

Storied Dialogues: Exchanges of Meaning Between Storyteller and Anthropologist

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## ***Storied Dialogues: Exchanges of Meaning Between Storyteller and Anthropologist***

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Blanca Chester

This writing arises from one particular struggle in the arena of cross-cultural communication. An essay of sorts, it is constructed in the form of a dialogue between several different texts and illustrates some of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. The text now exists primarily as a visual recording; it is a splicing together of two separate tape-recorded dialogues that I have transcribed into writing. The first is a dialogue between Wendy Wickwire, an ethnographer, and Harry Robinson, an Okanagan storyteller from the interior of British Columbia. Wickwire is also editor of Robinson's two books, *Write It On Your Heart* and *Nature Power*. These two collections of Robinson's stories are unusual because he told the stories to Wendy in English, thus translating them himself. The recordings were then transcribed, almost verbatim, into poetic texts that follow Harry's speech patterns as closely as possible. The dialogue that I work from in this essay is not in either of these books, though it follows the same model. It is previously unpublished and I have transcribed it from Wendy Wickwire's tape-recorded field notes; the dialogue takes place early on in Wendy's relationship with Harry.

In the first dialogue Wendy tries to understand what the Okanagan word *ha-HA* means, and she attempts to translate both the word and the concept into terms that exist in her understanding. The precise meaning of this concept never becomes clear; after ten years of working with Harry, Wendy still does not understand the full meaning of *ha-HA*. I document some of the processes of that misunderstanding between Wendy and Harry and, later, between Wendy and myself. Harry responds to Wendy's questions indirectly, answering her queries with anecdotes and, especially, stories. For Harry, stories are a

familiar way of explaining and teaching. To Wendy, however, the stories often appear unrelated to the questions she asks, and they are confusing.

The second dialogue, which is spliced into the first one, comes from an interview that I created with Wendy ten years later. I try to comprehend what Wendy has understood from Harry during her years of working with him. The dialogues, and my interpretation, end up illustrating a discourse of mis-understanding more than providing solutions to the confusion. *Ha-HA*, like many words about the supernatural, seems to lack a straightforward or concrete meaning. It is particularly problematic to translate such a term into English, where no corresponding words come close to matching its meaning. The taped sessions recorded here are creatively edited, or storied, accounts of the experience of trying to understand an other wor(l)d view through (its) stories. In creating such a dialogic understanding, one is nevertheless limited by the parameters of one's own cultural knowledge. Such understanding, if it is to make any headway at all, thus needs always to remain open-ended and recursive.

The use of the tape recorder as a source of fieldnotes is not always popular in ethnographic practice, largely because transcribing tapes is so labour-intensive. Taping texts and stories, however, is a widespread practice. The contextual information in such taped recordings provides richer information than that gleaned from written notes, as critics have noted (Sanjek 115). The translation of these recordings into written texts enables one to play with form. Indeed, form manifests itself as an integral component of the dialogue. Meanings change depending on the form and style that is used in framing an oral narrative. Should these stories be presented as prose narratives, or as poetry? Is the prose form more objective than the poetic? What is objectivity? Is the poetic form an imposition on Harry's text, implying that his speech is, somehow, more natural than Wendy's? Can the reverse also be true? Like Wendy, I have chosen to translate Harry's stories as "dramatic poetry," to borrow Dennis Tedlock's phrase. Any patterning that is revealed I heard, or thought I heard, in Harry's voice.

The literary critic, as well as the anthropologist, faces the problem of how to supply missing cultural context to make these stories meaningful. When stories are performed or written in English, what appears on the surface as transparent meaning is frequently illusory. Harry's stories are often Coyote tales, which does not make them any less real. Moreover, my manipulation of these texts creates another voice of authority, in addition to Wendy's and Harry's, in an explicit and textualized way. By juxtaposing Harry's words with the prose text of Wendy's speech, attention is drawn to the differences between their discourses, even as they communicate or mediate between each other.

Differences between their two worlds of experience are assumed. It is up to the reader to think about the nature of those differences. What is Harry telling Wendy? What is Wendy telling me?

Following the dialogues I discuss some of my own views and interpretations of the recorded speech performances. I try to explain what the experience of trying to understand both Harry's and Wendy's words means to me. This analysis may be read as part of the previous dialogue, even though it stands apart from it. Just as an audience interacts with the storyteller and the storytelling event, a reader interacts with a text to create new meanings and new dialogues, either implicitly or explicitly. Here these dialogues are also explicitly cross-cultural. I chose to leave my reading of the storytelling events more or less separate from the stories themselves for two reasons. First, I wanted to play with the ethnographic format of writing up an experience where the ethnographer remains explicitly part of both the experience and the writing. Secondly, by inserting written interpretation into the spoken dialogues, the format could have become so unwieldy that the words would have lost their sense of oral performance. I have referred to Wendy and Harry by their first names to emphasize their close sense of relationship, and the relating of one voice to another in a dialogic format.

