sup>104</sup> *Two Old Women, an Alaska Tale of Courage, Betrayal and Survival* (Wallis 1993) retells the traditional tale of two elderly women who are abandoned by their tribe and manage to survive alone until their return when the tables are turned and the tribe must turn to them for support. A more recent historical story that emphasizes the incredible strength and perseverance of Gwich'in people is that of Stephen Peter's walk from Arctic Village to Fort Yukon in winter when Arctic Village was suffering a food shortage (Peter, K. 1992; Fast 2002).

Vera's stories about her family's strength and hard work and her prescriptions for survival draw from these Gwich'in dialogues about strength and its importance to their identity and survival. Stories about her family's hard work, such as her father and his sister checking 80 traps when they were ten and twelve, the chores she and her siblings did as children, and the work they did for elders demonstrate the importance of everyone working together and supporting one another. Vera also emphasizes her own work history, near continuous employment over her lifetime, as important to her well-being and sense of self. It was, in part, her commitment to work and self-reliance that led her to seek treatment for her cocaine addiction. She is particularly troubled when she sees people selling all they have and neglected their children for their addiction. The importance of working hard extends beyond the importance of physical strength or material well-being and into mental well-being and identity as well. Vera's advice is to try. "You've just got to work at it." Vera addresses this directly in her advice when she says work is good for mind, body, and soul. People who came to her when

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<sup>104</sup> "Without Fire" also includes sexual jealousy as a theme, which was emphasized in the story as told by Gwich'in elder Julia Peter (Fast 2002:221).

she was a health aide because they were depressed or lonely were advised to walk, cut wood, get out and do something.

There are a number of “mini-dialogues” or themes within Gwich’in dialogue about the importance of hard work. Not surprisingly, gender plays a role in defining what is hard work and who is the hardest worker. Finding a hard worker was considered important for choosing a potential mate and is emphasized in generalized anthropological accounts (McKenna 1965), traditional stories (Herbert 1982) and personal stories (Herbert 1982; Peter, K. 1992). In an interview with Vera on gender relations (not included as part of her life history narrative) Vera remarks:

They look for a woman that can do the same thing they're doing. Work right along with them ... They don't look for the nice lookin' woman in those days. They look for a woman that can stand by them, do the same thing, do what they're doing right along with them. Work together. For example, I seen [names removed] like that. Since that day on [when they were married] they been together and they do things together. They never were apart. They were together all their married life. They do things together, they raise their kids together, they don't bother, interfere with anybody. They're just for family right there.

Gwich’in men, at least in relation to Gwich’in women, have been portrayed by women to work less hard than they do (Herbert 1982; Peter, K. 1992). However, this is not, in Gwich’in dialogue, necessarily a trait of Gwich’in men, but an aberration to be remarked upon. This dialogue does extend, however, into non-Native dialogues about Gwich’in men and work. For example, Robert McKenna in his journals remarks on the “Indians’” lack of reliability

(2006:223) and, in his analysis of the trapping based economy of Fort Yukon Shimkin comments on the relatively low labor requirements (180 days of effort) (1955:233). Neither of these particular examples necessarily implies a lack of work ethic on the part of Gwich'in men, but stereotypes about "lazy Indians" are a dialogue found in Alaska and even in Fort Yukon itself. One issue here may be different views of what constitutes "work" for a Gwich'in man. Gwich'in consistently admire men who are competent in traditional Gwich'in male activities such as hunting (and associated activities), building, and repairing things. "Office men" are not seen as hard working. Part of this is that traditional men's work is less compatible with modern wage labor, except for seasonal employment such as fire fighting or construction. Women, on the other hand, are more able to combine traditional skills such as processing animals and sewing with daily wage labor.

