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Learning to Drive the Yukon River: Western Cartography and Athapaskan Story Maps

David Neufeld



FIGURE 1:
Lake Laberge
Source:
D. Neufeld

This paper introduces the current conversations about the environment taking place between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in the Yukon Territory of northwestern Canada. Viewing this contemporary cultural meeting ground through the lenses of both Western knowledge and Northern Athapaskan traditional knowledge offers insights into the nature and consequences of difference. This wander through Yukon cultural landscapes may help us appreciate the difficulty a culturally pluralist society faces in coming to agreements on defining and participating in the environment we share.

The inspiration for and content of this paper ultimately relies upon my lessons with two brothers, Percy and Victor Henry of Dawson City, Yukon. They continue to generously share their experiences and knowledge of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in way of life in the Yukon River basin where we live. Without their care and guidance, my research—and my boat—would have been on the rocks long ago.

Cultural contact and wayfaring in the Yukon

Two cultures, those of Western and Northern Athapaskan, met in northwestern North America in the mid-nineteenth century. For the past century and a half, they have attempted to communicate, trade, and live together peaceably in the Yukon River basin. To understand the present, it is crucial to frame a research approach within this dynamic, culturally pluralistic situation and understand not only the others' culturally entrenched relationships to the environment, but also our own. This cultural consternation is a common experience for Canadians. Hugh MacLennan, a Canadian novelist, notes that Canadians "realize that what they hate is not one another, but the frustrations resulting from the necessity of living an eternal compromise."¹ This fundamental Canadian issue of different peoples living together defies closure, and an analysis of the resulting social, political, and cultural complexity requires an open-ended or reflexive methodology.

Perhaps a useful way of approaching such challenging relationships is through an understanding of the strategies that shape people's actions all over the world. Malcolm Lewis identifies such strategies as answers to "a fundamental human problem—relating themselves to their milieu and the cosmos."² The answers are framed within cultural narratives reflecting a people's beliefs and values. There is nothing deductive about the study of such narratives. The teasing of meaning comes more through the experience of actions than the analysis of culturally entrenched principles. My approach, then, is based on the concept of wayfaring: that is, a series of stops in our travels—not unlike an Athapaskan hunting trip. I sense opportunities, sample likely possibilities for their offerings, and explore the landscape and how we live in it. As a public historian working in national parks, I find it unhelpful to pursue a single clear

Thanks to Christof Mauch, Nadine Klopfer, and Kimberly Coulter of the Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich for the invitation to lecture and their assistance in publishing in this *RCC Perspectives* piece. I am indebted as well to Jackie Olsen, Allie Winton, Sue Parsons, Georgette MacLeod, and Wayne Potoroka of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government Heritage Department and the participants in a session at the 2008 American Society for Ethnohistory Conference for their interest and review of earlier versions of this paper, enhancing its clarity and purpose.

I am also especially grateful to my family, Joy, Erin, and Andrew, for joining me over some twenty-five years of river journeys.

1 Hugh MacLennan, *Seven Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1961), 78.

2 G. Malcolm Lewis, "Maps, Mapmaking, and Map Use by Native North Americans," in *The History of Cartography, Vol. 2, Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, ed. David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51.

objective through a delimited set of research resources. Rather, my work has more the character of constructing a forum for the presentation of ideas. Public history—and I think this also true of environmental history—is a reflexive practice. The practitioner must constantly adjust the scope, direction, and purpose of research as it evolves.

What does this mean on this traverse? I will not conclude with a series of principles by which Yukoners find their way. However, I hope to enable a more deeply informed sense of the diverse cultural values attributed to this treasured environment, the necessity of continuous negotiation between different and deeply held convictions, and a consciousness of the need for respectful relations with it, and, above all, with the humans and non-humans who inhabit it.

Mennonite heritage and a culturally entrenched narrative

To begin with, it is important to understand the character and potency of a culturally entrenched narrative. I draw upon my own community's sense of itself and its defining narrative of meaning as an example. I am a Mennonite. This Anabaptist sect, part of the radical reformation of the mid-sixteenth century in the Rhineland, was roundly persecuted and its members scattered to safer regions of Europe. By the mid-seventeenth century, my own ancestors had ended up in Prussia. In the 1780s, Catherine the Great, seeking to populate her recent conquests from the Turks, invited German settlers to the lands north of the Black Sea.³ As experienced farmers, the Mennonites headed for Ukraine, where they settled in an "empty" land and, in the course of a century, grew fat and prosperous. The collapse of this world during the First World War and the subsequent anarchy of the revolution drove the Mennonites to emigrate once again—this time to Canada.

I grew up with my *Grozma* in the western Canadian city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. As a child, she regaled me with colourful stories about our family heritage, and especially about the edenic life in southern Russia and the terrors of the Bolshevik Revolution.⁴

3 James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789 – 1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), 41-7.

4 Dietrich Neufeld, *Ein Tagebuch aus dem Reiche des Totentanzes* (Emden: Selbstverlag, 1921) and *Zu Pferd 1000 km durch die Ukraina* (Emden: Selbstverlag, 1922)



FIGURE 2:
Title page and
frontispiece of
*The Martyr's Mir-
ror*, Amsterdam,
1685

It was only much later in life, after I'd begun work with Yukon First Nation peoples, that I realized her stories were in fact an application of the biblical story of Genesis to history. The Mennonite dispersal was not a result of war and revolution; it was actually quite the opposite. The growing materialism of the successful Mennonite farmers and manufacturers coupled with their failure to acknowledge and respect their "indigenous" neighbours led to the "wrath of God" and their eviction from Paradise.



