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# Swapping Tales and Stealing Stories: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Folklore in Children's Literature

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## ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE IDENTIFIES SOME OF THE SALIENT issues involved when folktales cross cultural boundaries aboard the vehicle of children's books, a journey with many bumps in the road. Beyond the need to acknowledge the story's source, especially if it is outside the adaptor's own culture, is the larger question of who owns stories, specifically folktales, but also "story" in a broader sense as folktales serve as a bridge to legend, personal narrative, oral history, history, and fiction. I will examine a few examples of the literature that generate conflict between cultural responsibility and artistic freedom—variously represented by folklorists, critics, and writers—along with a sampling of the heated and heartfelt exchange about that literature in Internet discussions.

## PERSONAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

When I was young, I took a class bus trip from my home in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Cherokee, North Carolina, and walked through a Cherokee village reconstructed and run by the tribe. That evening we gathered at an outdoor theater to wait until darkness fell and stars pierced the sky. The night grew cold. A wail rose from the darkness, launching a performance of "Unto These Hills," which depicted the U. S. army's destruction of Cherokee villages in the surrounding mountains followed by the devastating forced march of the remaining nation to Oklahoma. Although I was sitting with schoolmates, I felt completely alone with this tragedy, logy with tears and unable to speak afterward. It never occurred

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to me that there was any difference between the children on that march and me except that they were dead and I was not, an accident of history that only increased my empathy since the vagaries of birth seemed so random. Such is the power of story to move one across temporal, cultural, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. At some level, the story became my story. It entered a new person who was supported by a mythological construct completely different from the teller's, a person (to complicate matters) who became a storyteller.

This story about a story has both a personal and a sociopolitical context. In terms of personal context, the experience culminated a childhood punctuated by weekly family rituals of hunting for arrowheads along the shores of Lake Chickamauga and camping out while my father, born and raised in India but not Indian and certainly not American Indian, hunted and fished with a bow and arrow. While other kids played store, I played at grinding acorns between two large rocks. It took hours and provided a healing rite amidst the painful realities of 1950's racial tensions between African Americans, then called Negroes, and whites, now called European-Americans. In the course of these realities, I was captivated by a third-grade assignment for each student to write a story about the shadowy painting on our schoolroom wall of a Native American, known as Indian then, paddling a canoe along a mysterious waterway. This assignment launched a writing life (unless you count "My Book of Peoms" [sic] written at age 4), and forty-five years later I incorporated it, along with an African-American story that I had heard even earlier, into an autobiographical novel as a metaphor for the journey made by a lonely white girl (Hearne, 1998a). The voice of the fiction writer says, that's fine. The voice of the inner critic says, hold on. Although the third-grade episode actually happened, my subsequent use of it—the use of a Native American to project a white person's dilemma—may not be fair. Although it is my story, it may not be my story to tell. Power imbalances between Anglos and Native Americans can overshadow personal meaning with political implications.

The personal context I have just explored reveals the complexity of a story embedded in one life at a cultural crossroads of European-American, Native-American, African-American, and Asian (the father from India) influences. The broader sociopolitical context is even more complicated and will be the focus of this investigation. However, one point with which I will launch the discussion is the impossibility of separating: (1) story from context, and (2) personal from sociopolitical context. Studies that do so, in an effort to be objective, lose sight of the inevitable confluence of interaction between individuals and their environments—a process increasingly recognized by anthropologists and folklorists collecting stories from a culture other than their own. In examining issues of cultural context for folklore in children's books, my personal context will inevitably be

a silent subtext. This is a point we need to remember in thinking about all the personal/professional opinions expressed later in this discussion.

The angle of sociopolitical context I will explore here is the critical controversy in my folk group of children's literature specialists—of which I am a thirty-year veteran member—about who owns story, specifically folktales, but also story in a broader sense as folktales serve as a bridge to legend, personal narrative, oral history, and history. Whose story is history? Whose history is story? (We will, for the sake of parameter, set aside the gender implications of using the term history instead of herstory.) To focus on these questions, I will examine some examples of the literature that generate the conflict, some critical response to that literature in print, and a sampling of the heated and heartfelt exchange about that literature on Internet discussion groups.

### ATTRIBUTION AND INTERPRETATION

The background for this work began five years ago with two articles about source citation in picture book folktales, which at the time ranged from nonexistent to sporadic (Hearne, 1993a, 1993b). Since that time, writers, illustrators, publishers, and reviewers seem much more attuned to the importance of notes about story sources and cultural origins (see, for instance, Birch, 1996; Horning, 1997), just as in nonfiction for children we no longer welcome phrases such as “studies show” but demand *which* studies, with documentation. However, evasive new citation tactics for folktales have also developed right along with new expectations. Even when a note appears, as in the case of *The Windigo's Return: A North Woods Story* by David Wood (1996), it may not tell us much:

The Ojibwe term “Windigo” is still found throughout the Great North Woods, usually in place-names like Windigo Lake, Windigo Island, Windigo Road. But few people nowadays have any idea of what the name means. It was in the woods of northwestern Ontario many winters ago that I first heard a version of this delightful tale told by a white-haired Ojibwe (Anishinabe) woman. Since then my travels and readings have led me to many variations of the same basic theme, echoing through the ancient oral traditions of northern Native American cultures, from the East Coast to the Pacific Northwest.

