UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
American Indians' Kitchen-Table Stories: Contemporary Conversations with Cherokee, Sioux, Hopi, Osage, Navajo, Zuni, and Members of Other Nations. By Keith Cunningham.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6nd9v12d

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 17(4)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Sequoya, Jana

Publication Date
1993-09-01

DOI
10.17953

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

In addition to being a very pleasurable work to read and to look at, this book is a welcome addition to the now-considerable documentation on various aspects of Yup'ik life, including material and non-material culture and postcontact history. This documentation is available in text, in film, and, with the publication of this book, in still photos. Barker's book shows that not only is Yup'ik Eskimo culture fairly well documented, but that this still largely traditional way of life and worldview is quite viable and shows every promise of remaining so. In Barker's words,

> the gathering of subsistence food . . . remains an essential theme of the current culture. . . . Technology for subsistence has changed in recent decades. What has not changed is the spiritual connection between man and the animal world which is born out of intimate knowledge and dependence. Ritual distribution is still practiced . . . carried out with much ado and ethnic pride . . . [but] the correct handling of game . . . [is] quietly automatic, even unconscious (p. 20).

A brief note on the words *Eskimo* and *Yup'ik* is in order. Although in Canada (and Greenland, to a lesser extent) *Eskimo* is considered pejorative by the Inuit people, who prefer to be called only *Inuit* (and *Kalaallit* in Greenland), *Eskimo* is still quite acceptable in Alaska. Alaska Natives do not find it offensive. This is because Alaska has both groups that call themselves Inuit and groups that use the term *Yuut,* or some variation of this word. *Eskimo* is a neutral word that does not exclude *Yuut* the way *Inuit* does. The term *Yup'ik* is used specifically by and for the people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta and Bristol Bay. In the language itself, the plural is *Yupiit.*

Steven A. Jacobson
University of Alaska, Fairbanks

American Indians' Kitchen-Table Stories: Contemporary Conversations with Cherokee, Sioux, Hopi, Osage, Navajo, Zuni, and Members of Other Nations. By Keith Cunningham. American Folklore Series, general editor, W.K. McNeil. Little Rock, AR: August House, 1992. 240 pages. $25.95 cloth.

The title of this volume may simultaneously attract and deter readers looking for privileged information about "tribal others."

Rather than contributing anything of particular interest to the popular quest for decentering experiences, however, this book is, for the most part, a chatty and unpretentious collection of the folk tales and "kitchen-table talk" circulating among ordinary folks in the mostly rural areas of Arizona and New Mexico—and among the American Indian folks of that region in particular.

At the outset, folklorist Keith Cunningham, professor of English at Northern Arizona University, invokes the convention of ethnographic writing in his assertion that "[a]lmost all these first interviews [chapters one through five] were conducted with friends—or friends of friends—in homes as a part of ongoing, evolving relationships with co-researchers." Accordingly, the opening chapter, "Learning to Listen," invites us (so to speak) into Helen's kitchen at Zuni to "listen" to her response to "the first question on our list about Zuni health"(p. 31). General conversation about some of the daily health concerns at Zuni is followed by an engaging history of the research project, during which Cunningham and his wife "began to focus less on the lore of the folk than on the folk themselves and on questions of how people and culture are continually shaping and being shaped by one another" (p. 35). It is an interesting question, indeed, and one wonders how the professor will elaborate his distinction between "people" and "culture."

However, despite his sincere interest in the human subjects of these interviews, the frame of reference of the collection is not so much the people interviewed as it is the organizing and classifying standpoint of narrator/editor Cunningham, whose sheer "gee-whiz" enthusiasm may initially be a bit of an irritant. And although his narrative tone gradually becomes integrated as a responsive dimension of the friendly settings, the "project" itself is not entirely clear. Perhaps because it was funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation as well as the American Indian Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (among others), a sort of subtext occasionally surfaces that positions these interviews in terms of a "study of views of disability and rehabilitation" (p. 157). Although the opening chapter leads the reader to expect that these "kitchen-table stories, [the] everyday art of extraordinary people, [are] stories dealing with illness and cures and life itself" (p. 36), only the second chapter—"Zuni Medicine"—focuses on the topic of health and healing. Under the subheadings of "Sage Paste and Vicks 44" and "The Dance of Health," the theme of medicine is organized around an unfortu-