FIGURE 3:
Grozma Sarah
(nee Siemens)
Albrecht, 1911,
Nieder Chortitza,
Russia.
Source:
D. Neufeld,
family collection.

This was my introduction to an Anabaptist form of traditional knowledge. My Grozma's powerful moral narrative, grounded in the authority of the Christian Bible, highlighted values and prescribed good behavior. Under her guidance, I heeded Clio's call and studied Canadian history. And for the past two decades, I have lived and worked with my

family in a beautiful land where, like my ancestors, we are newcomers meeting and trying to live with different peoples.

Origins, purposes, and characteristics of historical narratives

Cultural narratives, such as the Mennonite example just related, carry group wisdom from the experience of the past. They incorporate both lessons on how to manage one's future—in the West we call this history—and provide guidance for behavior and responsibilities that make for a being a “good” person, a lesson often referred to as heritage. These narratives are an expression of values which forward a specific set of principles shaping a group's interaction with the environment.

The values-based nature of these narratives suggests that any investigation of them must also be a moral exercise. In his seminal *A Place for Stories*, William Cronon highlights the significance of narrative in understanding the past:

To recover narratives people tell about themselves is to learn a great deal about their past actions and about the way they *understand* those actions. Stripped of the story, we lose track of understanding itself.⁵

Cronon calls for an engagement in saying that

the moral problems of living on earth... The virtues of narrative [are] our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world... narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world.⁶

With such a culturally driven method we must acknowledge that contact with other groups, with different narratives, can be complicated. In the early 1990s, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Parks Canada jointly hosted a Yukon River heritage workshop in Dawson City, Yukon. I hoped the workshop would provide an opportunity to discuss First Nations' cultural values associated with the river and the role Parks Canada might play in presenting these values to Canadians.

5 William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1369.

6 *Ibid.*, 1374-75.

The program included representatives from a variety of river interest groups, including wilderness protection advocates, several First Nation governments, perhaps two dozen community Elders, and both territorial and national government departments. Canada was represented by Daniel Tlen, the Yukon Territory's member on the national historic sites board. Tlen highlighted the importance of national cultural designations. As an example, he described the commemoration of the archaeological evidence uncovered in Beringia, the unglaciated link between Asia and America, for its telling of the story of the peopling of the Americas.

The audience of First Nation Elders and political leaders listened politely. At the conclusion of Tlen's presentation, Irene Adamson, an Elder of the Ta'an Kwach'in Council, rose and thanked Daniel for his speech. She then went on to say:

I've heard about those people you are talking about. *My grandmother told me stories* about them. She remembered all these strange people walking around, they didn't have any good clothes, didn't know how to hunt, they were just lost and starving—we killed them, those are the people you are talking about.⁷

Explicit in her story was the primacy of aboriginal peoples in North America: "we" were created here and this is "our" homeland. Implicit was a challenge to the authority of Western science; her grandmother's stories versus old bones scrutinized by archaeologists in distant cities. She thereby questioned the "truth" presented by academic perspectives on Canadian history and the authority and power of government agencies that rely on this history. Mrs Adamson's use of First Nations oral tradition challenged the assumed distribution of social power inherent in the Western understanding of the past. She articulated

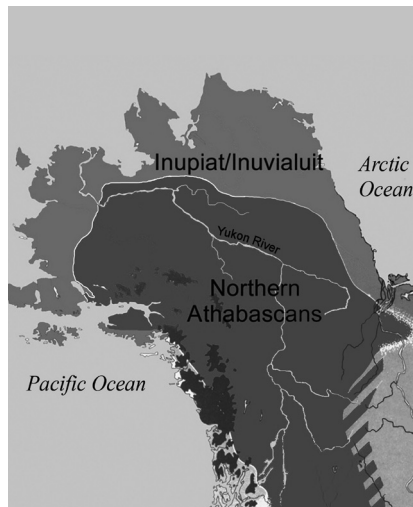


FIGURE 4: Traditional territory of the Northern Athapaskan in the Yukon River basin. **Source:** J.V. Wright, "Plate 9, Cultural Sequences: AD 500 European Contact," in *Historical Atlas of Canada*, Vol 1, ed. R Cole Harris and G.J. Matthews (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) and map "Key to Tribal Territories," in *Handbook of North American Indians* Vol. 6 Subarctic, ed. J. Helm (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1981), ix.

7 The italics reflect Mrs Adamson's own emphasis on where authority came from. The story of these killings is recognizable from an Athapaskan myth cycle. A version of this story, "*K'oyeedenaa Yoo*" (Little People) can be found in Catherina Attla, *K'etetaalkkaanee: The One Who Paddled Among the People and Animals* (Fairbanks: Yukon Koyukuk School District and Alaska Native Language Centre, 1990), 140-45.

a different vision of how the world was made and how it should be lived in. She reminded listeners that there were other ways of understanding who we are and where we are going.