Gwich'in dialogues of strength and discipline are essentializing dialogues in that they establish a set of "essential" characteristics for Gwich'in identity. As with any essentializing dialogue, their use can be both positive and negative. They work to directly counter the dialogues of dysfunction that people, both non-Gwich'in and Gwich'in, engage in, but they also constrict how Gwich'in, particularly men, engage in modern work opportunities. Vera contrasts her own work history and the importance of being able to pay her bills with Gene's more seasonal work, although she notes that he did provide for her and the children. However, she also emphasizes the equality of the hard work her grandparents and parents did in the mixed trapping and subsistence economy of their time.

### *8.1.3 Dialogues of Respect and Affection*

Respect is another theme that runs through Vera's dialogue: respect for others; respect for the land and animals; respect for self. Respect for others, particularly respect for elders, is

an important value in Gwich'in culture. Vera has spoken to me many times of the mutual respect she saw between men and women and between generations. Although many of the marriages Vera discusses in her narrative are less than ideal (for example, Grandma Natalie "getting out of jail" when Grandpa Paul died) in her narrative and in other discussions she has characterized the ideal marriage as one where husband and wife work side-by-side throughout their lives, showing mutual support and respect to one another.

Current dialogue about generational respect within Gwich'in communities tend to emphasize the respect due to elders by the young, which Vera clearly illustrates through her discussions of how children were expected to behave towards their elders and how she observed her parents treating elders (for example, her father tipping his hat to them). However, Vera's stories also emphasize mutual respect between generations: for example elders working with children and young couples when they were having trouble. Youth respected the elders by listening to them and helping them and elders respected youth by listening to them and teaching them.

Respect for the land and animals is also an important dialogue in Gwich'in and other Alaska Native cultures. The idea that you must show respect in order to maintain proper relations with the environment has been noted in many works, including some discussion in McKennan (1965) and Osgood (1936a) specifically for the Gwich'in, but the most detailed work for Alaskan Athabascan groups was produced by Richard Nelson, who writes of the Koyukon, "traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes" (1983:14). Current dialogues about subsistence in the Yukon Flats and Venetie reservation areas draw on this tradition of respect towards their environment. We also see this in Vera's narrative, most clearly in the section where she speaks about her Grandma Myra. Grandma Myra teaches Vera

about proper respect for the land, including not leaving trash lying around and, for women, not swimming in the water, as well as respect for animals, especially in her treatment of meat, making sure that the meat does not spoil or get contaminated with maggots and disposing of meat properly, and again, for girls, not eating certain types of meat. This respect also intersects with notions of respect for people, for example not giving bloodshot meat to other people.

Finally, although Vera does not specifically use the term “respect” in this context, her discussion of how people should take care of themselves seems to be related to a notion of respect for self. Her advice at the end of her narrative is to show respect for yourself through action. “Don’t have that low self esteem. Be proud of what you are. Be proud of what you're doing. Don't give up.” Self-reliance, personal accountability, pride in culture and identity, these ideas all contribute to a sense of respect for self that Vera feels is important for living as a Gwich’in person.

Affection, in this case, is the other side of the coin of respect. For Vera, showing love - to children, to animals – is both a sign of respect and an important precursor for self-respect. She attributes many of her father’s problems to the lack of affection he received as a child from his (step) father. “Grandpa Paul Erick made a good working people out of them, but children needs love too, you know, and I don't think they had that from him.” She also emphasizes the difference between discipline and abuse in a family setting – discipline is a sign of affection and ultimately of respect. Within the Fort Yukon community today there appears to be a dialogue that emphasizes the opposite: that discipline is abusive and disrespectful. In part this dialogue has grown out of traditional notions of independence. The same ideas that have lead me to emphasize allowing the audience to create their own reading of Vera’s stories also emphasize personal freedom, even for young people in making their own decisions. People, even parents,

who attempt to impose decisions, are often seen as “mean,” as Vera saw her own mother at times.

