Dr. Fast’s informative essay, “Alaska Native Language, Culture and Identity” included in this selection of online readings, suggests language, land, and religion have been central to Alaska Native identities. As a way of highlighting the power of these themes, I will briefly discuss how four Alaska Native writers have poignantly expressed these ideas. While they often draw upon their own specific tribal identities as one means of recognizing and maintaining traditional Native values in this ever changing world, they also acknowledge the role and place Western traditions play in who they have become.

Elsie Mather, a Yup’ik woman born and raised in Kwigillingok, succinctly describes the ambivalent nature of the relationship to English language literacy when she calls it a “necessary monster” (Morrow and Schneider 20). This highlights the uneasy position reading and writing in English sometimes creates for those who want to maintain an important component of their indigenous identity—learning through oral traditions, rather than books. As she notes, the elders are “eager to pass on our traditions, and stories…” but unlike in Western school settings, they “don’t spell things out or theorize. Usually [the elders] will tell a story that illustrates what they are teaching ”(17), expecting the listener to contemplate the meaning of the story in relation to one’s own life. Mather suggests that learning through oral traditions—storytelling—serves an important purpose in maintaining Yup’ik cultural identity. She laments the fact that “the gap between our students and the past is widening” and that in the past, “[o]ur classrooms
were our homes, our community houses, and the land which was around us….We learned by word of mouth as we interacted with each other” (20).

In contrast, Mather suggests that learning through books, while “necessary” is also a “monster” because learning through oral traditions requires close contact with elders unlike learning through books, which puts “distance… between us and our sources” (20). Learning through books can also be “dangerous” because readers are often greatly affected by what they read. This can be especially troubling when Yup’ik youth learn inaccuracies about their culture from books written by outsiders—rather than learning from the elders. The youth then absorb this inaccurate information as truth and pass it along. Mather acknowledges there is no easy solution to this problem because “[we] are living in the age of literacy” and everyone needs the tools and skills of Western education to survive and thrive. She urges people to take the tools of English literacy into their own hands, to write their own histories, and “to speak up and not start believing an untruth about ourselves and then hand it down to our children” (24).

Mather points to Edgar Neguelook of Shismaref who states in Village Journey (Berger 50-51) “that it is possible for Natives to maintain their identity and their spirit, their language, their traditions, and history and their values and still function in the twenty-first century” (25). Mather agrees and suggests that both learning through books and oral traditions are important for Native people today. While she urges the Yu’pik community to develop their own written resources in their own language and English, she also stresses how important it is to hold the elders close, and to listen carefully to their stories because the lessons they impart must be learned and experienced over a lifetime. For Mather, it seems that an important part of maintaining Yup’ik identity means learning
how to negotiate the sometimes slippery terrain between perpetuating Yup’ik oral traditional values, and taking control of English language literacy to dispel or correct previously published inaccurate portrayals of her people.

Robert Davis—Tlingit artist and writer—might very well agree with Mather particularly as she speaks to blending traditions and engaging writing as a powerful tool. Davis speaks of his dual heritage—his father a Tlingit from Kake and his mother a white woman from Michigan. He explains that he frequently moved back and forth between the two places, but because he has lived mainly in Kake—his Tlingit homeland-- his writing has focused more on this part of his life. He states: “I believe there comes a point where one must name and own who and what he is in order to take responsibility for where his actions and attitudes are coming from.” He identifies himself as a “Neo-traditional artist/storyteller” one who believes in the “continuous creation theory: everything is in perpetual renewal” (Bruchac 49). From Davis’s perspective, contemporary artists and writers use the old forms in new ways to address today’s social issues, and he speaks specifically for the need to deal with “grieving loss” brought on by “outside forces: relentless change, government subordination, painful acculturation, and assimilation…feelings of being severed from a tradition, from an identity” (49).

Davis says that grieving loss requires “healing cerem[ies] or ritual[s]” and that neo-traditional storytellers can serve an important purpose because they have “the versatility within the forms of songs, chants, myths, and stories to begin naming and acknowledging our grief…writing is a catharsis, and healing always moves outward to others…” (49). His poetry is a testament to this process. In one of his finest poems, “Saginaw Bay: I Keep Going Back,” he skillfully weaves the history of his people and
the confusing aspects of contemporary life into a story that begins and ends with Raven, hinting at life’s infinite creative possibilities: “You wonder sometimes you can’t reach me?/I keep going back./I keep trying to picture my life/against all this history,/Raven in the beginning/hopping about like he just couldn’t do enough” (57).

Life’s creative possibilities for transformation and renewal are also important to another Tlingit writer, Diane Benson, who says she “write[s] about pain and recovery….I want to move people, to cause them to experience sadness and then hope. Sometimes to laugh in the midst of despair. No matter what, hope is the outcome” (1). In her one act play “River Woman” (Spatz, Breinig and Partnow 259-261) Benson uses humor and irony to tell the painful story of one woman’s loss of her child to the State. The play forces readers to consider how traditional values--in this case participating in “fish camp”-- are not always recognized or validated by Western institutions.