Mrs Adamson's "call" highlights the difficulties arising from incommensurable narratives of meaning. Cultural contact has moved to the center of the discussion of our shared future in the Yukon. Different peoples' histories have shaped the way they experience, understand, and respond to the physical world.⁸ As a cultural researcher, my understanding comes from the investigation of the narratives guiding a people's actions. What we are studying, according to Cronon, are "the networks of relationships, processes and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural."⁹ The evidence to be studied is the great range of activities different groups play out in their relationships with each other and the environment. The very nature of this research is wayfaring, a reflexive methodology gradually piecing together ongoing cross-cultural experiences in order to understand them.¹⁰

The Yukon River

The Yukon River is the central element of the boreal sub-arctic ecosystem that characterizes much of Yukon and central Alaska. The river bends northwest to the Arctic Circle in Alaska then southwest draining into the Bering Sea, approximately 3,200 kilometers from its origins in northern British Columbia. Major tributaries include the White and Tanana, glacier-fed rivers entering from the south, while the Porcupine and Koyukuk drain the northern permafrost taiga flats. The Yukon River is subject to significant variations in flow throughout the year, with early summer peak flows at Dawson City some ten to twelve times minimum flows in winter. Following a serpentine course through a broad valley, the river has cut its way down 250 metres in some areas over the last five million years. The valley is thought to have been one of the corridors for intercontinental animal and plant exchanges during the time of the Beringian land bridges (35,000 - 15,000 BP).¹¹

8 Mere Roberts "Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science: Perspectives from the Pacific," *The Royal Society of New Zealand, Miscellaneous Series* 50 (1998): 59-75.

9 Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1359. R. W Sandwell also stresses the central importance of relationships in environmental microhistory in "History as Experiment: Microhistory and Environmental History," in *Method & Meaning in Canadian Environmental History*, ed. Alan MacEachern and William J. Turkel (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2009) 133.

10 Richard White, *The Middle Ground Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xv.

11 Duane Gerald Froese, *Field Guide to Quaternary Research in Central and Western Yukon Territory*, Occasional Papers in Earth Sciences, no. 2 (Yukon: Heritage Branch, 2001).



Figure 5:
Isaac Henry and
his boat across the
Yukon from the
Chandindu River
confluence.
Source: D. Neufeld

The river represents the central element in the Athapaskan cultural landscape. The story cycle of Tachokaii (in English “the traveller” or “the one who paddles”), a mythic hero who travelled down the river establishing the finely balanced order of the world, is a shared legacy amongst the Northern Athapaskan peoples. The regular arrival of spawning salmon in three runs in late summer and the migration of caribou herds through the region are regarded as a part of this established contact between the human, natural, and spiritual worlds. These relationships remain important elements in the Athapaskan civilization of the Yukon basin.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Euro-American fur traders and prospectors entered the Yukon basin. The development of trade and mining was built upon the extension of a riverboat transportation system that operated until the 1950s, when the road network expanded. The natural resources of the region and large flows of the river continue to spawn grand schemes for water diversion, power generation, and industrialization. Today, the river is the site of a wilderness recreational canoe trip especially popular with Germans.

The meeting of these two cultures, Athapaskan and Western, now extended over some one hundred and sixty years, remains tentative and cautious. The first call for a formal

accommodation came from Kashxoot—also known as Chief Jim Boss—of the upper Yukon River in 1902. However, the small number of newcomers and limited contacts after the Klondike Gold Rush receded into history and limited serious conflicts until the 1940s. Then, the rapid expansion of military and economic development in the Yukon and Alaska and the national governments' desire to “modernize” the Indian led to growing difficulties. In response to pressure from Yukon First Nations for acknowledgement of their sovereignty and a commitment to work towards a shared future, the Canadian government eventually began talks with them in 1972.

The negotiation of this cultural accommodation continued for two decades and specific agreements with individual First Nations are still being finalized and implemented today. The resulting agreements establish advisory and consultative structures designed to bridge the cultural divide in the Yukon. While the agreements are comprehensive, and address, amongst other topics, education, self-government, and cultural heritage, the most extensive discussions were those relating to land use, fish and wildlife management, and the assessment of resource development proposals. That is, the Yukon environment is the focus of attention in this lengthy and ongoing conversation between cultures. And in this process, there is an emerging collision between the traditional First Nation narrative about the character of relationships within the world and the Western narrative of settlement and economic development.

Maps as entry points to cultural narratives

Maps, those human reconstructions of the world or a route through it, offer some illumination of this difficulty. The English word *map*, from the Latin *mappa*—a table cloth or napkin—suggests *mappa mundi*, a sheet showing the world, but can also signify dining together, a communion.

J. B. Harley, a cartographic philosopher, argues that maps are valuable in conducting cultural research. In addition to a map's obvious value, deriving from its original purpose, Harley reminds us that “our task is to search for the social forces that have structured cartography and to locate the presence of power—and its effects—in all map knowledge.”¹² Harley does not offer maps only as evidence of the real world, but

12 J. B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 152.

understands maps as social constructions. He suggests that the artificial simplification of the world implicit in map-making also entails “the potential to constrain the way people thought and acted.” Harley makes a case for recognizing the map as an object deeply entrenched in the social and cultural milieu, and sees maps as artifacts of cultural narratives.¹³ He encourages us to consider what maps, or more specifically the powers and the technical system that create maps, want us to do or how they shape our understanding of a place.

In this paper, I compare “maps” of the Yukon River produced by two cultures— a Yukon First Nation story map taught to me over a period of several years by two Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in brothers, Percy and Victor Henry, and a Western modern topographical map produced by an American military expedition in the 1880s—and examine the “norms and values of the order of social... tradition” implicit in each.¹⁴

Victor Henry’s story map

A number of years ago, during research on the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in cultural landscape, I planned a trip down river to visit some of the more remote land selections of the community. It was a new section of the river for me.