Because this dialogue is a continuing and continual process, the ethnographic experience cannot be used to translate the concept of *ha-HA* into some unified and unitary meaning that defines *ha-HA* as either this or that. Such an interpretation of Harry's stories would suggest the cohesion and closure of a culture frozen through transcription and translation. Instead, interpretation is drafted into the dialogue itself in a kind of linguistic and storied recursivity. This essay may then be read as a self-interpreting dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Readers may, to use Harry's and Wendy's words, "Come up with what they think" about *ha-HA* and about Harry's, Wendy's, and my stories. Moreover, the reader continues the process of interpretation not only during the process of reading but also afterwards, in thinking about the text and the connections it makes to the world "out there." To follow Harry's instructions, "To think about the stories for a while," suggests that they may be self-interpreting in this way. It also means that these stories, these dialogues, then become part of other, newer dialogues in the endlessly recursive process of structuring meaning.

I wish to thank Robin Ridington for the initial idea that inspired this essay. And I especially want to thank Wendy Wickwire for permission to use her fieldwork sessions with Harry Robinson, and for being the source and inspiration of this and many other dialogues.

### Exchanges of Meaning

**Wendy:** What does that word mean?

**Harry:** *Sumix?* Is the thing—some of them Indian word—  
that I can't turn into English.  
Seems to be they got no mate.

**Wendy:** No word in English?

**Harry:** Yeah.  
And should be.  
That *ha-HA*, that should be because the priest,  
they learn the Indian word.  
And the priest, they mention that.  
And we know what it is.  
We must've heard in English.  
But that's something I don't know.

**Wendy:** So if you were going to talk about that word,  
how would you talk about it?

**Harry:** *ha-Ha*. Well, it could be . . .

**Wendy:** Does it mean a person?

**Harry:** No. No person. *ha-HA*.  
Well, in other way, God the *ha-HA*.  
God was a *ha-HA*.  
He nothing else.

**Wendy:** Could a sweathouse—could that be that?

**Harry:** A sweathouse.  
No, no sweathouse.  
Is the steambath, the sweathouse.

**Wendy:** But what about that *Shoo-mish?*

**Harry:** That's one of 'em.  
See, we didn't get to this yet.  
I was going to tell you.  
But we going by the number.

**Wendy:** But Harry, a person who has that—  
If a person has that, then is he this?

**Harry:** *ha-HA?* Yeah.  
That would be the *ha-HA*.

**Wendy:** That's what I wanted to know.

Harry: Yeah, that's the *ha-HA*.

When you have that, then they had 'em.

I don't know what they do.

But they have 'em, you know.

They must alone—in the writing.

No paper those days, you know.

They might've wrote 'em in,

in something so they could keep 'em.

I think they could sew the buckskin thin,

the thin of the buckskin, you know.

In the edge, like in here.

They really thin, almost like the paper.

They thin.

Then I think they cut them and they make it very small,

kind of narrow, you know, like that.

And they sew that.

They sew that, and then they put the *ha-HA* in

when they just kill 'em, you know.

When they fresh.

Put 'em in and then they sew.

Then they can stay in there and dry 'em

and they turn into powder, like.

But still in there.

And he must've had 'em in his pocket

or sitting somewhere.

So they need 'em,

so they can take 'em out on his hand.

Once they had 'em on his hand,

you can never see 'em.

It just disappearing.

You could see 'em walking from here.

Maybe two, three man is standing and himself make it four.

But the other three, they standing here still.

Then whoever the power man,

they walked a couple hundred yards away from the others.

And these others still want 'em,

still looking at 'em.

Then they get there,

then his hand—don't see no more.

Even in open place.

We didn't get there yet.

But we will.  
That's the way he got away.  
See, this the Blackfoot . . .  
This is a bunch of bushes.  
That was in the prairie.  
I see them because I went on a trail and I could see every-  
thing.  
And the bushes over there, in the prairie,  
they're not like this.  
This is a tall and big one around here.  
But over there, this too high.  
Oh, about the highest, six feet or seven feet.  
And small.  
That's all. They natural.  
They stay that way all the time.

Then, in the bushes, in the ground, you know,  
some of 'em kind of long, but mostly they kind of round,  
something like this, you know.  
Then, some of 'em, it might be a little long.  
These bushes.  
But it's kind of thick.

I seen 'em.  
And that's the kind of bushes that these two man,  
three, four man went in there, hiding.  
But the Blackfoot Indian watching 'em go in the bushes.  
And they don't go out.  
They stay and they wiggle the bushes.  
And a bunch of Blackfoot Indians.  
Then the chief says,  
    "They're there.  
    They never go through before.  
    They just stop there in the middle, and hide there.  
    We leave 'em then, til tomorrow.  
    Then you can make a fire clean around the brush."

