

Drew Viles
Sabbatical Report

Unexpected Findings: I'll begin this report with the surprises that resulted from my term-long sabbatical.

My sabbatical work continued an on-going project that both reverses and continues the typical goals of oral history projects. My goal has been to “re-oralize” my ancestral autochthonous oral tradition by committing to memory stories told by my native ancestors and written down by ethnologists. As this circuitous transmission route suggests, my relationship with my ancestral storytelling tradition is not intact. It had been broken. Ruptured. And for a long time, I was not interested in doing anything at all about it. Or with it because I considered it gone. Missing. Lost.

Then it occurred to me that I could do something. I could repair the rupture by retrieving ancestral stories recorded by ethnologists. I could do more than retrieve these stories: I could memorize them! In short, I could return to a state that approximated the state of my ancestors prior to the time that stories first were written down.

Telling such stories committed to memory involves more than merely recalling the words. Here is how to tell such a story. First, you remember the “right” way to tell a story. You start this process—this right way to tell a story--simply by listening carefully to stories that an older person tells you. Next you repeat back these stories as they are told to you by your elders or relatives. Finally, you yourself tell the story. And at every stage of this process, you take satisfaction in the knowledge that you are participating in an unbroken string of storytelling that continues from time immemorial, as the saying goes, to the present.

I am telling you how I tell a story. Before I begin a tale, I remember something that is absent. I recall every detail of what is not here any longer. Because my knowledge of present-day elders and relatives who were able to recite and share such stories was limited, I memorize stories that were written down. I tell these stories written down first (which ended the long unbroken string of purely oral tellings) and then memorized by me second. I tell these stories. And as I begin to tell these stories, I remember the event that I am not capable of—the situation that I am not placed in. The activity that I am impotent to arrange. As prelude to telling a story, I take stock of bare shelves, so to speak. I serve up an empty platter. I promise a valuable present, but I turn over an empty palm. I pretend to take a drag on an imaginary pipe.

In a word, as I begin to tell a tale, I resolve to mime. This discovery surprises me. The equation holds much truth. As a mime treats reality so, too, do I work with these ancestral stories.

This is to say that all my verbal motions will be the same as the one who really does tell a story the right way—the real way! The words will be the same! And yet, there will be a world of difference between my telling and the telling of the story the right way. What I might call “mime space” intervenes—fills the gap between the telling of the tale in the oral tradition and my retelling of the tale memorized from writing.

The work of this sabbatical has given me this concept of miming as both a method and metaphor for my work with re-oralization. My memorization of these stories is inextricably linked to my ancestral autochthonous storytelling tradition at the same time as it exists as a shadow to it—as a careful replication of that tradition placed in minute detail across the distance of writing. My telling of these

stories exist as an echo—as a reflection or as a shadow on the wall—to the right way, the real way, to tell these stories.

And as I tell these stories, I know that anybody else could tell these stories—just like most anybody could mime any position—any situation. You don't have to climb sheer cliffs to mime the climbing of sheer cliffs. To mime stories is to begin a study in humility.

People to whom I tell these stories have been kind. Some have even asked me to write them down!

Further Surprising Results of My Sabbatical: In addition to gaining a major new conceptual understanding of my project, my sabbatical gave me this surprise: it confirmed the two areas of work that are essential to my re-oralization project. In other words, my sabbatical affirmed my new methodological approach by bringing into clearer focus two elements that I struggle against while doing my work.

My method proceeds once “brokenness” characterizes the oral stream by which the stories were handed down from generation to generation. Typically, this rupture of the oral tradition also included the participation of members outside the cultural tradition of my ancestors. In other words, two events occurred simultaneously. One, the stories that were previously transmitted by word of mouth were reduced to writing. Two, the stories were collected and kept by members belonging to another cultural heritage. So the cultural legacy represented and embodied by these stories faced new forces. They were frozen in time in the form of written language and they were reduced to writing by hands of people more-or-less strangers to the life ways, philosophy, theology, government system, music, language, songs and culture of my autochthonous ancestors.