In my field notes I observed:

On Sunday afternoon, I go to see Victor Henry. Victor’s the expert on the river below Dawson. I know better than to take my river maps—not so much because Victor disdains maps, actually I don’t think he cares about maps one way or the other. Victor is, after all, the man who can drive his boat up river in near dark, navigating the winding channel by the thin corona of day lingering on the ridge tops alongside the river. But I want to hear him tell me.



FIGURE 6:
Victor Henry at Da-
noja Zho Cultural
Centre.
Source: D. Neufeld

13 J. B. Harley. “Power and Legitimation in the English Geographical Atlases of the Eighteenth Century,” in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, 113.

14 Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 152.

I catch him on his front porch: ‘Victor, I’m going downriver tomorrow and wondered if you could give me a few pointers to keep me out of trouble.’ Around Dawson, the river is tricky: water levels change quickly with rain, higher flows move the channel, and there are rocks. Locals say you should buy a drum of gas and a crate of propellers and see which one runs out first. Victor smiles and steps down to the White Channel gravel covering his front yard. Using a well-weathered plywood slat, he furrows the coarse broken stones—the river bank, sandbars? I’m not sure. I squint down at the ground trying to make sense of the pattern he is making.

‘The only place you have to watch is by Forty Mile. When you come up there, you’ll see an island in front of you.’ The slat pokes the gravel amongst the circles and lines in the stones. ‘Just watch it, when it starts to move, turn and head towards the next island.’ The slat curls away from one of the bigger rocks. ‘And when that island starts to move, turn away and you’re through.’ The slat swings up easily like a maestro’s baton. Victor smiles again.

After our chat I go back to my map to look for the moving islands. Sure enough, there is a confusing group of bars and islands in the channel, but I can’t tell which are the moving islands or even guess where the main channel runs. I don’t understand, I can’t even compare Victor’s directions in any meaningful way to my abstracted aerial view and knowledge of the place. In his front yard Victor, had reproduced the physical experience of passage through this sticky part of the river. He had given me a map, but I don’t know how to read it.

Lewis suggests that many Aboriginal maps might best be understood as supplementary maps.¹⁵ That is, the map and its maker assume a certain level of user knowledge of the area and provide only the necessary, selected “supplementary” information to guide the planned journey. Thus, Victor understood I had the requisite knowledge to find my way to the moving islands—how to work my boat in the current, read river eddies denoting rocks just below the surface, how to avoid sandbars, sweepers and deadheads, and other river hazards. His story map was specific not only to location, but also to me as the traveller. My notes continue,

On the way downstream, with the full weight of the river current pushing us on, I

15 G. Malcolm Lewis, “Maps, Mapmaking, and Map Use by Native North Americans,” 178-79.

opt to pull up the motor and float through the confusion I feel. We cling to the north bank, sounding regularly with pole and paddle, and I look out to see how the river islands and bars might have changed since my twenty year-old map was drawn. We drift through easily, but realize there isn't enough water for us to power back upstream in this channel.

Our return three days later is under the flat light of an overcast sky, a strong trailing wind ruffling the river's surface. Against the current it's easier to approach this difficult stretch of water—I can cut the engine as soon as we touch bottom and drift back downriver instead of being driven further into grief. Even so, I throttle back and we crawl forward. I head towards the first bar on the right, still some distance away. As we approach, other bars and islands—just shimmers on the water—appear further upstream. Even if I stand up, my eyes are barely more than a meter above the water's surface, not very high to see a wet sandbar three hundred meters away breaching the surface by fifteen centimeters, or perhaps only as a turbid ripple. The bar ahead remains firmly anchored to the bottom of the river as we close. We are no more than fifty meters away and I can see shoal water reaching out towards the boat.

Suddenly, the prow of the bar rises and begins to move. I stare at the bar. The whole mass seems to have cut its bonds to the earth and is quartering upstream at a nearly perpendicular course to my own. I promptly yank the rudder into my side and the boat obediently veers to a track parallel with the bar. We're now angling across towards the grass-covered island on the other side of the channel. As the bar beside us slips behind, I watch the island before me begin to rise in the same way. As it foams ahead to cut us off, I swing in line with it as well. Although there are still two bars and another island ahead, I find solace in Victor's words, 'turn away and you're through.' The channel is now obvious and I push the throttle ahead to clear this interesting point.

Back at home, I met with Yukon College physics instructor Dr Tim Topper in an attempt to regularize my experience, to frame it within the Western way of perceiving the environment. While both of us remain convinced the phenomena can be rationally explained—largely because we think everything can be—we are left in wonder instead of satisfaction. Victor's experiential description might be categorized as paranormal: that is, beyond the scope of normal objective investigation.

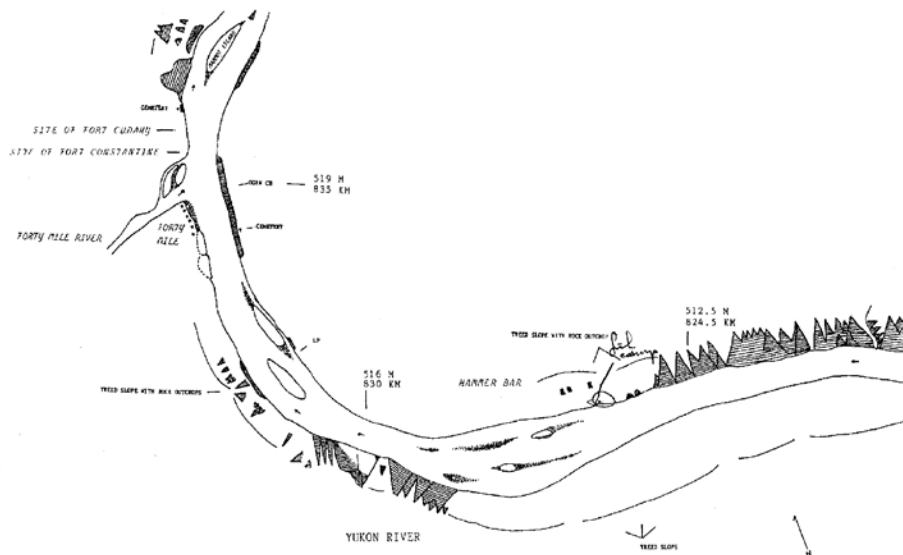


FIGURE 7: The “moving islands” just above the Fortymile River confluence.