#### *8.1.4 Dialogues of Dysfunction*

Dialogues about the dysfunction or degeneration of Gwich'in (sometimes specifically Fort Yukon sometimes more generally Native American) culture exist both within and outside the Gwich'in community and have become deeply intertwined both in content and in response. Two of the most prominent of these discourses, sexual violence and jealousy and substance abuse and addiction, are deeply contested within the Gwich'in community and between the Gwich'in community and the non-Native community. The most difficult aspect of understanding these intertwining dialogues is trying to understand the relationship between what people in the community are saying and what people outside the community are saying, and to what extent people inside the community are appropriating what outsiders are saying about them and to what extent dialogue inside the community is constrained by concerns about what outsiders might say. This last issue is particularly difficult because of the very real possibility that any internal dialogue will simply reinforce external stereotypes.

Historic accounts and traditional and personal stories indicate that fidelity in marriage was of traditional concern and in extreme cases could be an impetus to murder of the wife or her lover so it is clear that Gwich'in culture, like all cultures, has their own longstanding dialogic thread regarding gender relations (the discussion above regarding strength and hard work also includes a gender component). For most other Northern Athabascan groups anthropologists have generally described a fairly equal relationship between spouses.<sup>105</sup> However, although

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<sup>105</sup> For example, Helm writes that for the Slave women are considered to be the secondary partner in marriage, although the day-to-day relationship is characterized by egalitarianism, but she goes on to

accounts differ, particularly over time, Gwich'in are one of two Athabascan groups that have been described as having an extremely low status for women. Current internal dialogue on the topic includes dialogue on domestic violence and dysfunctional Gwich'in gender roles and also a backlash against external negative characterizations.<sup>106</sup> The difficulty here is that by acknowledging a problem within their community people risk propping up racially based stereotypes both within and outside the community. As bell hooks commented about Alice Walker's (1982) portrayal of black men in *The Color Purple* :“When black women suggest that the most exploitative and oppressive force in the lives of black females is black men, white society is free from the burden of responsibility; they can easily ignore the painful and brutal impact of racism” (hooks 1990:72).

Most of my discussion was and is with Gwich'in women and they have two concerns about how this topic is perverted to serve other's stereotypes: first, they object to generalized characterizations of their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons as predatory, and second, they object to characterizations of themselves as weak and victimized. At the same time, as Vera acknowledges in her narrative, domestic violence is a problem for the community and one that used to be addressed directly by family and community support and now is being mostly

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describe three different marriages that run the spectrum of male to female dominant marriages, indicating the great variability possible in Slave marriages (Helm 1961:75-76). For the Tanaina (Dena'ina) Osgood (1937:137) describes women as the “bosses” of the family and one male informant described woman and the home as “fundamental” and man and his work as “contributory.”

<sup>106</sup> Within the community, sexual violence and jealousy is not a hidden topic, but it is not an everyday topic either and I don't want to give the impression that discussions were common. I had an interest and also spent time with close female friends where the topic was sometimes brought up. However, I did not find, as Fast did, that “ordinary conversations among Athabascan women and their writings ...depicts men as undependable in economic and domestic spheres and sometimes morally objectionable in private life” (2002). While both Herbert (1982) and Peter (1992) do address these issues, their approach and sentiment about gender relations is more nuanced, as are the conversations I have with Gwich'in women.

ignored. Vera, herself, hid the abuse she experienced through Gene's drinking and never sought public help even after she decided to kick him out.

For Vera and others, substance abuse lies at the center of any discussion of community problems, including domestic violence. Substance abuse, once restricted primarily to alcoholism but expanding to cocaine and other addictive substances as with the rest of the nation, is another discourse of dysfunction that impacts the community. Since alcohol has a relatively recent history for the Gwich'in there is little "traditional" discourse on the subject. Instead, local people incorporate Gwich'in discourses on strength, discipline, and personal responsibility, religious discourses, particularly regarding abstinence, and lay and clinical discourses that describe Native people as particularly susceptible, either mentally or physically, to addiction. For Vera, substance abuse is a context that underlies much of her life experience. As context, it is essential for understanding her life, but, as we have seen, it neither defines her experience nor is it the point of her stories. This is particularly apparent in her stories about her father. His strength, intelligence, hard work, irreverence, and love for his family, and their love for him, dominate her narrative even while Vera discusses the difficult childhood, jealousy, and grief that contributed to his alcoholism. As she describes her loved ones and her own life choices she consistently emphasizes strength, the importance of striving and enduring, and the importance of community even in the context of substance abuse. Life and love, she seems to say, is bittersweet, but it is what it is and she leaves none of it behind.