The frozenness of these stories’ language precedes and necessitates the my work of memorization. In a word, I mitigate the change that the entrance into written language has had on these stories by committing the words to my memory and then by reciting these stories myself orally until I have them by heart. Mitigation is not so accurate a description, however, as “accentuate.” I exaggerate the frozenness of these stories through my work just as a mime exaggerates the “unreality” of certain human movements through miming.

The other area I struggle with in this project is justifying my urge to find the version of these ancestral stories that is closest to the original stories told by my ancestors. The skeptic in me suggests that this urge is nothing more than the very common sort of essentialist-fueled thought behind most other searches for “the real” or “the authentic” within Native America. My work, in other words, has been open to the charge of continuing the long-standing search for the “pure” Indian—the “essential” native—that Renato Rosaldo has termed “imperialist nostalgia.” “Imperialist nostalgia” is typically a frustrated and misguided attempt to gather the “true” and “essential” only after the work of colonialization has worked great cultural destruction. This search for the “essential”—this longing for the “true”—in terms of metaphor can be likened to the naming of streets in a suburban addition “Oak Steet” and “Madrone Drive” after the subdivision has been cleared of trees.

Instead of seeing myself as a participant in “essentialism” or “colonialist nostalgia,” I now see myself as a dutiful re-oralizer. I seek the most “authentic” rendition of the original verbal movements just as a mime seeks the most “authentic” movements of, say, a mountain climber. In other words, both a mime and I, before committing to memory the minute movements of another, make certain the movements are the most characteristic. My search is not a slavish rehearsal of a former telling but a careful research into the version of the story that is the most revealing, the most significant. Stories, of course

are broken down into parts. And I want—before committing these parts to memory—to find the parts that are most representative—the most significant, the most characteristic of the stories of my ancestors.

The surprising discoveries I've made during my sabbatical have emboldened me and encouraged me in continuing my project, which has been plagued by such objections as follows: Is not memorizing a set of words which have been written down and printed a waste of time and effort? Why spend time committing to one's memory a set of words that is "consultable" and accessible in the realm of print? I know now good answers when addressing the question, "Why re-oralize these stories?"

A person might just as well ask, "Why mime?" Why commit to one's memory the motions of a mountain climber or a person climbing stairs for later re-enactment? It is an artistic endeavor, of course, and it has as goals both entertainment and education. Specifically, a mime calls into question the authenticity of actions. Existing as a shadow to an absent motion, the art of mime not only creates--out of apparent nothingness--a recognizable reality but also places into question the solidity, the reality of that recognizable reality. Mimes pursue the goal of interrogating the status of "the real." What might be mistaken as "essential" or "authentic" becomes exposed by miming as what is "characteristic" and "significant."

This work is also accomplished by me through the re-oralization of ancestral stories.

Other Results of My Sabbatical: In specific terms, my search for ancestral stories ended with stories told by Emma Luscier and Mrs. Bertrand as recorded by Verne F. Ray's and published as part of his *Lower Chinook Ethnographic Notes*, a work that was first published in 1935.

Without question, these stories are the work of relatives. Okay, there might be a little question. My great-grandmother's aunt Isabelle Bertrand is named directly as an informant by the writer of this work (Verne F. Ray) but Ray only generally identifies her as "Mrs. Bertrand." This style of denomination raises the question, "Might not this Mrs. Bertrand be a different Mrs. Bertrand than Isabelle Bertrand who is my great-great-grand aunt." However, Ray also conveniently includes a genealogy for Mrs. Bertrand in his text, and this family tree makes it obvious that this Mrs. Bertrand is the same Mrs. Bertrand who started life off as Isabelle Aubichon, sister to Catherine Aubichon, my great-grandmother's mother. Emma Luscier, who Ray gave the title of "chief informant," is also a relative (although it appears that Ray did not find the fact significant or was ignorant of the fact). Emma Mallet Luscier married a certain Alex Luscier. And Alex Luscier is a nephew of Mrs. Bertrand.