Source: (map) Mike Rourke, *Yukon River Marsh Lake to Circle, Alaska* (Watson Lake, Yukon: Rivers North Publications, 1985), 22-23 and the National Air Photo Library, 2000.

Nevertheless, Victor’s “map” allowed me to successfully move through a difficult portion of the river. His story oriented me to a vibrant geography—the river pushes, the islands move—and thus it fulfilled one of the primary demands we make of maps. It offered guidelines for the safe passage through a place. While it is difficult to place Victor’s story within the Western cartographers’ definition of the “best maps [as] those with an authoritative image of self-evident factuality,”¹⁶ it is what I will call a “story map.”¹⁷ As a story cartographer, Victor used his deep experience of place to “produce an artificially simplified world... carrying the potential to constrain the way people [think] and [act].”¹⁸ As a culturally entrenched object, the questions we might ask are what constraints or guides does it incorporate? How does it frame reality for its sponsors, creators, and users? What cultural narrative does it reflect and support? But first, let us consider a Western map of the river.

16 Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 155.

17 David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (“Introduction,” in *The History of Cartography*, Vol. 2, Book 3: *Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)) present a table describing “non-Western spatial thought and expression.” While acknowledging the difficulties of analyzing the “inner experience,” they recognize the necessity of examining the “external” expression in both material cartographic objects and performance cartography, the latter including the nonmaterial and ephemeral gesture, speech and song amongst other forms.

18 Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 152.

Lieutenant Schwatka's stop on the moving islands

In 1883, a small US Army exploratory expedition rafted the length of the Yukon River. According to its leader, Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka,

the main object... was to acquire such information of the country traversed and its wild inhabitants as would be valuable to the military authorities in the future, and as a map would be needful to illustrate such information well, the parties effort were rewarded with making the expedition successful in a geographical sense.

Of its eight members, two were assigned to map making.¹⁹

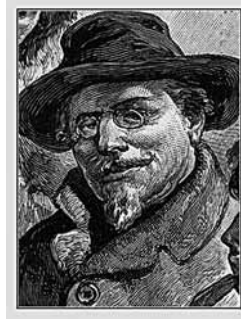


FIGURE 8: Schwatka tells a ripping tale.
Source: Frederick Schwatka, *The Illustrated London News*, 1880 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Schwatka_sm.jpg accessed October 29, 2010 and *In Rink Rapids by Gloster in Schwatka, Along Alaska's Great River* (New York: Cassell & Co., 1885), 175.

FIGURE 9: "Wild inhabitants" of the Upper Yukon River.
Source: Stick Indians by Gloster, in Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River* (New York: Cassell & Co., 1885), 127.

Along the journey, as Schwatka and his party approached the Forty Mile River, he encountered the same "moving islands" I struggled with some 120 years later. His passage, handicapped by both the difficulties of manoeuvring his large raft and uninformed by the

¹⁹ Frederick Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River: A Popular Account of the Travels of the Alaska Exploring Expedition of 1883, along the Great Yukon River, from Its Source to Its Mouth, in the British Northwest Territory, and in the Territory of Alaska* (New York: Cassell & Co., 1885), 9.

“gross inaccuracies [of] Indian reports,” was somewhat less fleeting than my own.²⁰ His journal recounts:

The nineteenth [of July] was a most disagreeable day, with alternating rain showers and drifting fog, which had followed us since the day of our failure in securing astronomical observations, and to vary the discomfort, after making less than thirty miles we stuck so fast on the upper point of a long gravel bar that we had to carry our effects ashore on our backs, and there camp with only a dozen water-logged sticks for a camp-fire. What in the world any mosquito wanted to do out on that desert of a sand-bar in a cold drifting fog I could never imagine, but before our beds were fairly made they put in an appearance in the usual unlimited numbers and made sleep, after a hard day’s work, almost impossible.²¹



FIGURE 10:
Source:
By Gloster in
*Schwatka, Along
Alaska's Great
River*

Schwatka was conscious of his entry into an unknown land. The expedition’s raft, swept onwards by the powerful current of the river, took them through a bewildering new landscape of high mountains, rolling hills, open meadows, numerous islands, and seemingly endless forests. Each day reinforced his sense of the importance of his mapping mission. An unmapped place was almost beyond existence.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

At every few miles we passed the mouths of inlets and channels, leading away into the mountainous country no one knows whither. There are no charts which show more than the mouths of these inlets. Out of or into these an occasional canoe speeds its silent way... but the secrets of their hidden paths are locked in the savage mind. How tempting they must be for exploration, and how strange that, although so easy of access, they still remained unknown.²²

In the course of the expedition, Schwatka brought order to this unknown place, both by charting and naming (or renaming) the places he found. While hiking through the Chilkoot Pass to the headwaters of the Yukon River, he came across the “the *Kitlah-cook-ah* River of the Chilkats... I shortened its name, and called it after Professor Nourse of the United States Naval Observatory.”²³