Windigo tales often took place during the Winter Moons. This particular story employs a multi-seasonal approach (unpaginated).<sup>1</sup>

So what *does* the name Windigo mean? Wood should be one of the few who knows if he's telling us this story, and he should tell us. Does the monster in the story, the Windigo, have a mythical history? *Where* in the woods of northwestern Ontario? That's a big place. Who was the “white-haired Ojibwe (Anishinabe) woman?” Did she have a name? If she didn't want it used, might there have been a specifiable occasion for this telling? What readings have led to variations of this theme? Has it appeared in other collections? Which collections? Which cultures? Quite a few Native

American groups range from the East Coast to the Pacific Northwest. It is one thing to adapt a folktale from a printed source, which should, of course, be cited. It is another to collect a story from an oral source and not attribute it, which violates basic folklore and storytelling ethics. Although the person whose story has been collected will not receive the money or prestige of authorship, at least she or he will have been acknowledged as well as the story's origin.

Such vagueness is all the more striking in contrast to another version of the same story, *The Legend of the Windigo: A Tale from Native North America* by Gayle Ross (1996) published the same season. Her note is much more detailed and specific, naming both the persons and printed sources on which she drew in addition to giving some contextual background. One other point to which we shall return: Ross is Native American, though not of the tribe involved here; Wood is not. Here is Ross's (1996) note:

Though it is based on several stories told by tribes in the north, from the Tlingit of Northwest Canada to the Cree of the Eastern Woodlands, this version is essentially my own creation.

Many years ago, I stood next to a roaring campfire with a gathering of storytellers and folk musicians in northern Wisconsin. I had just told a story about a Cree trickster's run-in with a gang of angry hornets. My friend Bruce "Utah" Phillips said that he had heard about a story someplace involving a monster that the people burned, and the ashes turned into the plague we know as mosquitoes. I knew the monster Bruce was talking about had to be the Windigo, having heard many Windigo stories from my adopted brother, Chippewa-Cree storyteller Ron Evans. In a Cree tale about the destruction of the Windigo, the insects created from its ashes are biting blackflies.

Drawing on the memories of those stories, I began to weave this tale. A Tlingit variation called "How Mosquitoes Came to Be," retold from a 19-century English source, has appeared in *American Indian Myths and Legends*, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, and *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*, edited by Jane Yolen. . . . Finally, the character of the young boy at the sweat lodge fire is my own creation, inspired by a real incident in my family. (unpaginated)

What a journey this story has made; how enriching to know a few places where it has traveled on its way to readers and listeners. And generally, despite examples of "non-source" notes, the quantity and quality of citations are improving. Judy Sierra (1996a), a folklorist who wrote *Storytellers' Research Guide: Folktales, Myths, and Legends*, knows how important are the footprints of a story, and she shows us in her carefully cited *Nursery Tales from Around the World* (Sierra, 1996b), explaining her rationale for retelling some tales and reprinting others, citing her exact sources (including a Pueblo version of The Tortoise and the Hare and a Cherokee *pourquoi* tale), indicating where she has needed and gotten permission and referring to the standard Aarne-Thompson tale types and Thompson motifs that can lead listeners to similar tales across cultures. Some, though

not all, of the notes also elaborate with bits of textual or contextual explanation: for instance: “In the original Norwegian text of [The Pancake], the characters also have rhyming names: *kone krone* (the woman), *mand brand* (the man), *hone pone* (the hen), *ande vande* (the duck), and *gasse vasse* (the goose)” (p. 105); or “Soda saleratus is the name of a chemical compound formerly used in baking breads and biscuits in the same way that baking soda is used today. The fireboard is the shelf above a fireplace, usually called the mantelpiece” (p. 107). Folklorist John Bierhorst’s (1997) notes for *The Dancing Fox* are well, if briefly, contextualized (“Notice that the fox promises the woman not one but two husbands, an arrangement not unheard of in Inuit society and one that implies high status and material comforts for the woman” [p. 135]), as are Howard Norman’s (1997) for *The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese and Other Tales of the Far North*.

As more good source notes appear, however, the underlying issue of ownership comes to the fore, sometimes because information makes the question of ownership all too clear. Identifying the source of a story is only the beginning, it turns out. The next step is considering the broader implications of who tells stories and how they tell them. Indeed, the argument of who owns a story is almost as old and traditional as the stories on which the argument focuses.

One obvious root of the ownership problem is the fact that early “collectors”—folklorists, anthropologists, or writers—were usually men from a colonizing power with a history of oppressing the culture being studied (no one worries about Jon Scieszka’s [1989] offending Anglo-Americans with his version of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf*). Adding insult to injury is the further fact that the culture may be subject to continued social, economic, and political oppression, so that cultural “raiding” sets off historical suspicion if not rage. While some people have now begun to recognize—largely because of Native American protests—the ethical questions attendant to desecrating graves, selling holy objects to art collectors, and displaying ancestral bones in a museum, the spoken word is more elusive. Still, in some ways, story could be considered an artifact belonging to its culture of origin (Harrison [1992] actually explores this idea in “Ritual as Intellectual Property”).

Challenging this position is the fact that, without collectors, however controversial their methods, motivations, or presentations, much great culture would be lost. Without Joel Chandler Harris, for example, we would not have such a large canon of Brer Rabbit stories despite the fact that a few would survive for collection in the twentieth century. Without Henry Schoolcraft, we would have far less knowledge of Native American lore, although, again, some of that lore obviously continues and grows. Without the children’s books based on work such as these mens’, fewer people, young or old, would be aware of the rich heritage that

African-American and northern Native American cultures bring to U. S. culture. However, "collectors" versions of the tales were filtered through attitudes foreign to the tellers, a fact of which we are perhaps more aware now than then. Like folktales themselves, the study of folklore has changed constantly and traveled far.