So far, the fire so far—  
Like from here to that table maybe.  
The fire clean it out.  
They keep that dry wood from the bushes  
and they used the buffalo manure.  
The old, old manure, DRY.  
They used that for fire.  
And they built the fire.

See, at this little ridge top.  
That could be the fire.  
And they make a fire clean around there.  
And then a bunch of Shuswap,  
the some of 'em, they go that away.  
And the other one, they go this way.  
And they meet, you know.  
They going around all time.

The other went this way.  
And the other one this way.  
And the fire—  
They seems to go on the side of the fire.  
And the other one thataway.  
So they could never get out.  
If they come out, they grab 'em and kill 'em.  
They just leave 'em there.  
That's what the chief thought.

They could leave 'em there til the sun comes up.  
So high.  
And then they can—  
The whole bunch, they can go in there.  
In the bushes.  
And grab 'em and kill 'em.  
There.  
That's what the chief thought.

And he do that.  
They build the fire clean around.  
And they walked this way and that way, all night.  
Til the sun comes up.  
But this mans in there, the one that's hiding,  
the four of them, before morning,  
just about two o'clock in the morning,  
before it gets daylight—  
And they use that.  
One of them they got the *Shoo-mish*, this one.  
And he got 'em on his hand.  
And then they go right through the bush.  
And then they go right through the fire.  
And then they go right through the people, they want 'em.  
They go right out and they go away.  
Nobody seen them.



See, now, we'll call that *ha-HA*.  
That's his power.  
That little—just about that size.

**Wendy:** So you call it two things. You call it *Shoo-mish* and *ha-HA*.  
You call it the both things?

**Harry:** Well, that's his power.  
And that's his *Shoo-mish*.  
Now, that's in English.  
We say that's his power.  
But in the Indian, we'll say his *Shoo-mish*.

**Wendy:** And also, what about that *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** Well, because his *Shoo-mish* was a *ha-HA*.  
*ha-HA* his *Shoo-mish*.

**Wendy:** *Well, it's interesting that you pick that one, because I pride myself on the fact that I wasn't trying to shove Harry into any particular box, but that was the one box—I went through a period of being very interested in that, so that discussion came out of something I was interested in. And I knew it meant a lot to him, and at that stage I'd been reading the ethnographies too, and we got Boas talking about power concepts, and I had read that. And yet, I felt that the way Harry talked about the Shoo-mish, it wasn't the quality, it was the being. So I wanted to define it. As you could see from the discussion.*

Harry, however, responds to Wendy's query by launching into a story about an insect whose name he does not know.

**Harry:** This is the full power.  
Is about the best power there is.  
Because no other animal can be that way.

**Wendy:** What animal is that in English?

**Harry:** I don't know.  
But I seen 'em.  
But nowadays I don't think I can see  
because my eyes is not very good.  
And then there's a lot of these little animals and things,  
they're not here no more.  
I don't know why, they go away.  
No more.  
And I used to see this—  
They more like a little snake.

And the colour like a snake.  
Kind of green.  
Oh, no hair.  
They look like snake.  
But they got little legs.  
I think the legs were six.  
And they got the tails, sharp.  
It's about that size, or maybe a little bigger than this.  
And they can jump.  
And I put my finger there, you know.  
I could see 'em laying on the dirt, on the ground.  
And I put my finger in there.  
I thought, you know, I'm going to catch 'em that way.  
But no.  
That fast, and they were over there already.  
They can jump.  
They can jump all across—  
They can jump about like from here to there.  
That's about all.  
They don't jump too far, just little ways.  
But you can't catch 'em.

**Wendy:** *It never got defined really. I don't think I ever really did get it totally clear, from that discussion. And I don't know if we had pursued it further we could have. And part of it was his inability to hear. And he got very upset—he had to understand something. If he looked at me and felt that he wasn't explaining himself, he got this very tormented look. He sort of would lapse into a story as his way of trying to explain it.*

*And then I would be trying to think: Now what's the point of this story? What is this little teeny insect he's talking about, and how does this insect have anything to do with this ha-HA?*

**Blanca:** *So you found the stories actually made it harder instead of easier to understand what he was trying to get at?*

**Wendy:** *I would say so. As they were going by. Because we are used to having something explained. We have dictionaries. We have the word. It's explained. But with Harry, there wasn't that kind of dictionary definition . . . about him, about his way of seeing the world. And yet it is with us. And so we want it explained. And I think that—*  
*This is Boas on the religion of the American Indians:*

*The fundamental concept bearing on the religious life of the individual is the belief in the existence of magic power, which may influence the life of man, and which in*

*turn may be influenced by human activity. In this sense magic power must be understood as the wonderful qualities which are believed to exist in objects, animals, men, spirits, or deities, and which are superior to the natural qualities of man. . . . This idea seems adequately expressed by our term "wonderful." (259)*

*That's what I was reading at the time. And quite interested in seeing what Harry was talking about. How it related to that. I remember linguists, especially the ones who work on dictionaries and grammars, have a very narrow vision of the whole picture. I flipped through the dictionary to see what they had down there for the word "power" and how they defined ha-HA. They were strange meanings. Not "wonderful," but "scary." The meanings that the linguists got seemed off-the-wall types of meanings that didn't fit with what Harry was talking about.*

**Wendy:** Well, how is God *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** Well, God *ha-HA*.

We could see it was sure *ha-HA*.