This is a particularly difficult dialogue to negotiate without moving to an extreme position by either eliminating discussion of substance abuse totally or giving it a central place in understanding the story. Ambiguity, in the sense of making substance abuse a piece of, but not the whole of the story, is not an easy stance to take in dialogues about substance abuse within

or without Gwich'in society. Again, in talking about substance abuse, many Gwich'in people are sensitive to discussing anything that would further racial stereotypes about them and some are also concerned about suggestions that they have a unique problem.<sup>107</sup>

While not necessarily considered “dysfunctional” poverty is another area of dialogue that can lead to erroneous and negative interpretations of Gwich'in culture. Dialogues of poverty in regards to Alaska Natives are pervasive throughout academia, government, and both Native and non-Native peoples. Vera herself relates how ideas about poverty impacted her perceptions as a child of her family's poverty and how they changed over time as she began to see the value of an upbringing without the false wealth of television and junk food. As she says, “as I was growing up we were very traditional and we have a rich, rich life. The people were pretty strong and we live rich. Even though it look like we're poor, but still we were rich, you know.”

For Vera and other Gwich'in people, wealth is found in the land and in the people, not in things. Non-Native dialogues about poverty consistently place valued activities, such as subsistence, in the category of poverty and promote values and activities based on Western conceptions of wealth. For example, grant applications to the federal government for Native programs are filled with references to the poverty of Native lifestyles and monies are generally intended to bring people into a more Westernized model of wealth through increased wage employment, Western style housing, or Western based nutrition. Attempts to avoid or subvert

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<sup>107</sup> For example, in 2005 the Council of Athabaskan Governments Health Director organized a meeting about substance abuse where she showed video and other material that all referenced indigenous people's problems. Several participants were incensed by the selective representation, noting that Native people are not the only people suffering from addiction.

this “deficit model” of culture in grant writing and program development must be subtle to be accepted, so entrenched is the idea of Native poverty.

Vera’s own childhood desires to have a “fancy” house and “nothing short” translated into her determination to always work for a living and her pride in never having been on public assistance. Vera chose to work in wage employment, but she does not see that as necessarily more desirable or prestigious than her parents’ livelihood of trapping and subsistence. Self-sufficiency through hard work of whatever kind provides the material necessities as well as cultural and spiritual necessities as Vera continually reminds us in her stories about how community worked together through sharing of subsistence foods and resources and sharing of knowledge and expertise in areas of healing or counseling, how hard her family worked across generations, her grandmother’s advice to work hard and “never bother anybody,” and her own advice to do something; to not give up and “keep doing it.”

Finally, there is a dialogue that specifically labels Fort Yukon as dysfunctional and culturally compromised. Discourses of Fort Yukon have historically emphasized Fort Yukon’s “wild west” reputation: complete with the dueling families like the Hatfields and McCoys.<sup>108</sup> Even other Alaska Natives frequently comment on Fort Yukon’s reputation as a rough community, with rampant substance abuse and extreme culture loss. Vera herself refers to it as “Dodge City” in her narrative. Friends who have attended statewide hiring fairs for teachers report that it is “common knowledge” among teachers that Fort Yukon is a difficult place to live and work. Although this runs counter to my personal experience, which found Fort Yukon an especially enjoyable place to live and work, this is the dominant stereotype for the community. In addition to dialogues about substance abuse, this dialogue about Fort Yukon also draws on