It should be noted at this point that, just as folklore has a crossover audience of children and adults, folklorists such as Harold Courlander, John Bierhorst, and Howard Norman have "crossed over" by publishing the finest products of their research for children as well as adults. Courlander worked with Haitians, Cubans, several African groups, East Indians, southern African Americans, and southwestern American Indians, especially the Hopi (Courlander, 1970). Bierhorst has published extensive and meticulously documented collections of Native American lore from both the southern and northern parts of the continent. Norman has concentrated on northern Native American tales, especially Cree. All of these people are distinguished scholars as well as riveting storytellers who have won children's book awards along with recognition in the field of folklore.

However, many adaptors of folktales from cultures other than their own are artists or writers whose primary concern is not cultural authenticity but a no less noble dedication to aesthetic expression. Says Jane Yolen (1994) in her article "An Empress of Thieves": "We humans are made up of stories. Almost all those stories have already been cross-fertilized by other cultures, other tongues. A gifted storyteller can plumb a culture not her own. To arbitrarily set borders for our writers, boxing them in with rules, is to do literature the gravest disservice" (p. 705). Stories travel. They always have. Shakespeare's plays are rife with folklore (compare *King Lear*, for instance, to the Cinderella variant "Like Meat Loves Salt"). He did not cite his sources. On the other hand, he was primarily raiding sources close to his home culture.

Besides cultural and aesthetic interests, aspiration for money, power, and prestige joins the fight over story rights. These agendas are not mutually exclusive. We all have culture; we all tell stories; we all have to make a living. A 1998 picture book called *Magic Words* demonstrates the complexity of issues that only begin to emerge with a faithful acknowledgment of story origin. The politics of cultural appropriation are complex, and this collaboration by New York poet Edward Field and Italian artist Stefano Vitale (now also New York based) is challenging to consider.

Beautifully designed and illustrated with photographs of oil-painted stones and wood set against a background of crystalline snow, the nine narrative poems in *Magic Words* are based on Inuit myths collected by Knud Rasmussen in his 1920s travels from the Arctic to Alaska. Field (1998) delivers the stories in a clean style devoid of poetic pyrotechnics but nevertheless stamped with a distinctly current American idiom (and there-

fore attitude), as in this poem about a wise man cutting open the belly of “The Giant Bear” after being swallowed alive: “Everyone lived on bear meat for a long time./ That’s the way it goes:/ Monster one minute, food the next.” Although there is no background note on the art, Vitale’s illustrations apparently draw on traditional motifs and stylistic imagery of Inuit art, integrated with his own surrealist interpretation, all translated in organic materials. The contrast of dark objects on snowy ground is arresting, and the figures themselves dominate starkly disciplined compositions. Field (1998), unlike Vitale, has set the textual scene with an extensive note regarding the source and inspiration of his poems:

This collection of poems came to be thanks to a remarkable Dane named Knud Rasmussen, who spent his life among the people often called Eskimos but who call themselves Inuit. . . . He spent many months with Inuit tribes, sharing their lives and writing in his journals everything the people told him about their world. . . . One well-known poet named Orpingalik explained to Rasmussen, in words that many a modern poet would agree with, that “songs are thoughts, sung out on the breath, when people are moved by great feelings, and ordinary speech is no longer enough.” . . . I drew on this material to create this selection of their legends, which deals with what the Inuit told Rasmussen about the universe and its creation: the sky, the stars, the weather, and the creatures with whom they share their land of snow and ice. Inspired by both the songs the poets sang for Rasmussen and the stories and legends ordinary people told him, I have tried to recapture Inuit voices in poems in our own language. I hope that the reader can imagine real people speaking—in this case the Inuit, in all their history and humanity. (unpaginated)

The tricky aspect is nuance of diction and tone in Field’s poetry. Remember that his is a poetic adaptation of an English translation of a Danish translation of an Inuit story. Although recounting the creation of earth and humans, sun and moon, thunder and lightning may seem purely a matter of craft, the choice of words can alter meaning significantly from non-European lore which is based on cultural assumptions different from the adaptor’s and readers’. Since Field has “tried to recapture Inuit voices in poems in our own language,” it might have been important to immerse himself in the culture of the people he is “projecting,” especially since many native peoples have come to resent being represented by outsiders who profit from their lore (Lenore Keeshig-Tobias [1998] puts it quite plainly: “Appropriation exploits and commercializes Native cultures, and is harmful to innocent people” [p. 71]). On the other hand, Rasmussen *did* immerse himself in Inuit culture for thirty years, from 1902 to 1932 (he was born in Greenland of Inuit ancestry on his mother’s side and traveled some 29,000 miles of arctic North America, mostly by dog sled), and Field’s giving a wider world access to these stories, even in basic outline, is valuable. Moreover, to assess the work for anything other than its aesthetic effect may be pitting artistic freedom against political censorship.

Demonstrating the long-standing nature of this dilemma of aesthetic versus cultural ownership is another picture book based on Rasmussen's work, *Beyond the High Hills: A Book of Eskimo Poems* published in 1961, thirty-seven years before Field's book came out. This book bears the name of neither author nor translator but only of the photographer who illustrated it. However, there is a very specific source note: "These poems were collected among the Iglulik Eskimos of the Hudson Bay region and the Musk Ox people of the Copper Country and appear in volumes 7 and 9 of Rasmussen's *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-1924*. The photographs by Father Guy Mary-Rousseliere, who is an Oblate priest doing mission work among the Eskimos, were taken in the same area" (Rasmussen, 1961, unpaginated). The advantage of this work is its direct visual and verbal representation of the originating culture, albeit several times removed. We see vivid photographs of the people, if not the persons, from whom this narrative came, and we hear it in a presumably direct translation. (This version is, of course, long out of print, but we do have some recent outstanding anthologies of other northern Native lore, including John Bierhorst's (1997) *The Dancing Fox: Arctic Folktales* and Howard Norman's (1997) *The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese and Other Tales of the Far North*, both published in 1997 and the latter on the Aesop Accolade List sponsored by the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society.)