He is the one that makes this whole world.

He didn't make 'em,

but he thought it would be that way.

Then it was that way.

So that was *ha-HA*.

Who can do that besides him?

**Wendy:** Who else is *ha-HA*? Can a person be *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** Well, if he got the *Shoo-mish* like that,  
it could be *ha-HA*.

**Wendy:** Maybe he's got the bear for his *Shoo-mish*.

If he's got the bear or a bird or a tree or something,  
can he still be *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** Oh yeah.

But it's not his *ha-HA*.

It's this.

It was *ha-HA*.

**Wendy:** So a plant can be *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** Yeah. But this one is *ha-HA* than anything.

**Wendy:** That's the strongest one?

**Harry:** That's the strongest one and that's the end.  
That's all.

Because if you get a hold of 'em,  
and nobody would see you,  
you disappearing.  
But the other animal,  
they got *Shoo-mish* with some other animal,  
grizzly bear or whatever there is,  
they *ha-HA* all right.  
But not like this.  
This is the only one.  
That's the end of that way.  
You understand?

**Wendy:** Yeah. I understand.  
I think I understand.

**Wendy:** *And yet Harry couldn't really describe it. But then he did tell me, at the same time that we were working on that, you know, "Listen to these a few times. Not just once. And you know, it'll teach you something. You'll learn something from it. You'll see what I'm trying to mean. You know, it'll tell you something."*

*My reading of Nature Power is that the big motive there, in those stories, was that the whites, the "Shamas," and the Indians are different. What is Shama? And what is Indian? And he's explaining in those stories. He's explaining essential stuff there. A concept like this, even if we don't get at it, even if I don't totally understand—I think I've gotten it, as I thought about it. It's not at once. It comes slowly and it takes a lot of thinking about it. With Aimee, even though I don't speak Shuswap, I've just loved it. And I can tell that she has too, when she's realized that I'm homing in on a word or a concept which she's never been asked about before, but which she knows. Like "respect" means dynamite to her. Well, no one has ever asked her, why is it so important? I kind of understand what it means. And she really knows what respect means. And we are treating each other respectfully. We have a relationship. Like Harry, I've known her since 1977. When I ask her about respect, she knows I mean I understand respect, and I really try to treat her respectfully. Bringing gifts is really important. And that's something she's always done her whole life. Part of it is respect. And that the way you sit, the way you relate, and the affection that you show is very much a part of the concept. So when we're talking about the concept, there's the relationship and understanding that's gone before. So to me, it's a wonderful thing to be talking about the meaning, when we have the friendship to go with it. And I think we can only do that from coming from my world, and coming from her world, and discussing it. It brings in this whole amazing level of meaning.*

**Harry:** Some people, they had the *Shoo-mish* ant, you know.  
This is not an ant.  
I don't know the name of this in Indian.  
Don't seems to have a name.  
I don't know but I seen 'em.

**Wendy:** So this *ha-HA* can also be God?

**Harry:** Yeah. That's about the only ways I could see his *ha-HA*.  
It's *ha-HA* all right, if it wasn't for this.

**Wendy:** If it wasn't for the animal?

**Harry:** Yeah. Because if you hold this one, and nobody could see  
you,  
nobody could see you.  
You could keep the doors open.  
They can come in and stand there but we cannot—

**Wendy:** You can be invisible?

**Harry:** Yeah. More like a ghost.  
Some people, sometimes, they can see the ghost.  
But sometimes they can hear only.  
Hear 'em walking.

**Wendy:** So *ha-HA* means that they can disappear?  
That's what this means? Or just this?

**Harry:** No. Now this man, that was his *Shoo-mish*.  
This one.  
When you hold this one, and nobody can see 'em,  
they just disappearing.  
This is the one that help him to be that way.  
Just this one.  
But no animal can do it the same as he does.

**Wendy:** But say, if it was a flower, a plant, say that's his *Shoo-mish*,  
then he's *ha-HA*, because of the plant?

**Harry:** Oh yeah.  
And that would be *Plax*.

**Blanca:** *Would you say you almost need these kind of dialogues to show respect?*

**Wendy:** *I think so. I don't know if we'd have to make it explicit. I think that is respectful. The fact that she has another world view and another way of seeing it, and that I am really making the effort to get*

to know that. But I don't think to her it feels extractive. I think it doesn't work if you're just bombarding questions and you seem to be taking away something. I know with Aimee that wouldn't work.