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<sup>108</sup> A characterization made by a lawyer who worked with people in Fort Yukon in the 70s.

essentializing dialogues about what is traditional Gwich'in culture, including speaking Gwich'in,<sup>109</sup> wearing a certain style of clothing,<sup>110</sup> engaging in subsistence activities, demonstrating knowledge of traditional beliefs,<sup>111</sup> and communicating in a particular manner.<sup>112</sup> People, both Native and non-Native, draw on these dialogues to both maintain identity and dismiss as irrelevant or insignificant the concerns of supposedly "untraditional" Native people. In addition, Fort Yukon serves as a sort of "safety-valve" for the neighboring communities; providing a place where people can go to act out or go on a binge. Long-time residents of Fort Yukon sometimes feel that Fort Yukon bears the brunt of social problems so that other villages can remain seemingly unimpacted by modern problems such as alcoholism. On the other side, the attitude of Fort Yukon residents can also be prejudiced towards people from other villages. This can be seen expressed in the tensions Vera describes between the BIA and Territorial schools when Vera is taunted for being a "Venetian" and "Neets'qji Gwich'in." In Vera's narrative there is a clear distinction between life in Venetie, which was less impacted by alcohol in the 1950's and 1960's, and Fort Yukon, which was a regional economic hub with a mixed community and easy access to alcohol. However, the same principles of hard work and discipline applied in both communities.

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<sup>109</sup> There is something of a cultural debate going on as to whether speaking Gwich'in or engaging in traditional subsistence activities is most essential to Gwich'in identity.

<sup>110</sup> For example, beaded "chiefs" vests.

<sup>111</sup> For example, the traditional treatment of animals exemplified by Nelson's book on Koyukon relationship to and treatment of animals, *Make Prayers to the Raven* (1983). A Gwich'in friend once commented on the irreverent behavior and language of an older Gwich'in man, claiming that he had been raised like a white man until I pointed out that he had actually been raised by his very traditional grandmother.

<sup>112</sup> Gwich'in people generally and Fort Yukon people in particular are more demanding and direct in their communication styles than other Athabaskan groups, in my experience, something that is reflected in the earliest writings about Gwich'in, including Murray's journal (1910), but that is often seen as somehow less authentically Native.

These dialogues of dysfunction are the most concerning to me in how people might read Vera's narrative. By talking about her personal experiences, good and bad, Vera has entered into what could become a very public dialogue about community problems that many people in Fort Yukon and other Gwich'in communities try to avoid. However, there is also a discourse in Fort Yukon that says people should more openly share their experiences so that others might learn from them similar to Harold Napoleon's (1996) call for community members from all generations to tell their stories in order to heal their communities. This discourse supports the publication of books like Velma Wallis' *Raising Ourselves* (2002) and Michael D'Orso's *Eagle Blue* (2006)<sup>113</sup> because they "pull the blanket" off of hidden social problems. These dialogues about what should be public and what should remain private impact other dialogues by limiting or encouraging dialogue in certain ways. Vera's own position in this dialogue is that while she appreciates the importance of privacy and "not talking against her people," sharing her experience, an authentic Gwich'in experience, can help others. The difference I think she sees in her openness is that it is done with continuing love and respect for all her people. She acknowledges problems while insisting on the fundamental strength and goodness of her people and her culture.

It is easy to place sexual infidelity, violence, substance abuse, and poverty at the center of Gwich'in culture even inadvertently, due to the prevalence of these narratives.<sup>114</sup> As previously mentioned, there is a discourse in Gwich'in society that emphasizes dysfunction, particularly in the areas of violence between the genders. Sexual infidelity and jealousy (fueled

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<sup>113</sup> D'Orso is professional writer who came to Fort Yukon specifically to write a book about Fort Yukon's high school basketball team. As with Fast's book, many people in Fort Yukon were unhappy with the unflattering portrayal, but others felt that people needed to confront the issues it raised.