In both picture books, old and new, Rasmussen and the Inuit have been clearly identified. The issue here is no longer attribution but interpretation. Although one definition of folklore is its survival through time, cultures do change. The Inuit of today are different from the Inuit of eighty years ago. Interpreting their old lore without their input essentially freezes them in time as well as potentially misrepresenting them entirely. The very choice of materials can distort meaning through omission or imbalance, as can the choice of what to put in and what to leave out of the chosen materials. Says Keeshig-Tobias (1998): "Cultural insight, cultural nuance, cultural metaphor, cultural symbols, hidden subtext—give a book or film the ring of truth. Images coded with our meanings are the very things missing in most 'native' writings by non-Native authors. These are the very things that give stories their universal appeal, that allow true empathy and shared emotion" (p. 71).

#### PERMISSION AND CULTURAL ASSERTION

Discussing choices of and within Native American lore raises the issue of who will make those choices. Who will control the use of a culture's lore which is often governed internally by social/ritual rules that are a profound part of its meaning and telling? Beyond attribution and interpretation looms yet another element—i.e., permission. Nancy Van Laan's (1997) *Shingebiss: An Ojibwe Legend*, thoughtfully written and brilliantly illustrated by Betsy Bowen, notes six sources ranging from Henry



Schoolcraft in 1856, to Benjamin Hathaway in 1882, to William Jones edited by Franz Boas in 1919, along with more recent texts (unpaginated). This picture book has generated a furor on the ChildLit listserv (child\_lit@email.rutgers.edu) from which I have extracted a few quotes (with permission from each author) to show opposing viewpoints. These are most distinctly represented by Roger Sutton, editor of *The Horn Book Magazine*, and Debbie Reese, a reviewer for *The Horn Book Guide*, a doctoral student in early childhood education at the University of Illinois and specialist in images of Native Americans in children's books (Reese, 1998, pp. 636-43). The exchange took place on a thread called "Multiculturalism, yet again" and involved many posts. Part of Sutton's first post said:

We've just reviewed a new picture book by Nancy Van Laan, illustrated by Betsy Bowen, called *Shingebiss; An Ojibwe Legend* published by Houghton Mifflin. It's about a tough little diving-duck who outwits the fearsome Kabibona'kan, Winter Maker. I like the book a lot, but it has a strange source note. The note contains a list of books, but it does not provide a specific source for the story. It also says "Tobacco and gifts were taken to an elder in the Grand Portage Chippewa Band to ask for an understanding of this story." What does this mean? Did they buy some guy a drink and a Marlboro and say, "Hey, what do you think of our book?" The passive construction of the sentence is a little coy, and note that it does not say that an understanding was *given*, only that it was asked for. And what the heck is an understanding of a story anyway? . . . (Sutton, ChildLit, September 24, 1997)

In her first response, Debbie Reese criticized Sutton for showing cultural insensitivity and said, among other things: "As a Pueblo Indian, I am offended that Roger would see 'elder' and think 'some guy' and 'tobacco' and think 'Marlboro' and 'gifts' and think 'a drink'" (Reese, ChildLit, September 24, 1997). Sutton replied: "Debbie doesn't seem to recognize that I'm on her side. My point is that the source note in question is evasive, patronizing, and totally devoid of any information whatsoever. Some people might even call it insensitive" (Sutton, ChildLit, September 24, 1997). Later he apologized:

I'm sincerely sorry if anyone (this includes you, Debbie) was offended by my joke about buying a drink for some guy and giving him a cigarette. I did not mean to perpetuate a stereotype; I meant to expose one. While I do understand—if not always remember—that humor doesn't always travel well on email, I would like to say that irony is a Way of my people, on both the Irish and the homosexual sides. Booze, smoking, and guys are sacred to both traditions, and we think everything is funny, including ourselves. (Sutton, ChildLit, Sept. 25, 1997)

Reese replied privately:

I appreciate the apology. There was a time when I had a greater sense of humor about this sort of joke, but that was when I was back home at the Pueblo, surrounded by my family, relatives, etc. Though

tragedy strikes us, and social ills abound, we draw strength from each other, a strength that allows jokes like that to go unnoticed, or be deemed not worthy of concern, or even told amongst ourselves.

But now that I live far away from family, in a place where there are so few Native Americans (let alone PUEBLO Indians) around, in a place where people revere a sports symbol who does a gymnastics-like dance wearing feathers and buckskin, where such figures and caricatures inform and feed the very wrong conceptions of who Native People are, it just doesn't seem appropriate to joke in this way. (Reese, e-mail, September 29, 1997)

I am especially grateful to these two spokespersons for their honest, direct, and personal exposure of a deep cultural dilemma that is often avoided in formal informational exchanges. Both have broad understanding of their subjects, and both are willing to go online with what may be irreconcilable differences of opinion based on background, experience, and knowledge. Their disagreement demonstrates that, in moving from a tribal context to a popular print context, *Shingebiss* begged a question: Who owns it? The Chippewa? Which Chippewa? The unnamed elder? The re-creator? The reader? Which reader? Who's to say, and in what tone of voice? The fact that one sentence in Van Laan's source note triggered a thread with multiple posts over a period of many days demonstrates the way ownership of story taps into a social subtext of powerful dimensions both emotionally and intellectually. It also shows how a folk group united through common work goals can be strained by crossing boundaries of cultural and physical space.