Eventually, Schwatka and his crew arrived at Fort Selkirk, the confluence of the Pelly and Yukon Rivers, and the site of an earlier Hudson’s Bay Company fur trading post. “Here, we were on land familiar to the footsteps of white men who had made maps and charts, that, rough and rude though they were, were still entitled to respect.”²⁴ Nevertheless, Schwatka was also pleased by his scientific improvement to the company’s maps that now rigorously demonstrated a certain Western cultural construction of place:

Altogether on the Yukon River, this far, there had been taken thirty-four astronomical observations, 425 with the prismatic compass, and two for variation of compass. I have no doubt that these are sufficiently accurate at least for all practical purposes of geographical exploration in this country, until more exact surveys are demanded by the opening of some industry or commerce, should that time ever come.²⁵

Schwatka’s map, allowing for the infrequent chances to “true” his data through sun sightings and the quality of his instruments, is easily recognized as a modern Western map. Tied to the Royal Observatory just west of London in Greenwich, England through

22 Ibid., 22.

23 Ibid., 72.

24 The Hudson’s Bay Company, trading for furs across Canada’s north, was active in exploring and mapping the country. This work was a responsibility in its Royal Charter, though many of the maps produced remained company secrets for decades. Although rarely surveyed, the country was generally accurately represented. Many of the maps, however, focused on the distribution and organization of the regional aboriginal population, that of fur trappers. The Hudson’s Bay Company Archives house an interesting array of Yukon basin maps dating back to the 1830s. Hardisty’s 1853 map is interesting as it shows the Yukon River unconnected to the Bering Sea, its full route still unknown at that time. (HBCA Map D5 38 fo77).

Frederick Whympier published his map showing the complete river in 1868.

25 Schwatka, *Along Alaska’s Great River*, 203.

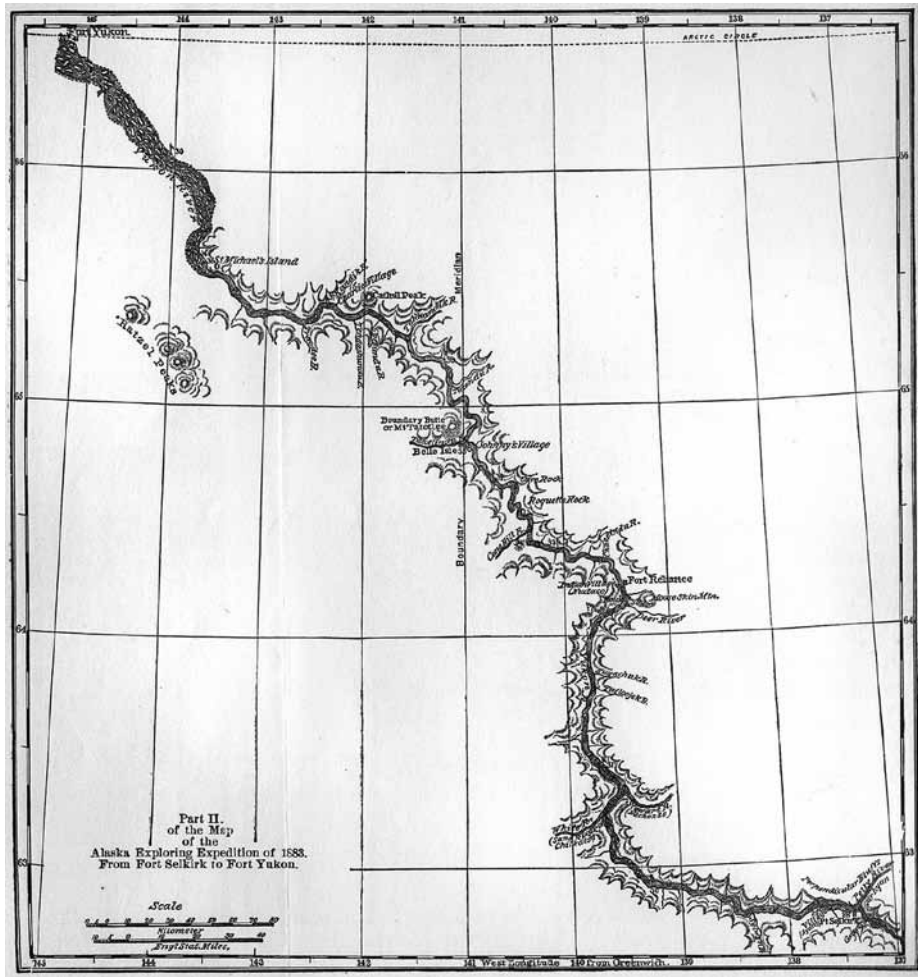


FIGURE 11:
Source: By Hom-
an, in Schwatka,
*Along Alaska's
Great River*

an abstract grid of lines of latitude and longitude, his team's map works towards the model of an objective, factually accurate representation of objects encountered on his journey.

In the first instance, Schwatka's map is not about navigation. Instead, it is a product of his navigation.²⁶ The purpose of the map is the representation of information on the "wild inhabitants" useful for the military, and the description of possibilities for

26 Timothy Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 24.

economic development by farmers, traders, and miners. And although Schwatka did converse with indigenous people he met on his journey, he carefully separated their “imperfect information”²⁷ about place, little of which seemed relevant to his purpose, from his mathematically true map.²⁸

Cultural roots for the Athapaskan and Western narratives

Harley reminds us that maps have a social purpose: their design and use is not only embedded within the culture creating them, but they reflect and support the social traditions of that culture.²⁹ What tasks are maps given? What do they focus users’ attention on and what do they make invisible? What power do they exert? Are there differences between maps of one culture and another?