<sup>114</sup> These types of narratives are not limited to Gwich'in or other minority peoples. Tabloids and reality TV thrive off of dysfunctional narratives of American and other cultures.

primarily by alcohol and drugs) are central to this discourse. And, as Vera also notes, these are the things that people talk about. Gwich'in society is much more open and less segregated than Western society. There are few "closet drinkers" in Fort Yukon. There are few secret affairs or private parties. No one is ostracized. No one is denied a place in their family or their community. People talk about all of these things with a certain horror and delight all at once. Public condemnation is fleeting. Private condemnation is a mixture of sadness for negative impacts on Gwich'in society, particularly the children, and appreciation for the spectacle of a life lived to the extreme.<sup>115</sup> Rare is the conversation over our Friday night Scrabble game that involves the goings on of some stable and peaceable couple across town. And, continuing talk about scandalous behavior can become overwhelming in a small, tight-knit community until nearly everyone seems to forget that the mundane, the uneventful, the positive, still makes up the majority of their lives. We see this within Vera's narrative. Her own experiences with spousal abuse, covered up at the time, and her struggles with substance abuse are there, but also in the narrative are ordinary scenes of family outings, teaching Gina to bake cookies, teaching Leon to trap rabbits. It brings to mind the comment of another Gwich'in friend, a new teacher who had done her student-teaching at a Fairbanks school. She recalled another Fairbanks teacher asking her, in all seriousness, "What do Natives do all day?" "They go to the grocery store and check their mail" was the gist of her reply. It infuriated her that people did not recognize the ordinariness of everyday Native lives. There are problems, to be sure. Gwich'in culture, as any culture, has its difficulties. Gwich'in people do not deny the problems

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<sup>115</sup> Gwich'in culture admires both restraint and acts of extreme strength and discipline. Thus, extreme behavior in some ways is appreciated as an aspect of the Gwich'in ability to withstand any trial or hardship.

in their community, but they do not want to continually be defined by them either, by outsiders or by themselves.

Can Vera or any person talk about FAS or cocaine as problems without evoking the image of a dysfunctional or dying culture? Can she talk about Gwich'in personal and societal strength without evoking images of an idyllic past? How do we engage in dialogue that addresses issues without essentializing them? How do we engage in dialogue that upholds people's honor and integrity without covering up painful realities that need to be addressed? I think we engage in these important dialogues by listening, really listening, to voices like Vera's, keeping in mind how she is using and responding to existing dialogues and how we are using and responding to them as well.

### Chapter 9 Conclusion: A Pause in the Dialogue

Using and encouraging a dialogic approach to reading Vera's stories comes closest to Vera's and Gwich'in ideas about how knowledge and understanding is gained and passed on through stories. There is no one question and there is no one answer. There are many dialogues and each person's personal experiences leads them to engage differently and thus to find their own answer. Offering a story acknowledges the ambiguity, the inbetweenness, of understanding and the fluidity of storytelling and story listening. If I or Vera "interpreted" – gave an answer to what we think is the question – we diminish understanding. Letting each reader find their own understanding, with guidance, but not direction, broadens understanding by allowing for questions and answers we may not know yet ourselves.

This dissertation does many things; it provides a little information on Gwich'in life in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: it explores how stories are used to construct personal identity and to create, maintain, and disseminate ideas about group identity; it explores the types of dialogues currently in play that might impact how people read Vera's narrative; and it explores ways that we can negotiate meaning between people of different cultures and backgrounds. Most importantly to me, I hope it enters into continuing dialogues about Gwich'in culture and identity, negotiated meaning in life histories and in life, and how anthropologists and others who work with and study others can talk and write responsibly and respectfully.