Another point to be observed here is that listservs seem related more to oral than to print tradition in their spontaneity, group dynamic, and ephemeral nature. The members talk to each other with an informality quite different from letter writing. However, this kind of communication lacks the context of physical exchange, which is why humor does not translate well. Reese's point about needing the context of a secure folk group to absorb self-directed humor may show that a spatially remote environment can be as insecure as a culturally remote environment. It also shows that humor is one of the most difficult elements to cross cultural boundaries. Paul Goble (1998), an artist who has taken Lakota (Sioux), Blackfeet, and Cheyenne folklore very seriously for three decades since he moved from England to the Black Hills and was adopted by the Lakota tribe, starts one of his many award-winning picture books with this tease: "Hi kids! I'M IKTOMI! That white guy, Paul Goble, is telling my stories again. Only Native Americans can tell Native American stories. So, let's not have anything to do with them. Huh? You're cool kids! You're GREAT!!" (unpaginated).

As usual, he lists all the sources from which he adapted the tale, *Iktomi and the Coyote* (1998), the sixth in a series about a Plains Indian trickster. The ten sources include:

- Maurice Boyd. (1983). *Kiowa Voices—Myths, Legends and Folktales*, vol. 2. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press (pp. 185, 190).
- J. Frank Dobie. (1950). *The Voice of the Coyote*. London: Hammond, Hammond & Co. Ltd. (p. 277).
- George Bird Grinnell. (1892). *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (pp. 155-158, 171).
- Gerald Hausman. (Ed.). (1995). *Prayer to the Great Mystery—The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis*. New York: St. Martin's Press (p. 109).
- A. L. Kroeber. (1900). Cheyenne Tales. *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 13, 168.
- Walter McClintock. (1910). *The Old North Trail—Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians*. London: Macmillan (p. 338).
- Darnell Davis Rides at the Door. (1979). *Napi Stories* (Blackfeet Heritage Program, Browning) (p. 33).
- Stith Thompson. (1929). *Tales of the North American Indians*. Bloomington: University Press (pp. 162, 298).
- Clark Wisler & D. C. Duvall. (1908). *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians* (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 2). New York (pp. 25-27).
- Zitkala-Sa. (1901). *Old Indian Legends*. Boston, MA: Ginn (p. 27). (Goble, 1998, unpaginated)

Moreover, Goble recounts the occasion when he first heard an Iktomi story nearly forty years ago from Edgar Red Cloud of the Lakota: “[I]n the shade of cottonwood trees at the powwow ground in Pine Ridge, South Dakota” (Goble, 1987, unpaginated). He also gives some background on the ambiguous role tricksters play in many Native American cultures. Equally important, Goble designs an aspect of traditional context—audience participation—into the varied typefaces as he specifically instructs readers: “When the text changes to gray italic, readers and listeners may want to make their own comments.” There are in fact four voices (four is a standard number in folktales from many Native American tribes) in the text. The narrator’s is in large black typeface: “Iktomi was walking along . . .” The call for response appears in large gray italics: “Do you remember that every story about Iktomi starts like this?” Iktomi’s monologue within the story is also in large black typeface with quotation marks around it: “Hi, I’m Iktomi. You know me. Yesterday I was at the White House. The President needed my advice.” Iktomi’s asides are in small black typeface, often in the form of boasts, questions, or demonstrations: “My warbonnet and trailer (Eagle-friendly feathers made of dyed domestic goose).” These asides often reveal the true nature of Iktomi, especially his foolishness, as much as does the action of the story: “How did my ancestors tell stories if they had no books?” . . . “I’m a great hunter—it’s

in my ancestral blood. I wish I had brought my AK-47." Goble has worked to incorporate a new context for "Iktomi Power" while retaining a traditional tone that combines derision with affection and respect.

Of course, Goble has published serious stories as well, including many legends (*The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* won the 1978 Caldecott Medal, and *The Legend of White Buffalo Woman* [Goble, 1998] was on the 1998 Aesop Accolade List), myths (*Star Boy*, 1983, etc.), and history (*The Death of Iron Horse*, 1987, etc.). But his humor seems born of a secure knowledge about, and ease with, the culture on which he draws. How do we draw a line between humor that stereotypes a culture and humor that engages it? Debbie Reese suggests that some Native Americans who admired Goble's serious work are now questioning his handling of the Iktomi tales (personal communication, November 23, 1998). Humor, as we've seen, is one of the touchiest cultural elements to translate across boundaries in print, online, or in person. Can only Native Americans laugh at other Native Americans? Or only members of a tribe laugh at other members of that tribe? If we can't laugh at each other, how can we relate as individuals across the boundaries that segregate humanity? What we can't laugh at, we tend to mythologize, and that's a barrier to real communication and mutual acceptance.

Harold Courlander (1970/1996) tells a story of his "induction" into a group of Navajo regulars at an Arizona cafe. He had been steadily ignored as a white outsider except by the Hopi cleanup man, something of a trickster himself, who—when Courlander admired his belt buckle—insisted on giving it to him, especially after the Navajo stopped talking among themselves to "watch the performance."