Another of Benson’s poems “Hostage of the Past” begins darkly, linking images of historical and world wide tragedies with Tlingit losses: “Mass graves in South Africa/in Ethiopia, in Nicaragua, in Sitka!” (Bruchac 12). She also repeats the line “[m]other,/Grandmother watching” (12) to hint at the horror a mother or grandmother might feel at watching such atrocities. But as the poem builds to the end lines, the images and tone move from raw and angry to soft and hopeful: “The notion we had vanished/at last./Indigenous strong/Even with the slaughter of the Amazon./Sparkles of past knowledge cling/to the trunks of our being/as long as one person stands/with grandmother watching” (13). In the end, “grandmother watching” suggests the endurance of indigenous ways linked to matrilineal protection.
Mothers, grandmothers, and the matrilineal line are also significant in Mary TallMountain’s writing. TallMountain, a Koyukon Athabascan who died in 1994, struggled for many years with making sense of her mixed cultural identity. Eventually, she came to recognize the significance of language, land, and religion as central to her healing process. These themes resonate in her poetry and prose. Her writing—often semi-autobiographical—provides hope for the struggles some Alaska Natives have experienced as they have grappled with language loss, movement from their villages into urban areas, substance abuse, and the potential role religion or spirituality might play in their lives.

Born in 1918 in Nulato to an Athabascan Russian mother and Scotch-Irish father, Mary TallMountain was adopted at six by a non-Native doctor and his wife because TallMountain’s mother had contracted tuberculosis. TallMountain and her new family moved to Oregon where she started school, and they lived there for two years until moving to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, a place she felt most at home. They lived in Unalaska for three years until her adopted father retired and they moved to a chicken farm in California. While in California, during the Great Depression, TallMountain’s adopted father died and she also learned of her natural mother and brother’s deaths from tuberculosis (Dunham G-2).

Wandering through a dark period in her life, TallMountain battles cancer and succumbs to alcoholism. But in 1968, she experiences a series of life changing events which lead her on a spiritual quest to re-connect with her Athabascan heritage and to begin writing—which becomes a form of healing for her. As part of TallMountain’s quest, she returns to Nulato to search for her mother’s grave. While she is never able to
find it, she does make peace with the profound losses of her life, revisits Alaska several times before her death, and promotes writing among Alaska Native youth.

Having been raised far from her village, language, and cultural traditions, she ultimately realizes that it is impossible to recover everything that has been lost. Yet TallMountain finds a way to learn what she can, to claim a place for herself, to make peace with her mixed cultural identity, and to turn the devastating losses into spiritual strengths through her service to others. As part of her re-commitment to the Catholic teachings of her youth, she spends the last part of her life devoting herself to serving the poor and disenfranchised in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district.

As one strand of her move towards healing, TallMountain intersperses her writing with Athabascan words as a way to bring her readers closer to the language that has been lost to her through adoption. She also speaks eloquently to the possibilities inherent in loss, recovery, and spiritual restoration in her autobiographical essay, “I Tell you Now You Can Go Home Again.” In the piece, she juxtaposes poetry, prose, letter, journal and novel excerpts to suggest the sometimes confusing, but multi-faceted aspects of her life, telling her own personal story of loss against the backdrop of the historical losses experienced by the Koyukon Athabaskan people in general. She ends on a powerful affirmation:

I recall with startling clarity and longing every detail of the land, the river, the people. I know now why my mother wanted me to leave them. It was contained in her message to me. I understood; sometimes I almost agree with her. Yet Alaska mesmerizes my spirit, and I finger the thoughts like beads of prayer. I still feel the crush of the lost bed of wild violets in the Aleutian hills where one day I flung myself down in rapture, knowing who I was, what the wild violets meant. Alaska is my talisman, my strength, my spirit’s hope. Despite loss and disillusion, I count myself, rich, fertile, and magical.

I tell you now. You can go home again. (13)
TallMountain’s story resonates with the stories of many Alaska Natives, whose own historical, cultural, and personal losses have affected who they are today. In the end, TallMountain recognizes the power, beauty, and strength of what she has been fortunate to inherit and uses this understanding to create a transformed life for herself and for others. TallMountain, along with Mather, Davis, Benson and many other Alaska Native writers, affirms the possibilities for Alaska Native people today to heal, to reclaim, and to renew their languages and their cultural traditions.

Works Consulted

- - - “We are the In-betweens: An Interview with Mary TallMountain.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures.* Series 2 1.1 (1989) 13-21. Also available: http://oncampus.richmond.edu/faculty/ASAIL/SAIL2/11.html
Also available: http://www.tlingitart.com/
Akeya's native Alaskan voice is typical of the more than 50 found here. There is a refreshing directness to this collection of essays and stories edited by Andrews and Creed, journalists and associate professors at the Chukchi campus of the University of Alaska in Kotzebue. Most of the narratives were part of a student writing project initiated in 1987-88, with the students' efforts often published in the Anchorage Daily News. The slender anthology includes a brief overview of Alaska's history in relation to its native peoples followed by individual autobiographies, accounts of Alaska Native Voices and Environmental Conservation Movements in Alaska. Professors Paul Ongtooguk and Jackie Cason discuss Alaska Native voices and environmental conservation movements in Alaska. Topics include Alaska Village and Native Corporation jurisdictions, John Muir's legacy, the Sierra Club, and the book The Firecracker Boys by Dan O'Neill. Paul Ongtooguk is the director of Alaska Native Studies at UAA. Amongst his many research projects, he designed and contributed to the websites alaskool.org and akhistorycourse.org. He currently teaches the course Alaska Tribes, Nations and People. Native nations are treated differently in Alaska than they are in other states. Rather than being organized into reservations at the tribe level, most Native American and Inuit communities are organized into Alaska Native villages. That is why there are so many of them--each village is considered separately, even if it contains only 400 people (whereas for example, the Navajo Nation, with its population of 250,000, is considered as a single nation.) Rather than list the address for each village, we are listing here the address and website of each of the twelve Alaska Native Regional Corporations. The Alaska Native Heritage Center is honored to be guests in the traditional territory of the Native Village of Eklutna, a Dena'ina Athabascan tribe. Experience & Educate. Upcoming Events. See All Events. Classes & Programs. See All Classes. News & Stories.