Identity is a fluid concept, always responding to past, present, and future dialogues. It is always in flux as individuals and communities negotiate the meaning of their lives. For many people Gwich'in identities (and other Native people's identities) are bound up in essentialized definitions of "traditional" language, beliefs, styles, and activities. Anthropologists and other non-Natives often support dialogues that emphasize the boundedness of Native identities by

focusing on the past, treating the present as deviant and possibly degenerate, and the future as a hoped for return to past values. There is nothing particularly surprising or sinister about this. In fact, I believe we call it “nostalgia” and it is a common dialogue in American culture as well. However, it does not tell us much about identity and too much focus on these essentialized traditions can work against our understanding of ourselves and each other. By exploring some of these dialogues I hope to help readers look past a single dialogue or frame for Vera’s narrative and see that stories may not have just one meaning or interpretation, but many, and that understanding a person’s stories depends on understanding how it enters into and engages many dialogues.

Through Vera’s dialogue I believe we see identity formation and maintenance in action: responding and contributing to various dialogues within and without Gwich’in culture to engage other Gwich’in people, particularly youth, in a conversation about what she considers essential traits of “Gwich’inness.” We also see how stories of personal experience are offered to help others understand their own experiences and how putting stories into writing can be an extension of an education tradition that prioritizes experience over study. Vera believes that “maybe something is in there” that others can use. In many ways I have tried to adopt Vera’s approach to negotiating meaning as my own, albeit primarily through a multitude of academic discourses. Through exploring multiple discourses and providing a “reading” instead of an interpretation of Vera’s narrative I hope that “maybe something is in there” that will help others understand Vera’s words as well as understand the processes of negotiating meaning that people go through every day in Fort Yukon and the Yukon Flats.

I also hope that this work will serve Vera’s purpose of asserting her voice as a Gwich’in woman and helping young people understand their past and their own identities as Gwich’in.

Over time, local dialogues about Gwich'in culture, particularly in Fort Yukon, have taken the last sixty or so years and placed them out-of-time and out-of-culture; an aberration in their history, but one that also separates them from their culture. I believe that this sense of disconnect is partly due to a change in the effectiveness of oral tradition to maintain group identity. If stories are a way of making meaning of experience and creating both personal and group identity, as I believe they are, they must be shared. Over time communities choose what stories become a part of their oral tradition<sup>116</sup> but practices that once assured transmission of important experiences and shaped people's ideas about their culture and identity have been weakened by factors such as larger, less cohesive communities, compulsory school attendance, and modern mass media. Using stories as a means of educating young people in the knowledge and traditions of the community is no longer "institutionalized."

Stories like Vera's attempt to re-integrate the culture and history of this difficult time. As people begin to publically tell these stories I believe they are trying to find another way of using stories to re-braid together the ends of a frayed thread to forge a common identity for their community. Telling the stories in community (as Vera and others do) provides some of this, but not enough to stop the fracturing of identity that seems to be especially hurting young people. For that they need a platform more permanent and that reaches a broader audience than what is provided by current oral means. Putting their stories in writing provides that platform. Writing also provides a certain distance. Stories that may not be comfortably told in a group can be written down for each person to experience individually. The purpose of life stories like Vera's are different than academic purposes that focus on understanding or illuminating past or present culture. The life stories are an act of creation focusing on the

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<sup>116</sup> See Schneider (2002) for a discussion of this process.

future. They are part of a fight to develop a community identity in the modern world; to link tradition to the present without negating their own experiences with culture change.

This purpose requires a way of looking at the collaborative process in the production of life stories that emphasises the continuing dialogues between all parties. We must ask more questions and wait for more answers. Is our work useful for the community? Is it appropriate? And, most importantly is it the right time in the conversation? In a conversation you must pause to hear your audience's response. Vera and I have made our judgements about what is useful for the community, what stories are appropriate to tell, and that it is the right time to tell them. What we have chosen not to say is left unsaid because we do not feel that it is useful, appropriate or timely. Some things must wait to be said because we need other voices, other responses, to know what more there is to say.

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