I said "No. I can't take your belt." He said, "When an Indian offers to give you something, you've got to accept it from the Indian, you can't say 'No I won't accept it,' that's an insult!"

I said, "I don't mean it as an insult, all I wanted was a little information, and now you want to give me your belt." And he said, "Why won't you accept this belt?" and he's taking it and pulling it further out. And I said, "Well, I do have a reason." He said, "What's that?" and I said, "Because your pants will fall down."

The Navajos broke out laughing. Polacaca sheepishly put the belt back in its loops. The Navajo said, "Come sit over here with us." After that, whenever I came in for breakfast, the Navajo greeted me and made room for me at the counter." (Jaffe, 1997, p. 132)

This story not only points up the importance of humor as an in-group/out-group issue (see Barre Toelken's [1996, pp. 243-46] famous "Connotative Moose Nose" story for a full exploration of this dynamic) but also suggests that we remember how all groups break down into smaller groups, Navajo and Hopi being distinctly different and traditionally hostile subgroups of a minority group that whites often lump together as Native American. The folklorist got "in" with the Navajo by leaving the Hopi "out."

The ingroup/outgroup issue has infinite permutations that affect permission as well as interpretation. Was it okay for the late Chief Lelooska (1997) to draw on Northwest Coast Indian tales in *Echoes of the Elders: The Stories and Paintings of Chief Lelooska* and winner of the 1998 Aesop Prize, Children's Folklore Section, AFS) if he was Cherokee and only adopted into the Kwakiutl tribe? And if it is, shouldn't we apply the same rule to Goble, white but adopted into the Lakota tribe? Is a person's right of ownership affected by the percentage of Indian or white blood or by knowledge and experience of traditions? What about the myriad subgroups within each tribal group with their attendant differences and disagreements.

In one of his thoughtful posts to the ChildLit listserv, which in fact triggered the whole *Shingebiss* debate, Julius Lester addressed just this issue. Lester is a distinguished writer and career officer in the culture wars, having adapted four volumes of Uncle Remus stories into witty current vernacular (Lester, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1994). Just as he defended that trickster from attacks for not being a model rabbit (Lester, *New York Times*, Letters, June 14, 1987; Introduction to *The Last Tales of Uncle Remus*, 1994), he now defends other stories from political correction:

It is ironic that in the push for cultural diversity, diversity within cultures is being denied. There is no such thing as THE African-American experience. I am 58 years old and the black experience I grew up with bears little resemblance to hip-hop and the black experience of urban youths. Just because I'm black it doesn't mean that I like rap, or for that matter, even understand the words. I don't. But if I want to understand the words of a rap "song," who do I ask? My 17-year-old white stepdaughter who has no trouble understanding Tupac Shakur and any of the rest. Go figure. (Lester, ChildLit, Sept. 24, 1997)

Supporting Lester's assertion about personal diversity are the frequently mixed reactions to a picture book *within* the cultural community. David Adler's (1997) picture book *Chanukah in Chelm* made some Jewish readers angry because they felt it poked fun at the rabbi (whose Sabbath message is "That that is, is not/that that is not./That that is not, is/not that that is./Is not that it? It is") as well as the synagogue caretaker ("Mendel . . . looked under the table and over it. He even moved the table aside so he could look behind it. But he couldn't find a table to place by the window"). David Adler, however, is an Orthodox Jew while the illustrator, an Irish-American artist named Kevin O'Malley, dedicated his remarkably irreverent pictures to "all my Jewish relatives"—the family into which he married. Go figure.

## AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

Enter the realm of artistic freedom and individual difference. Janice Harrington, a noted African-American storyteller, makes no bones about

cultural qualifications for re-creating folklore: "Just because a person is one color or another doesn't mean s/he qualifies as an expert. I've known plenty of folks of various shades—black, white, green, blue, or purple—who didn't know their traditions but did know how to mess up a good story" (Harrington, personal communication, October 22, 1998). Being part of a cultural in-group doesn't automatically make you the best conveyer of its lore. Umi Heo's (1996) *The Green Frogs: A Korean Folktale* isn't stellar just because she's Korean but because she's a skillful artist and storyteller. Baba Wagué Diakité's (1997) *The Hunterman and the Crocodile: A West African Folktale* isn't notable just because Diakité is West African but because he's gifted and practiced at bearing those gifts.

And many things can go wrong for a combination of aesthetic and cultural reasons:

- Certainly a story can be literally confusing when taken out of context, as was Rafe Martin's (1998) *The Brave Little Parrot*, which introduces Hindu mythology into a realistic setting without identifying it. Unnamed, Ganesha appears to be, inexplicably, an elephant with human feet floating in the sky.
- Certainly a story can be culturally confusing, as was Yukio Tsuchiya's (1988) *The Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War*, which turned out to be a legend and a complex one at that (Kawabata & Vandergrift, 1998, pp. 6-12).
- Certainly a story's selection of details can be literally misleading, as in Robin Moore's (1997) *Hercules*, which leaves out critical chunks of sex and violence so that Hera's vengeful pursuit of the hero is never explained by her jealousy over Zeus's dalliance with a mortal (is it okay to misrepresent the mythology of dead Greeks just because living Greeks don't worship the same pantheon of gods today?).
- Certainly a story's inaccurate detail can be culturally misleading, as in the reference to a "hogan" (Navajo) in a Mandan myth as retold by U.K. writer Geraldine McCaughrean (1998) in *The Bronze Cauldron: Myths and Legends of the World*.
- And certainly a culture can simply be omitted because of the complexity of dealing with all these problems, witness Eva Martin and László Gál's (1987) *Tales of the Far North*: "The only indigenous folktales of Canada belong to the native Canadian Indian and Inuit peoples. Because these native peoples have such a unique and beautiful tradition of storytelling, no attempt has been made to adapt their stories for this collection. Too often English-speaking storytellers retell native tales only from their own perspective, imposing upon the tales their own vision of life" (p. 123).