**Blanca:** *Is that what happened with the dialogue on ha-HA?*

**Wendy:** *With Harry I was at the stage where I was trying to fill in the spaces and ask the questions and get the answers. So it's more forced. And he was hard of hearing. I was being very academic. I was pursuing something that I had read a lot about and I was trying to get it answered. I wanted to figure out what it was. But I have to say, I don't know how I would write this up if I were asked to write what ha-HA really means.*

**Blanca:** *About the footnote, the concept being untranslatable—?*

**Wendy:** *It was kind of neat, the way he said that. "I don't think there is any mate for this word." When he got talking, though, I got to thinking about it. And for a while when he was explaining, I thought, what is this insect that he's talking about? And what is the point of this teeny little insect? But in the years thinking about that—and I thought about that a lot, and the fact that God is really powerful. God is the most powerful, one of the most powerful people, because he can make himself invisible. But in Harry's world, he was making the point that this teeny insect that you can't even see is more powerful than God. I think he even says that, or next to God. As powerful.*

*They're powerful because they have the same ability. If you have that little insect in your pouch, then you could disappear too. That was the point he was making. ha-HA was this ability. It's an essence. A quality. I don't know.*

**Harry:** *So that's why they call that ha-HA.  
There's no other thing ha-HA than this one.  
But it's very small.  
Now I wonder if you can understand.*

**Wendy:** *Yeah.*

**Harry:** *There's none of this in my word, in my language,  
that I couldn't tell in English.  
And that kind of thing,  
they don't seem to have a word in English for that.  
I can only guess, that's all.  
So we could say, that in English, ha-HA or power,  
it's about the highest power there is.  
But still we don't know the name, even in the Indian.  
Might be coyote, might be skunk, might be grizzly.*

Might be bird—anything.  
One person, they got lots of *Shoo-mish*.  
Some of 'em, they got lots of 'em.  
But some, maybe only one or two.  
And some, they might have only one.

**Wendy:** Can a Shama have *ha-HA*?

**Harry:** I don't know.  
Not supposed to.

Not supposed to because God give this *Shoo-mish* to the  
Indian.

Not to the Shama.

And what they give to the Shama, the power like *ha-HA*.

So that's why there's the Indian  
and they got a different way than the Shama.

But the Shama, they could never have this,  
this kind of power.

That's not their way.

That's the Indians' way.

So they got to be that way from the time they enter the world.  
But nowadays, the Shama was trying to make the things all in  
one.

On his side, on his way.

But it should not.

But the Indians is got to have his own way.

That's what God says.

So, finally we can go that way.

Now, again.

**Wendy:** I think I understand.

**Wendy:** *This has made me really think about what linguists do. To me, you should have all of this back and forth understanding before you start. Every word is so loaded. With this—you could have fifty pages on it. And that's why when I started my songs research, well, it's like you've got to get a corpus of so many songs. You've got to transcribe them and see what their structure looks like. And yet I went out there and sometimes it would be five or six days and maybe five songs. A lot of times. And the songs were special items associated with the person's whole life or the whole community. I couldn't separate them.*

**Blanca:** *Did both Aimee and Harry not like answering direct questions?*

**Wendy:** *Direct questioning is just not something that is part of their culture. Back and forth bombarding with questions. They accept it*

because that's where we're coming from. And Harry, I never bombarded him with questions. That's one of the few instances where I bombarded him with questions. I just sat there and let it go by. And with Aimee I just let it go by. Whatever she just wants to tell. And sometimes I follow up and say, well, what do you mean by it?

And when I did this thing last spring with the Trail of Songs, where we were having these round table things and I was being very much white, organizing it. They were all there. I was the only white person there. And we were doing these workshops, getting everybody to sing and do texts and everything. And I was constantly saying, "Well, you know that song. Sing it for everybody." And that was hard for me to do. And they would laugh and everything, and finally I would say to my two friends who were my age, who were organizing it, who really wanted this to happen, I'd say, "You guys ask the questions because I feel so uncomfortable just firing out all these questions and running the show." And they said, "We can't. It's just not appropriate. But you can. We want you to. And we like the answers that are coming out. We want that information. But we can't do it."

There has been a lot of [ethnography] where people have gone and they've paid money and they've taken off and they never come back. So when you go as an ethnographer, that's what it is. And linguists have been there, dominating the space, word after word after word. A type of research which has not often been pleasant for the people who have been going through it. So when you go into the community, you're dealing with all that baggage. And now . . . you shouldn't be there because you're white. And you shouldn't be asking those questions. And that was really intimidating for me at first.