Tim Ingold, in his book *The Perception of the Environment*, suggests that the different world views of the Western farmer/settler and Northern hunter cultures can be characterized as “genealogical” and “relational.” On the knowledge from the farmer/settler cultures, the genealogical, he notes,

the very idea that originality can be passed ... along chains of genealogical connection, seems to imply that it is a property of persons that can be transmitted... independently of their habitation of the land.³⁰

Life for farmer/settlers, then, is making the most of their inheritance; the development of individuals’ potential rises from mastering the elements of the world around him or her.

Western maps of the kind produced by Schwatka and described by Harley highlight resources and opportunities for human endeavour. The object of Western scientific mapping supports this aim by the production of “a ‘correct’ relational model of the terrain.” Such maps assume that:

²⁷ Ibid., 249

²⁸ Schwatka’s accompanying report to the army explicitly recognized the Indigenous presence. He carefully describes the structural integrity of coastal villages, noting the size and number of cannon required to reduce them, the logistical challenges of fielding a modern military force in the interior, and the networks of diplomatic relationships amongst tribes that would need to be considered by an attacking force.

²⁹ Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 152.

³⁰ Timothy Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 132.

objects in the world to be mapped are real and objective, and they enjoy an existence independent of the cartographer; their reality can be expressed in mathematical terms; that systematic observation and measurement offer the only route to cartographic truth; and that this truth can be independently verified.³¹

These assumptions are the basis of an approach designed to secure the investment of human endeavour and economic resources, that is, to exercise mastery over the environment. More importantly, Schwatka's map also describes development potential—a place suitable for the application of his civilization's energy and prowess.

On knowledge from hunter/gatherer cultures, Ingold writes that

[in the] relational approach ... both cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings—human and non-human—that dwell therein.³²

Life for hunters is characterized as growing out of relationships developed and participated in by the individual with the world around them. Julie Cruikshank, a highly regarded oral historian of the northern Athapaskan people, characterizes Yukon Indigenous narratives depicting these relations “as occurring within a deeply moral universe where natural-cultural histories are always entangled.... [Yukon aboriginal elders listen, observe and participate] in ritualized respect relations.” Story maps rising from this “co-production of a shared world”³³ are consequently less interested in the tangible components of the land and more interested in the relationships among its human and non-human inhabitants.

Ingold offers a way to understand the differences between the search for opportunities and the co-production of the world. In his lectures on lines, he suggests we consider our reading of print in two ways: as wayfaring or as pre-planned navigation. While for the wayfarer “the text was like a world one inhabits, and the surface of the page like a country in which one finds one's way about,” for a navigator “the text appears imprinted upon the blank page much as the world appears imprinted upon the paper

31 Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 154.

32 Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*, 133.

33 Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 243.

surface of a cartographic map, ready-made and complete.”³⁴ What Ingold finds significant about the navigator’s approach is the absence of time:

...The Western map effaces memory... [it] eliminates all trace of the practises that produced it, creating the impression that the structure of the map springs directly from the structure of the earth. But [it is a world] without inhabitants: no one is there; nothing moves or makes any sound.³⁵

It is a map driven by desired outcomes—settlement, development, and production—not one responsive to the experiences of contact and travel.



FIGURE 12: Map of 1900 highlighting the expansion of the different stages—from “single itineraries and reports” to “exact trigonometric work”—of the Western scientific map.

Source: J.G. Bartholomew, *The International Reference Atlas of the World* (London: George Newnes, Ltd.), Frontispiece.

To be effective in its cultural application, the map had to deny the validity of other forms of spatial representation. In Western cartography, this was achieved by delivering a scientific map based upon:

³⁴ Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

true, probable, progressive, or highly confirmed knowledge.’ creat[ing] a ‘standard’—a successful version of ‘normal science’—that enabled cartographers to build a wall around the citadel of the “true” map. Its central bastions were measurement and standardization, beyond this there was a ‘not cartography’ land where lurked an army of inaccurate, heretical, subjective, valuative, and ideologically distorted images.³⁶

To ensure that the primary focus remains on the mastery of resources in new lands, maps silence differences in landscape and erase the presence of indigenous inhabitants; they produce an empty land, a land of unexploited resources and opportunities. According to Harley, “this sort of cartographic silence becomes an affirmative ideological act. It serves to prepare the way for European settlement... such maps are ethnocentric images.... the map becomes a licence for the appropriation of the territory depicted.”³⁷ Maps serve as a foundation for the development of a secure future.

The wayfarer’s map, like Victor’s story map, is set in both place and time.³⁸ Such maps are about journeys and the relationships exercised during travel. The object of story mapping is to engage with place. The story cartographer assumes the world is a network of journeys, each with sets of unique relationships to be repeated or replicated by travellers, their reality expressed in experiential or relational terms, with continuing engagement offering the only path to cartographic reliability. So which journeys are being replicated by Victor’s story map about moving islands? To address this question we need to meet Victor’s older brother, Percy.

Percy Henry offers other kinds of travelling stories. While Victor’s moving island story map provided guidance in the animate landscape, Percy introduced me to the larger contextual story map of the Yukon River, one describing the accompanying moral compass. The Yukon River and time itself were created by an Athapaskan hero figure known as Tachokaii. The Tachokaii story cycle, an oral map of a journey and associated adventures from the river’s origin to its mouth, describes the transformation of the world from chaos—not a void as in Genesis, but rather a time of limitless possibilities when

36 Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” 155.