True, and conscientiously stated, but now we have a beautiful volume of Canadian tales with no representation of an important cultural group.

So how do we deal with folktales crossing cultural and aesthetic borders in the "innocent" fields of children's literature, which on closer examination sometimes resemble battlefields of social values? Is this a no-win situation?

The answer lies in the nature of stories themselves. Despite legal efforts and ethical pressures, the one thing a story cannot seem to be is *owned*. Stories are outlaw. They will elude U.S. copyright laws as well as tribal laws (the Tlingit, for instance, have had a complex system of story ownership from which stories strayed just as they have from the copyright domain). A note at the beginning of Chief Lelooska's posthumously published *Echoes of the Elders: The Stories and Paintings of Chief Lelooska* (Normandin, 1997) is careful to explain his acquisition of the tales: "He recalled vividly something one of the elders had told him many years before when he was doing research on the old stories. 'Don't take these stories to the grave with you.' The elder then entrusted into Lelooska's care stories of the Kwakiutl so that they could be passed on to new generations" (unpaginated). Yet every reader can now retell them, with or without the same sense of cultural responsibility, from Lelooska's printed version (for further consideration of indigenous peoples' intellectual property rights, see Brush & Stabinsky, 1996). Folklorist Barre Toelken (1998) recounts the ethical dilemma facing him when his career-long collection of taped stories from Yellowman, who willingly told them, posed a threat to Yellowman's widow and family in terms of their Navajo world view. Drawing on forty-three years of experience and on ethical manifestos such as Claire R. Farrer's (1994) "Who Owns the Words? An Anthropological Perspective on Public Law 101-601," Toelken ultimately decides he does *not* own the words and returns them for the family's disposal.

Stories, of course, *can* be possessed. They will enter some person for a while and then leave (Norman, 1985, p. 19). They will live and die or perhaps reincarnate in another form. In short, stories are beyond our control, a sometimes daunting notion for scientific westerners. Although education for responsible custodianship is the ideal, the fact remains that such a voluntary effort will always produce sporadic results. And the implications are enormous, because story lives right next door to history and is first cousin to fiction. It is no accident that the same listserv which hosted the controversy about ownership of folktales later became a forum for debate about cultural representation in historical fiction, specifically the image of Native Americans in Alice Dalgliesh's (1954) *The Courage of Sarah Noble*, history, in Susan Jeffers's (1991) *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*; and even fantasy, in Lynne Reid Banks's (1998) *The Key to the Indian*, a sequel to two equally controversial books, *Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1980) and *The Return of the Indian* (Banks, 1986).

Banks's first two novels evoked strong criticism for cultural insensitivity, including savage and violent images of Native Americans, stereotyped

speech patterns, and a white boy's manipulating a tiny "Iroquois" figurine that comes to life (dressed in Plains Indian clothing with tipi). A ChildLit post (October 5, 1998) mentioned that Banks seemed to have responded to previous criticism by engaging a consultant to vet Native American aspects of the third in the fantasy series. Beverly Slapin (1998), an editor of *Through Indian Eyes* and a strong advocate of fair Native American representation in children's literature, contacted the consultant, Marge Bruchac and posted Bruchac's response. Bruchac expressed frustration that her name had been used but none of her advice followed, and that Banks had persisted in hide-bound attitudes and insisted on what amounted to her own creative rights (Slapin, ChildLit, October 6, 1998).

Although a close analysis of this exchange is outside our scope here, some of the issues involved in fiction are the same as those in folklore, among them cultural representation, the rights of the storyteller, and the effects of the story. Notice also how many cultural boundaries the listserv discussion crosses: Banks is British, Slapin is Jewish American, Bruchac is Native American, and Julius Lester, who had already expressed a strong viewpoint on the "creative rights" issue several months earlier, is African American. He makes a case for imaginative latitude:

But perhaps we need to distinguish between documentary accuracy and "poetic license." Remember that term? We used to be more accepting of factual inaccuracy because of the larger artistic purpose. Today, however, such generosity seems to be on the wane because of issues of who has the \*right\* to portray whose culture, etc. That, however, is not a literary issue. It is a political one involving who has power (or is perceived to have power) and who has access to power. . . .

For all the things that may be "inaccurate" about the Jeffers Book [Brother Eagle, Sister Sky] it seems to have touched something within people that other books had not to the same degree. . . . [though] she "used" him [Chief Seattle] for her own purposes.

Ah, but isn't that what we writers do, regardless? We "use", exploit anything and anyone if we think doing so will strengthen what we are writing [here Lester tells the story of "using" his parents' letters to write his first adult novel, *Do Lord Remember Me*, and of his mother's response that "A lot of what you wrote in that book wasn't true."] I did not set out to write a book that would accurately reflect my parents as they were in life. I wanted them to be "real" in the context of the novel and the emotions of those who read the novel. . . .