**Blanca:** *And it doesn't bother you any more?*

**Wendy:** *It doesn't bother me any more because I do feel it is important. There is a level of communication that is really important. What Aimee is saying to me, she's desperate to say. I think if the right person from her family or culture were there she would be doing it perhaps more beautifully than she's doing it for me. But she's ninety and she really wants to say it. And for some reason, there's trust. And it's going on and on. And I think that Harry was desperate to say what he wanted to say. I think that really comes out. I feel like I was kind of a vehicle for some of the stuff that he felt was really wearing on him.*

*And this was a case, this ha-HA business, where I thought, this is something where I want to find out. And I wanted to go to some of the dances where they were dancing. They were expressing their Shoomish in the context of these dances. So we went. But that was another thing. I said I'd really like to go. And he said, "Well, I'd like to go.*



*And you could be my driver and you could take me." So we went to those things too. So, some of the things were prompted by me.*

**Harry:** Anybody have this, well that seems to be they have the special power.

And that's the best power there is in the world.

But it's not over God.

But God is not here.

Up in heaven.

But this one here, right in earth.

I wonder if you see that.

Did you ever see that?

**Wendy:** I don't know.

Can God be a *Shoo-mish*?

**Harry:** Why, God is God only.

See, just because God is God,

when there was no earth, no world, no nothing but water —

**Wendy:** *And there is this whole spirituality stuff that we keep hearing associated with the native. There's a lot of depth in Harry's. So often, when we read Boas, he's gotten notes from people like Teit and he's tried to understand what it means, and he tries to distill it and objectify it into a little paragraph. He's tried to take the equivalent of what he's heard from Harry and tried to get a handle on it. And that twists it around a bit. To make it into his kind of writing. Somehow, it works better with Harry when you read the whole thing. And do what he says, think about it for a while.*

*Not that you even have to define ha-HA clearly in Western terms. You get a feeling for it. Not that I could give you a definition for it now. You're not too sure, though?*

**Blanca:** *No. I don't think I have as much of a feel for it as you do. But I know what you're saying.*

**Wendy:** *Yeah. There's another part in there, which I put in the introduction [of Nature Power], where he was trying to explain Shoo-mish and ha-HA. He was talking about Shoo-mish as if it were an electric light and you turned it on. He gives you a very visual feeling about that power. It's going right through you. It's like the equivalent of that. And yet a lot of people have gone into the field with that [Boas].*

**Blanca:** *Like you did.*

**Wendy:** *Like I did. Thinking that this is the gospel. I do remember*

*feeling sort of uncomfortable. You start to wonder whether Boas had the same experience and this is what he's done with it. Boas wasn't into voice. He wasn't into the individual behind the voice either. So I would like to think that you answer the question just by doing what Harry does, which seemed to be told to illustrate it. And let people come up with what they think.*

*I feel that the only way we can come together is to make the connections. Or understand the disconnections. And that would seem to be the really important thing to understand.*

**Harry:** I told you that before.

That's all I can tell you about that because I tell you that before.

Well, I wrote it down but I didn't finish.

I wrote it down, all that, right from the start.

I write it down, but because I can't do it right—as good as you—

But I do what I can.

But I didn't finish.

About halfway

I got to finish that.

Then when I finish, I got to read it.

And reading and reading, til I make sure IS right.

If not, I might change.

Some, I think, is not right.

I got to make sure they IS right.

And then I can copy that.

And I can make so many copies, you know.

Then I can send one copy to one person

and send the other copy to another one.

Send 'em to whoever I think I should send 'em.

See who's going to say something about it.

That's what I'm going to do.

But I didn't finish yet.

### Changes of Meaning

Ultimately, my voice structures and controls what is presented to the reader in the preceding pages. I have transcribed and edited the tape-recorded dialogues, and, while words have not been changed or added, breaks in the dialogues have been selectively chosen. I chose where to cut the dialogues short (and they have been shortened considerably) and where to juxtapose the different sections. These are all arbitrary decisions. Through this process, however, ethnographic

interpretation and analysis has been reinserted into the dialogue. The text presents one with a dialogue within a dialogue, where the different voices influence and contextualize each other. I still cannot attempt to present or clarify the meaning of *ha-HA*. I do not understand it myself. Wendy describes the Okanagan word *ha-HA* in a footnote to the book *Nature Power*. She says, "Harry found this a difficult word to define in English. It seems to connote a magic power inherent in the objects of nature. This power is more potent than the natural power of humans" (53).

In the story "Getting to Be a Power Man" in *Nature Power*, Harry also discusses the nature of *ha-HA* and a related concept, *shoo-MISH*, with Wendy. He refers to a boy who gets to be a power man through a whirlwind. The dialogue between Harry and Wendy reads like this:

Another boy come to be a power man.  
He become to be a power man when he gets to be middle-aged,  
something like that.  
And by the whirlwind.