This collection of tales constitutes the nearest approximation of ancestral stories available to me. After reviewing the published account of these stories, I find myself in a similar position as when I first reviewed the text known as "Shasta and Athapascan Tales." It was only after I began committing those stories, told by Charles Depoe (brother to my great-great grandmother Adah Depoe Carson Arden), to memory that I stumbled upon the field notes kept by Livingston Farrand that included this introduction by Charles Depoe: "My father's grandfather told my father these stories so I know that they are true and my father told me before he died." In other words, having found stories narrated by a relative, I began the work of memorization of these stories only then to discover that the stories were ones shared by a direct ancestor of mine to relative of mine who had dictated the stories.

And only now do I begin to recognize, with the help of my son Nicholas who was kind enough to read a draft of this report and offer his insight, that my position is not unlike the position of Charles Depoe that long-ago day in August, 1900. Like a mime, Charles Depoe sat down with an ethnologist—not a

group Joshua friends and family members. Like a mime, Charles Depoe told these stories in a way nearly exactly like the way he had learned them. These stories were ones he learned the “real” way. But there must have interposed something like a “mime-space” that day as the ethnologist's scribbling replaced the sounds of friends and family repeating back the words. The stories were the same as Charles Depoe learned them but entirely different from the tellings that had preceded this particular telling. Did not Charles Depoe first recall what was not there? Did he not remember the situation that he was not placed in? The activity that he was impotent to arrange? As prelude to telling a story, did he not open his eyes to take stock of bare shelves, so to speak? Did he not serve up an empty platter? Did he not promise a valuable present, but turn over an empty palm? Didn't Charle Depoe do something like pretend to take a drag on an imaginary pipe?

Did Charles Depoe found then a tradition of miming that I continue now? Or did Charles Depoe himself continue a tradition that always already acted to create out of apparent nothingness a set of verbal motions that continue forward a timeless, if not exactly always unbroken, tradition of entertainment and education? Both possibilities bring me more encouragement than I had prior to writing this report.

What I Did (Have Yet) Not Find: Despite careful searching, I have failed to find any field notes or other similar documents that went before the publication of *Lower Chinook Ethnographic Notes*. If Ray kept such notes, they have gone missing.

Having come up with a lack of treasure, I feel compelled to list the particular institutions and persons whom I contacted in this research. Specifically, I visited or reviewed the online finding guides for the following collections: Southwestern Oregon Research Project (SWORP) collection, the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley, the Huntington Library of the University of California, Los Angeles, the American Philosophical Society archive, the Newberry Library of the University of Chicago, Harvard University Library, the University of Washington library, the University of Colorado library, Cornell University Library, Columbia University library, and the Knight Library at the University of Oregon; Western Washington University library, Gonzaga University library; Stanford University library, the National Museum of the American Indian.

I also interviewed or corresponded with the following persons during my sabbatical: Tony Johnson, Education Program Manager, Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe; David Lewis, Cultural Resource Director, Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde Community; Robert Kentta, Cultural Resource Worker, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon; William Seaburg, Professor of Anthropology, University of Washington, Bothell; Beth Piatote, Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley; Rozlind Koester, Assistant Archivist, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University; Whitney Hopkins, Reference Intern, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Jarold Ramsey, Professor of English Emeritus, University of Rochester; Blynne Olivieri, Pacific Northwest Curator, University of Washington Libraries; John Bolcer, University Archivist, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries; Leanda Gahegan, Reference Archivist, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Jennifer Lagergren, Office Manager, Chinook Indian Nation; Peggy Disney, Tribal Council Member, Chinook Indian Nation; David Kingma, Archivist, The Foley Center Library at Gonzaga University; Henry Petite, Oregon Department of Transportation; Charles Pellisier; Dennis Richardson; Natasha Cavanaugh, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon.

While I hope that field notes and other documents produced by Ray prior to the publication of *Lower*

Chinook Ethnographic Notes do still exist and will soon come to light, they are not to be found at the present time. I am happy to end my work of sabbatical with confidence that more will soon be revealed.