Perhaps because we live in the "Information Age" we seem to be expecting fiction to be a source of information. When I want information, I go to the Britannica or the almanac. I expect fiction to nourish and enliven my spirit and if the writer and/or illustrator got some facts wrong, maybe even some big ones, O.K. . . . The classical pianist, Artur Schnabel, was noted for playing wrong notes and yet, he is still considered one of the greatest pianists and interpreters of Chopin in particular. (Lester, ChildLit, April 17, 1998)

Slapin and Bruchac could very well argue that Julius Lester was using



a culture of his own rather than someone else's, and Lester could very well argue back that the storyteller's imaginative space must be unbounded (considerations of censorship, a perplex endemic to a society as heterogeneous as the United States, must wait for more spacious treatment). These opposing viewpoints from Slapin/Bruchac and Lester seem to summarize the polarities of approach to story, and each involves a credible argument. Moreover, as a student of these issues, I "read" my own experience into *both* positions. Bruchac's being misused as a consultant—to lend cultural credibility to a project over which she ultimately had no control—reminds me of a situation similar in effect if not substance: I once withdrew my name from being listed as consultant to a major video production because the corporation asked for my advice and then systematically spurned it in the interest of frenetically paced cartoons with little resemblance to the folktales on which they were based. Lester's post takes me back to the image of that Native American girl whom I "used" as she moved from a picture on the classroom wall to a novel half a century later. Every story is, to some extent, a memory swap. The swap may be explicit, as in exchanging stories verbally; or it may be implicit, as in the case of arguments over a story's meaning, to which each person brings different memories. This kind of swapping leads inevitably to games of cultural leapfrog.

I am reminded of a funny but haunting story, "How Death Came to Ireland" (Neely, 1938/1989/1998), a variant of the European Swan Maiden story "told by the late Frank Schumaker, Grand Tower, who learned it at either first or second hand from an Irish immigrant who had settled in that town and worked at the iron foundry that used to be there" (p. 125).

A French king traveling about to look for a wife sees three beautiful swans and decides to hunt them but is discouraged from doing so by a local monk: "'They ain't swans. They're the girls who come to the lake every day to swim.' The old monk had lived a thousand years, and he knew all about them things" (p. 122). The king traps the swans in human form, marries one, tries to return for a visit to France, and is caught by the Devil, whom he in turn tricks into a box. The box gets thrown into the ocean and washed ashore on the Emerald Isle. "Two big Irishmen got sledge-hammers and broke the box open. Death flew out and killed every man of them. And he started to killin' people all over Ireland. That was why the Irishmen left Ireland and come to America" (p.123). How's that for a neat explanation of the Irish-American immigrant experience borrowed from Europe? The Swan Maiden may have had nothing to do with Irish immigration to America, but now it does. The folktale suddenly becomes personal narrative, which shortly checks in somewhere between personal myth and fiction as we reshape it to fit our changing needs and turn it into family history. Is there a difference, ultimately, between folktale, personal narrative, family lore, and fiction in the way we use story as daily habit? We, otherwise known as the folk, use stories to explain our lives

not literally—any more than Coyote stories were/are considered literal explanations for humanity's incurable absurdity—but figuratively (Barre Toelken [1996, p. 128] provides us with an interesting example of literal versus figurative interpretation in a Coyote story). The flexible symbolism of folktales makes them culturally adaptable, and they become our own. When a story fits, we wear it. Is this thievery? Without that jumbo clothes swap, we'd be naked, but we still like to call our clothes our own.

The only way to reconcile the differences between conflicting needs of borrowing and owning stories is to try and realize the benefit of both. Every story *has* a story that enriches the telling of it and therefore enriches the teller. The knowledge of a story's history is not so much a burden as it is a matter of self-interest. Here, self-interest dictates a process of swapping rather than stealing, and swapping has certain ground rules. We can cheat to gain temporary advantage, but ultimately the more we bring to the swap, the richer we become. Long-range swapping depends on a relationship of mutual advantage. Moreover, good bargaining depends on knowledge of the wares, especially if they're antiques. The more knowledge we bring to a story *and its history*, the more we get as tellers and listeners. This kind of swap can help satisfy the requirements of both cultural responsibility and artistic freedom and, in doing so, can help ease (though never erase) tension between the ethics and aesthetics of folklore in children's literature. There are, of course, no easy answers. In some cases, a knowledge swap only entrenches conflicting positions. But with an awareness of a story's history comes at least the opportunity for better understanding of conflicts common to a diversified humanity.

## CONCLUSION

In appropriating folktales, does children's literature swap with or steal from cultural lore? That's a question each of us needs to consider with every book we evaluate. Certainly without folklore there would be no children's literature. Children's books were born of folklore and nurtured by folkloric traditions. Caxton printed lore such as Aesop's fables which children recognized and took for their own. Chapbooks in search of content seized on folktales, and children seized on chapbooks. Charles Perrault reshaped and published the stories his son's nurse, probably illiterate, told. Educators such as Madame Le Prince de Beaumont buried tales like *Beauty and the Beast*, based on earlier lore, in their advice for young ladies. The Grimms anthologized folktales and altered them through seven editions with an increasing awareness of their appeal to children. Folklorist Andrew Lang recognized the power of series to attract a new market of children and followed up his discovery with eleven variously colored fairy tale books. Since 1900, picture books have drawn from folkloric conventions to shape original texts (Hearne, 1998b). European artists brought their folktales to the United States as refugees af-

ter World Wars I and II and fed a burgeoning new industry with picture books and illustrated collections. At first slowly, now quickly, Native American, African-American, and Asian American folktales have joined European lore in the world of children's literature. It is a rich tradition, and the story of each story is worth telling.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Picture books generally have 32 pages but the pages are unnumbered, as reflected in the "unpaginated" notation after the quotations throughout this article.

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