Wendy: *So the whirlwind was his shoo-MISH?*

Right.

Wendy: *And that made him ha-HA?*

Yeah.

That the whirlwind, that become his *shoo-MISH*.  
He found that.

Wendy: *That made him ha-HA?*

Yeah.

Well, it's not the *shoo-MISH*.  
That is another *shoo-MISH*.

At this point Harry launches into the story, which he ends by saying, "So that's all about that" (59). Harry could be evading Wendy's direct questions on the nature of *ha-HA*. But it is also possible that he is providing Wendy with enough context, enough information, that, when she is ready, when she understands enough of Okanagan worldview, she will understand. But she may never be ready enough.

The effort to understand some of the disconnections in the dialogues between Wendy, Harry, and myself means examining the various contexts in which it means *something* to know or have *ha-HA*. It is a difficult and complex effort. The discursive running to and fro of the dialogues reveals how individual cultural knowledge is not merely a small part of a larger whole. It is simultaneously and paradoxically both partial *and* complete. Once something is transcribed and written down, the words tend to freeze into static units of meaning.

But Harry's and Wendy's and my knowledges of each other remain dialogic and dynamic. Each understands something different in what it means to have *ha-HA* and, for Wendy and me at least, that understanding is incomplete. Through our dialogues, each person becomes a character in the other person's story.<sup>2</sup> Harry uses Okanagan myths and stories to explain *ha-HA* to Wendy. The stories function as instructions for Wendy on how to interpret Harry's conceptualization of *ha-HA*, illustrating Harry's world. But these stories require cultural knowledge. One needs that knowledge in order to be able to create meaning from out of the stories. Harry instructs Wendy by telling her to listen to the stories and think about them a little while. Thus, cultural knowledge comes from the stories themselves. Paradoxically, Wendy needs the knowledge given by the story to understand the story itself.

After transcribing and going over my interview with Wendy, I was struck by how much the structure of our dialogue repeats Wendy's experiences with Harry. Wendy does not synthesize or define her experiences for me. She uses anecdotes from some of what she has learned, her own experiences to explain things to me. I must think about the *process* of cross-cultural understanding and not just the meaning of one word, *ha-HA*, in order to understand anything at all from the story. When Wendy talks about the respect that exists between her and Aimee August, a Sushwap elder with whom she was working at the time of the interview, the word *respect* cannot be separated from its concept, its reality. In order to learn what respect means to Aimee (or *ha-HA* to Harry) Wendy needs to treat Aimee with the respect, the knowledge, that *she* knows. This realization suggests the impossibility of doing what I initially set out to do. One cannot reduce Harry's conceptualization of *ha-HA* to a textuality which excludes the world of Harry's reality. But to what extent can I understand, and then translate, that reality? My own reality marks the conditions of my questions.

The writing of these spoken dialogues reveals some of the conditions of their telling as a part of that telling. As James Clifford observes, the ethnographer loses a certain amount of privilege when transcription and indigenous forms of writing are moved towards the center of ethnography. Harry's reality, the *context* of *his* world, is foregrounded in the dialogue between him and Wendy. The polyphony of voices does not necessarily make this kind of ethnographic writing superior or non-authoritative to other sorts of ethnographic writing, but it does distribute authority differently (Clifford 57). In contrast, Boas, whom Wendy initially draws on for her study, operates within the context of a distinctly Western form of anthropological discourse. Boasian discourse relies heavily on specific forms of categorization and

classification to structure its meaning. Some *thing* is defined on the basis of its classification. Its meaning is based on oppositions and the categorization of what it is not, as well as whatever inherent or essential qualities "it" is seen to contain. In order to fit concepts like *ha-HA* into such a system, the meaning of the word must be carved out, reduced, to fit into a pre-existing slot in the English language which most closely fits. This process is inherently one-sided and reductive.

Boas, however, was the first anthropologist who made the recording of texts the keystone of ethnographic style (Stocking 85). But Stocking observes that Boas directed his study at the past, rather than the present, in his analysis of Indian stories and "myths" (86). In "The Religion of American Indians," Boas takes the concepts of the great spirit, of the Native *wakanda*, *orenda*, *sulia*, and others, and relates them to the Semitic Western religions (Stocking 259). When he contrasts these concepts with parallel concepts in Western religions, Boas sets up a dichotomy. But dichotomies, or oppositions, result in hierarchies. One member of a pair becomes normative. Boas imports culturally different concepts into categories which make them easy for us, as Westerners, to understand. But what, exactly, do we understand? The Boasian approach typifies the universalism that dominates many early twentieth-century ethnographies and that now has often been replaced by the current, and equally rigid, notion of cultural relativity. The extreme view of cultural relativity insists that "we" are all so different that all comparison and communication is, finally, impossible.