nate coincidence suffered by the narrator: "Shortly after we became involved in disability research, I became disabled (I have often commented that I was very glad we had not been doing research on death and dying)." Cunningham's gentle irony notwithstanding, after the intervening eighty pages of "Legends," "Conversations," and "Navajo Humor," his reminder that the official focus of this collection is on "disability and rehabilitation" may come as a surprise.

Indeed, the stories themselves offer a certain resistance to that theme, ranging, as they do, from tall tales about microwaved poodles to vanishing hitchhikers; they are variations on those legends generally afoot in contemporary North American rural culture. Their specific interest in the context of a volume presented in terms of "Indianness" is in the syncretic twist given them by tribally cultured tellers, or the "incorporative acculturation" of those narrators—Cunningham's scholarly nod to the legitimating tales that anthropologists tell each other (p. 83).

Cunningham's discussions of the narrative and formal variations of these tales attempt to appeal to both a technical specialty and a nonacademic readership. But at times his observations are inexplicably banal—as is his observation that Navajo humor "generally focuses on things at variance with what is culturally expected and accepted" (p. 154)—as though this was peculiar to the Navajo. From a Navajo angle, though, the ensuing line of questioning based on the ethnographic premise that "to understand a Navajo joke and *why* it is funny is to know something of what it is to be Navajo" (p. 130), might become the point of departure for a genre of stories that begin like this: "We asked him what the jokes meant and why they are funny" (p. 133). But Cunningham's Navajo friend—"a cultural instructional aid" introduced as Clyde—adroitly develops that reductive absurdity into a consideration of the subtleties of context and of the cross-cultural influences by which, for example, TV ads are appropriated as word-play that only skilled speakers would recognize. Indeed, he demonstrates the professor's assertion that "Navajo jokes in the 1990s are a major genre of Navajo oral tradition—a major verbal art form, and the people prize their skilled performance" (p. 153). And herein is the connection between Cunningham's stated project of research into Native American healing practices and this volume of tales, legends, and conversations: "Laughter, like ceremony, may well be one way of reversing what should not be and of re-establishing *hozho*" (p. 154). That the

efficacy of laughter has become at least a theoretical commonplace of mainstream attitudes toward health does not diminish the need for an always welcome reminder.

Although the official topic of *Kitchen-Table Stories* may stir up popular associations with the figure of the Indian as healer of alienated modern society, the tellers of these stories do not inhabit any such extrahistorical space. The collection is interesting precisely for the embeddedness of its cross-cultural narratives in those daily social processes we all share. If you want tales of a more mystical bent, you might choose Carl A. Hammerschlag's *The Dancing Healers* (1988) ; if you are looking for a clinical study of innovative psychological approaches to American Indian health and healing, read Eduardo Duran's *Transforming the Soul Wound* (1990); if you are hoping for a "conversation" based in a traditional point of view, read Luther Standing Bear's *Land of the Spotted Eagle.*

On the other hand, Cunningham's volume might be read in light of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* for its relevance to the proposition that "users [of cultural systems] make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (p. xiv). Read in this light, *Kitchen-Table Stories* is a sincere but not always successful attempt to document those ordinary "verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners, creations of a communication that belongs to no one" (p. xxii).

Jana Sequoya
Stanford University

Anthropology, Public Policy, and Native Peoples in Canada. Edited by Noel Dyck and James B. Waldram. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993. 362 pages.

In assessing the contemporary role and importance of anthropology with regard to Canadian First Nations, this fascinating collection of fourteen essays covers a broad range of topics, interests, and attitudes. Anthropology, with its odd combination of colonialist background and commitment to cultural relativism, has played a peculiar role in the history of First Nations and of the federal government. Officials often have been more willing to listen to the