

SCHNEIDER, William, 2002 ... *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*, Logan, Utah, Utah State University Press, 198 pages.

John MacDonald

Volume 29, Number 1-2, 2005

Préserver la langue et les savoirs
Preserving language and knowledge

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/013958ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/013958ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiitiit Katimajjiit Inc.
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (print)
1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

MacDonald, J. (2005). Review of [SCHNEIDER, William, 2002 ... *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*, Logan, Utah, Utah State University Press, 198 pages.] *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 29(1-2), 368–371.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/013958ar>

strength, the relative recency of contact between Inuit and Euro-Canadians in this region, as compared to other regions where language shift is evident (Dorais 1996: 57-66, for example, documents such shift), is almost certainly also a factor which cannot be ignored.

In terms of style, the book is written clearly and concisely. In line with its interdisciplinary approach, technical jargon has been kept to a minimum. There are a few typos that have slipped into the text, as well as one error in translation of a French quotation (notable because it alters the meaning of the quotation [p. 138]). Such inconsistencies are few and far between, though, and do nothing to detract from what is a thorough and fascinating ethnography of language use in a multilingual community in Northern Quebec.

References

- BOURDIEU, Pierre
1977 The economics of linguistic exchanges, *Social Science Information*, 16(6): 645-668.
- 1982 *Ce que parler veut dire*, Paris, Fayard.
- DORAIS, Louis-Jacques
1996 *La Parole inuit: Langue, culture et société dans l'Arctique nord-américain*, Paris, Éditions Peeters.
- Shelley Tulloch
Department of Anthropology
Saint Mary's University
Halifax (Nova Scotia) B3H 3C3
Canada
shelley.tulloch@smu.ca
- SCHNEIDER, William
2002 ... *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*, Logan, Utah, Utah State University Press, 198 pages.

William Schneider, currently curator of oral history at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Elmer Rasmuson Library, comes to the authorship of this volume honestly through decades of close, hands-on involvement in numerous Alaskan oral history endeavours. He has also spent time in South Africa helping a university there establish an oral history program to document the role of the university's students and staff in that country's resistance to apartheid. His book is enriched by this sojourn.

Schneider's writing is pleasingly, and intentionally, in tune with his topic in its informal, personal, and frequently autobiographical approach, as he relates, considers, and discusses one pertinent point after another. His text is appropriately supported by many fascinating examples of oral history stories drawn mainly from Alaska and South Africa—some remarkable hemispherical leaps here—and a few notable examples from the Canadian north based on the work of Julie Cruikshank and Murielle Nagy.

The book's central theme is the challenge of preserving meaning in oral history once it has been recorded and archived, a challenge born of Schneider's misgivings about the ultimate value of oral history unsupported by sufficient contextual documentation. He states the problem frankly: "As I realize more about the differences between stories told and stories recorded, I question how good a job we are doing to preserve history and culture. I cringe a bit and ask myself what is missing from the archival record that was present in the recording session" (p. 7).

In addressing this issue, Schneider discusses numerous points about which oral history archivists and curators should be mindful. These include, among others, ethical considerations, the representation and interpretation of materials, the need for cross-referencing, particularly where variants of stories occur, and the importance of providing as complete a description as possible of the context and situation in which the record was made and archived, in other words, the detailed "why and wherefore" of any given project. Moreover, the oral history archivist must move from being a mere caretaker of records to, Schneider suggests, a "[...] creator of records, a person whose mark on the record is visible to all" (p.163). The main lesson here is that much thought and preparation should be given to all aspects of oral history collection, documentation, and archiving, to recognize, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's words, quoted by Schneider, that the "act of collecting" is, or should be, "[...] an active act of production that prepares facts for historical intelligibility" (p. 163).

Usefully, the book ponders many interrelated facets of the oral history and traditional knowledge field. For instance, there is a thoughtful, well-referenced (but perhaps not fully resolved) discussion of the differences between "oral traditions" and "oral history" and between "myths" and "legends," concepts that are all too frequently, sometimes interchangeably, used without much thought being given to their meanings or distinctions. Schneider's consideration of the various types or "genres" of oral history is also apt, and he is correct in drawing attention to what he terms the "neglected genre"—meaning, the record of formal gatherings and conferences of aboriginal peoples to discuss cultural and political issues. The proceedings of such meetings are now invariably recorded but not often properly documented and archived.

There are, perhaps, some other genres of the oral history record that could be added to those listed by Schneider: for instance the solitary "self-taped" recording, and the recording where the interviewer and the interviewee are both elders, of similar age, from the same community. These forms of record have been used effectively in the Igloolik Oral History Project¹ with results markedly different from, and usually richer

¹ The Igloolik Oral History Project began in the mid 1980s as collaboration between the Igloolik Research Centre and the Inuit elders of Igloolik. The project, still on-going, seeks to record and

than, those obtained in the more conventional “information eliciting” form of interview. Some elders clearly saw the tape recorder as a means to “speak to the future” and would favour the self-taped “interview” to record—without the interruptions of an interviewer—self-selected stories, information, knowledge and reflections, that they deemed important. Recordings made of two elders, where one of them assumes the role of interviewer, are also productive in that the elders’ shared experiences and knowledge of the topics or events discussed usually produced a highly informed and informative discourse, well beyond what could have been achieved by other means. And to Schneider’s “neglected genres” of oral history I would add the numerous audio and video recordings, often in aboriginal languages, made and stored by regional public and community broadcasting organizations. Characteristically, these diverse accumulations are unevenly documented, often poorly cared for, and difficult to access, but potentially represent an enormous oral history resource begging for the level of curatorial care and attention advocated by Schneider.