Paradoxically, such antithetical approaches validate a unitary (*my*) experience of culture—whatever that may be. Other cultures are either possible to understand only in one's own terms or are absolutely unknowable. In neither case is one required to shift one's own categories of experience. Dialogue, and dialogic writing, presents the reader with an alternative—different voices, different experiences, and the ongoing existence of the past *in* the present. Communication and understanding become ever present and simultaneously ever absent. Since speech is by nature dynamic rather than static, Harry's, Wendy's, and my interwoven dialogues suggest an intertextuality that includes the cultural contexts and backgrounds of all of the speakers. To speak to each other and communicate, Wendy and I must change our ways of reading, our ways of understanding. We must allow Harry's categories of experience to express themselves in their own terms. The process of working towards an affinity between such different speaking subjects suggests the potential for making connections between them by exploring some of the disconnections.

The disconnections in the written text are often arbitrary, however, and carry with them other sorts of meanings. My decision to render

Harry's dialogue with Wendy in poetic form, creating the line breaks from Harry's speech rhythms, while transcribing the interview with Wendy as prose, for example, carries with it certain implications. Poetic text restores the sense of orality and of dramatic performance to the words of the dialogue. It emphasizes Harry's role as storyteller and hints at the metaphoric quality of the world behind the text. But ethnographers tell stories too. Wendy's stories hint at some of the ways in which her world is structured through metaphors different from Harry's.

Storytelling remains central to Harry's concept of knowledge and learning. One might describe his life as *storied* in the way that Angela Sidney of the Yukon says that to live life "right" is to "live it like a story" (qtd. in Cruikshank 20). Cruikshank describes what she calls the "critical intelligence embedded in narrative" and notes that "[s]ocial structure and literature share a common ground" (354). The use of narrative can be either explicit or implicit. Sometimes the storyteller tells a story that appears unrelated to the ethnographer's questions and comes from a different period of time. But the storyteller's point is often a reconnecting with the community, a linking of the old and the new (Cruikshank 355). Harry too foregrounds his connections with community, particularly in his insistence on formulating the differences between the Indian and the "Shama." Dialogue ultimately creates multiple perspectives on what, for Harry, remains a singular reality. Specific differences between cultures cannot be reduced to word play.

Like Harry, Wendy uses terms and examples to explain experiences I have only read about or heard on tape. Her story about Aimee and the nature of respect, like her telling about her ethnomusical research on songs, at first appears unrelated to the dialogue with Harry about what *ha-HA* means. Why is she talking about Aimee August all of a sudden? Only after the tape was transcribed did I realize that Wendy herself was answering questions in the way that Harry did. She was "Doing what Harry does, which seemed to be told to illustrate." Still, despite their points of connection, communicative difficulties between Harry and Wendy, and between Wendy and me, reinforce the impossibility of neutral communication. Language is never neutral. David Murray observes that frequently, "Absences of translation are displaced into fictive records of communication" (6). He says, "The constitution of a stance of objectivity in the writing of ethnography has been shown to be a rhetorical strategy, which involves the turning of the personal into the impersonal, the erratic and discontinuous dialogue of fieldwork into the smooth, monologic written text" (132). The use of tape-recorded interviews as fieldnotes within the context of written analysis, and their writing up as competing, interwoven discourses, provide potential for dialogic written texts. The personal, as subject, may then

be reconstituted explicitly as a part of the competing discourses of culture.<sup>3</sup> Rather than re-presenting other realities, ethnography has the potential to create dialogues between cultures. Each telling, each story which explains *ha-HA*, refuses to reconcile itself into one singular meaning which is transferable, in the manner of a template, onto the English language and (Western) North American culture. The differences between Wendy, Harry, and myself maintain their points of disconnection. Or, as Harry said:

Because the Indian always talked about  
between the Indian and the white.

If anybody had a power.  
We don't know.  
Maybe some of these Indians.  
We seen 'em,  
maybe we didn't expect 'em to have a power.  
But he might.  
We cannot tell.  
We—we'll see later on.  
Do you understand about that?  
See, that's the difference, some,  
between the white people and the Indian.  
The white people, could they do that?  
They can't.  
They cannot do.  
That shows,  
that's the difference between the white and the Indian.  
The difference.  
The Indians got a different way.  
And the white people,  
they got a different way.  
Not in all.  
They gets together sometimes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term "self-interpreting text" is one that Robin Ridington used in a graduate course on anthropological poetics at the University of British Columbia in 1993.

<sup>2</sup>Robin Ridington discusses how stories and characters may be layered, each within the other ("Notes" 3). This layering is a form of recursivity at the level of the narrative itself.

<sup>3</sup>See Asad 141-65, where he argues that cultures are not coherent languages or texts; they are composed of competing discourses.

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