37 J. B. Harley. “Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe,” in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 104-5.

38 Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, 89.

humans and animals spoke with each other and in fact regularly changed from one form to the other—to its present more fixed, more reliable, but still dynamic, balance. This balance requires each element of creation, human and non-human alike, to know its role and fulfil its responsibilities.

The Tachokaii story cycle highlights the importance of the Yukon River to the life of the people living along it. The episodes of Tachokaii's adventures are shared and consistent among the Athapaskan people of the Yukon River valley. The stories are tied to specific locations along the river.

Frederica de Laguna, a noted Athapaskan anthropologist, characterizes these “[serious stories] as indirect conveyors of knowledge about the natural (and supernatural) world, of man’s place in it, and of how he should behave.”³⁹ These stories are, in fact, the components of a cultural narrative.

Athapaskan people share this riparian cosmology through their continuing relationship to their river. The clarity of place represented in these stories is reinforced by their repetition in time. Amongst the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in of the Dawson area, the story cycle was traditionally told in the fall, during the seasonal move down river from the summer fish camp to winter hunting grounds. As the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in journeyed, stories that linked to the places where they camped were repeated, and the audience would be reminded of both the moral lessons gained from Tachokaii’s experiences there and the practical knowledge of that place and time of year that were part of the story. The story cycle acts as a cosmographic map. Its ephemeral nature, perhaps, imbues it with a resilience that allowed it, along with its more practical story map, to continue to serve the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in into the present.⁴⁰



FIGURE 13:
Victor and Percy
Henry on the steps
of the Danoja Zho
Cultural Centre.
Source: D. Neufeld

39 Frederica de Laguna, *Tales from the Dena: Indian Stories from the Tanana, Koyukuk, & Yukon Rivers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 288.

40 G. Malcolm Lewis, “Maps, Mapmaking, and Map Use by Native North Americans,” 180-81.



FIGURE 14: A young woman sights in her rifle during First Hunt, an annual Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in event introducing youth to an element of their community's traditional round of hunting and fishing.
Source: D. Neufeld

The territory of the Athapaskans is created, understood, described, explained, and owned by these stories of travel and interaction. The stories instill and reinforce a sense of cultural identity and morality, they remind the participants of their responsibility in maintaining the balance of the world and, through their detailed ecological knowledge, the power to envision and control their future. The stories are also potent statements of ownership. The river and the journeys connecting the people in a shared experience are the foundation for and object of their story maps. The features encountered while travelling along the rivers and through the land are a chart for their complex value system and moral order. The story maps of the Yukon River basin are thus a source for the guides to proper behavior, instructions in the exercise of land skills to build a desired future, and the cultural foundation of the Athapaskan civilization.

These maps offer valuable insights into the social structures, historical processes, and cosmographic objectives of the culture that created it. A culture vests power in representations of place—power that guides or constrains thinking and thus guides us to the values and morality of the culture. Thus, such representations offer an opportunity to begin conversations between cultures with at least a modicum of understanding.

Conclusions

The recently negotiated agreements between Yukon First Nations and Canada are now based in law. As diplomatic treaties between sovereign governments, they describe mechanisms for conversing between these two cultures. Nevertheless, there remain significant difficulties in recognizing the realities of cultural pluralism. On both sides, deeply held assumptions of the nature of the world we live in often limit understanding.



FIGURE 15: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder Angie Joseph Rear shows young people how to cut salmon for drying in the smokehouse behind them.
Source: D. Neufeld

At a 2002 meeting of Yukon-based scientific researchers, including conservation biologists, hydrologists, planners, land managers, and one historian, there was a presentation on the agreements. A biologist analyzed and prepared a complicated schematic illustrating the legislated consultation mechanism for joint decision making. He carefully outlined each step required, concluding that the process was actually a closed loop; that is, it did not lead to any decision. The biologist also reported a personal conversation with a First Nation Chief where the chief acknowledged that that was the case. The biologist concluded that the process was flawed and should be set aside until it had been adjusted. There was silence in the room as we digested his recommendation to ignore an element entrenched not only in law, but in the Canadian constitution. I suggested the First Nation intention was to make the process circular, noting that while it offered no solution, perhaps consensus was the only way through such a mechanism.

The agreements recognize the importance of pluralism and establish these mechanisms to ensure the continuing richness of cultural diversity in our part of the world. Our challenge in the Yukon today is to accept cultural pluralism. James Tully, a philosopher of democratic constitutionalism, describes a plural nation as “a State with distinct cultural groupings constantly negotiating with each other on the basis of mutual recognition, respecting the continuity of group traditions with shared governance rising from mutual consent”.⁴¹ For environmental historians, the investigation of the Yukon’s rich intellectual

⁴¹ James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 116.

soil reinforces Cronon's direction to maintain a moral engagement with the world, and to care for it in new ways: "to try and escape the value judgements that accompany storytelling is to miss the point of history itself, for the stories we tell, like the questions we ask, are all finally about value."⁴²

Mida Donnessey, an Elder of the Kaska Tribal Council, in a telling of the Tachokaii adventures, explained that the purpose of this story map is to "make the world good for baby."

Figure 16:
Percy Henry and the author relaxing at the 2008 Moosehide Gathering, a bi-annual event hosted by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in open to all. It is an invitation to get to know each other better.
Source: D. Neufeld



42 Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1375-76.

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