From a Canadian Arctic perspective, I think a major oversight in this otherwise wide-ranging and helpful book is its failure to examine the dynamics of oral tradition transfer within the context of change and loss. We know that communication between elders and youth in most arctic communities is now severely compromised—withdrawal from the land, increasingly urbanized settlement life, formal schooling, mass media, and language loss, all encroach on, filter, and diminish, the oral transmission of traditional knowledge. Schneider, however, implies that stories and cultural information not communicated to others “represents a tacit decision by the group either that the story is not important enough to be part of the oral tradition or that they do not want to pass the information on to others” (p. 65). Surely this view misses the point that in the contemporary north there are factors beyond group and individual control that inhibit such communication. Indeed, the initial impetus for the Igloodik Oral History Project came from the elders’ reluctant acknowledgement that the community’s younger generations were rapidly losing traditional values and skills, along with their language, and were not readily receptive to their culture’s teachings. The oral history project was a conscious attempt to bridge the gap, to address the future, if not the present.

Towards the end of the book, Schneider delves into the contentious and complex issue of intellectual property rights and related concerns such as consent, release forms, access, and liability. In this context he relates a troubling incident where he had to decline, albeit reluctantly, accessioning a major oral history collection—“the life’s work of a prominent and important researcher” (p. 152)—because it was doubted that the Elmer Rasmuson Library could acquire the rights to make this collection publicly available. It is clear that such legal considerations will increasingly determine the shape, scope, and accessibility of oral history projects, all in the good name of individual rights and protection against inappropriate use of the stories and information recorded. But there’s an irony here in that legal conventions not of aboriginal people’s own making will doom important, often unique, recordings of traditional knowledge and oral history to neglect and oblivion.

document Inuit traditional knowledge and oral history of the Northern Foxe Basin area of Nunavut. The recordings, translations, and transcripts deriving from the project are archived at the Igloodik Research Centre, Igloodik, Nunavut.

All in all “...*So They Understand*” is a thoughtful, informative piece of work which will interest readers seeking an understanding of contemporary oral history practices and issues. Those actually engaged in oral history work, particularly the day-to-day tasks involved in its collection, documentation and archiving, will certainly relate appreciatively to this book, and find in its pages much to value and contemplate.

John MacDonald
Igloolik Research Centre
Box 210
Igloolik (Nunavut) X0A 0L0
Canada
jmacdonald@nac.nu.ca

SALADIN D'ANGLURE, Bernard et IGLOOLIK ISUMA PRODUCTIONS

2002 *Au Pays des Inuit: Un Film, un Peuple, une Légende (Atanarjuat, La Légende de l'Homme Rapide)*, Montpellier, Indigène Editions et Harmonia Mundi, 120 pages.

Présenté comme une réalisation conjointe de l'équipe Igloolik Isuma Productions et de l'anthropologue Saladin d'Anglure, cet ouvrage entend apporter un éclairage complémentaire sur le film réalisé par Zacharias Kunuk, *Atanarjuat*, qui a connu un succès retentissant au Canada et en Europe. Au-delà du statut de fiction revendiqué par les auteurs de ce film «pleinement inuit», l'œuvre cinématographique est analysée ici comme porteuse d'une réelle valeur documentaire, assimilable à un témoignage sur un mode de vie passé, marqué par le chamanisme, dans la région d'Igloolik au Nunavut. Pour le réalisateur, il s'agissait en effet de «rendre visible» le système chamanique, en mettant en scène un récit propre à la tradition orale iglulingmiut, l'épopée des frères Amaarjuaq et Atanaarjuat, dont on retrouve quelques traces dans le journal du capitaine Lyon (1824: 361).

Après quelques grands repères chronologiques bienvenus — situant les faits du récit environ 500 ans avant nos jours —, le livre commence par retracer la genèse du film, en précisant les modalités de recueil et d'adaptation de ce mythe qui connaît différentes versions pour la région même d'Igloolik (et plusieurs variantes dans l'Arctique canadien). Saladin d'Anglure met en perspective l'important travail de reconstitution de l'univers matériel, social et surtout idéologique qu'a impliqué l'écriture scénaristique, que l'on doit en grande partie à Paul Apak Angilirq. Évoquant en filigrane la participation de certains aînés à ce projet et les recherches menées à partir de la littérature ethnographique du dix-neuvième siècle, l'anthropologue fait valoir la notion de «chamanisme réinventé» pour le film, qui intègre des valeurs héritées de la christianisation. On pourrait rappeler à cet égard que les versions du récit recueillies auprès des aînés d'Igloolik mentionnent une vengeance beaucoup plus radicale que celle mise en scène à la fin du film. Ce premier chapitre se clôt sur un bref historique référant tant au cheminement politique des Inuit depuis les années 1970, qu'aux premiers contacts avec des Occidentaux et les processus de colonisation et