

# The Verbal Art of Mabel McKay

## *Talk as Culture Contact and Cultural Critique*

For years Mabel McKay has been pursued by countless people who want to know about her world. As the only surviving member of the Long Valley Cache Creek Pomo tribe and the last of the Bole Maru Dreamers, she is seen as a repository of valuable information: anthropologists seek ethnographic data; linguists want to record her language; and still others want to know about shamanism and the dream world. Yet her responses to questions are maddening.

“What do you do for poison oak?” a student once asked in a large auditorium where Mabel was being interviewed as a native healer. “Calamine lotion,” Mabel answered.

In another instance Mabel was asked to speak before a group of Stanford medical students who wanted to know about “ethnic medicine” and how they might work cooperatively with native healers. She smoked a cigarette on stage while waiting to be introduced. Once she was introduced she rubbed out her cigarette in the tin ashtray a student found for her, set the ashtray on the floor, stood up and said, “I have to pray first.” She prayed and sang a song, all of which lasted about five minutes, then sat down and talked somewhat in a trance about the dictates of her spirit and her doctoring. Then suddenly she stopped and looked up, out to the audience. “OK,” she said, “now who can tell me what I just said?” Her audience was quiet, stunned. “Ain’t nobody got a word for me?” she asked finally and laughed. “I thought you wanted to know about healers.” One student spoke up and paraphrased a portion of Mabel’s presentation, reinforcing Mabel’s legitimate claim to be teacher rather than

naive informant. Then another student challenged the dynamic Mabel had established by asking how she became a doctor. "Like you," she said, "long time studying!"

In the first instance Mabel answered the question (about poison oak) but, at the same time, renegotiated the representation of reality that the question presented. In answering the student's question, she acknowledged that she is Indian but, at the same time, introduced the fact that she is a contemporary American, which redefined the student's notion of "Indian." In the latter instance she challenged the assumption that the students could take information without having to account for it. The students were prepared to take notes and get answers, but could they say what those answers meant, as Mabel understood them and wanted them understood? Here she interrupted the classic participant-observation method.

While Mabel may not give so-called straight answers, she continues to answer. Until a recent bout with arthritis, she traveled regularly, demonstrating basketry and talking about her art and culture. She enjoyed interviews and told stories about the "ancient times" and about her life and people and places she has known. Always she insisted that it "is important for people to know." If her interlocutors find themselves baffled by her talk, it must have something to do with knowing or, more precisely, how people are to know. Again, by talk I include all speech categories—responses to questions, gossip, idle chitchat, stories—that Mabel may use in conversation with others, since, as I hope to demonstrate, the various categories engender the same effect. The talk establishes the premises on which an understanding of her world can begin, and an examination of this talk reveals, I think, just how those premises are established and in what ways they are significant.

Talk as such raises the question of talk as performance, specifically in terms of Richard Bauman's notion of performance as a distinct communicative phenomenon whereby "performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood [so that] this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal" (9). The frame is in this sense metacommunicative; the speaker's use of a special code, perhaps the attribution of an archaism or special formula (e.g., "Once upon a time"), keys the nature of the event or performance (genre) and how the interlocutor is to respond. Hence the interlocutor knows "this is a story" or "this is a joke" and subsequently has expectations associated with the respective keyed speech event. For the ethnographer or folklorist Bauman suggests "the essential

task in the ethnography of performance is to determine the culture-specific constellations of communicative means that serve to key performance in particular communities” (22). Ideally, fieldworkers would acquire keys to the “entire domain, viewing speaking and performing as a cultural system and indicating how the whole range of performance is keyed” (22–23). Yet Bauman is quick to point out that such perfect, standardized ethnographies—where certain keys always indicate certain speech events—cannot account for the individuality of each speech event or, more important for my discussion here, for how the speaker may manipulate certain frames given the context in which she is speaking, particularly if that context is new or unusual in some way. I am thinking of what Dell Hymes (1981) calls *metaphrasis*, where a speaker can use “the structural, conventional performance system itself as a resource for creative manipulation, as a base on which a range of communicative transformations can be wrought” (34). The structure of performance events can change, or new structures may emerge, depending on particular contextual conditions.<sup>1</sup> If one considers the presence of a fieldworker as real, and thus a variable, in the so-called native domain, what constitutes a frame in the speech event the fieldworker records and describes is likely to depend on and to emerge from that specific context. The fieldworker cannot know about frames independent of his or her presence. What the fieldworker sees is not so much how the entire community keys speech events for its members but rather how it keys them for the fieldworker specifically.

If Mabel is performing in ways that are specific to the Cache Creek Pomo, there is little way of knowing. The fact that she is using English may necessarily preclude the presence of a native form as such. What is known is that her speech activities, at least in what I have related thus far, point to the frames her interlocutors are using to understand her. It is difficult to discern the extent to which Mabel is performing, or if and to what degree her activity is intentional, because she forces her interlocutors to examine presuppositions that shaped and are embedded in their questions.

To illustrate how a fieldworker’s presence can generate emergent forms of framing activity on the part of the informant, and to further

1. Bauman observes “the emergent structure of performance events is of special interest under conditions of change, as participants adopt established patterns of performance to new circumstances” (42). He adds that “one would expect aspects of the social structure of the [contextual] interaction to be emergent from the interaction itself, as in any other situation” (43). See Bauman’s “The Emergent Quality of Performance” in *Verbal Art as Performance*.

discuss Mabel's talk, I want to take a cursory glance at Robert Oswalt's *Kashaya Texts*. Perhaps along with S. A. Barrett's *Pomo Myths, Kashaya Texts* is the most complete collection of Pomo literature in one text. Of interest is the fact that the book is primarily a study in linguistics and includes the Pomo text with the English translation. Also the text comprises stories from one tribe of Pomo (Kashaya) told largely by just two informants, Herman James and Essie Parrish. Perhaps the most notable feature of all the speech events, regardless of Oswalt's categories (i.e., Myth, The Supernatural, Folk History, Miscellany) or how James and Parrish might themselves categorize a story they are telling (e.g., "This is a story from the old days" or "Now I am going to tell about something I did"), is James's and Parrish's use of formal frames to open and close their talk.

In the first text, titled by Oswalt "The Creation of the Ocean," Herman James begins: "This is something from ancient times—I am going to tell about the creation" (37). James concludes the narrative stating, "This is the end of my account of the start of the world in the old days and the making of the ocean—that is what I have been telling about. This is finally the end" (41). In another story titled by Oswalt "The Flood," Essie Parrish begins, "I am now going to tell about people turning into trees at the time of destruction" (129) and concludes with "This is all" (131). Oswalt observes that the narratives told by James and Parrish differ most notably in the endings: "Essie Parrish usually terminates a story rather abruptly with a phrase like 'This is the end.' Herman James employs such phrases but typically precedes them with often-repeated protestations of the truth of the story" (10). In concluding his telling of a long story associated with "The Flood" and titled by Oswalt "The Whale in the Creek," James, for example, declares:

This is also a true story. It really happened. This is what my grandmother said when she told it. I listened when she told me. "It is true," she said. That is why we believe it and tell it too. This is a true story. This is the end.

(129)

It seems though that Essie Parrish, too, often repeats protestations of the truth, albeit more subtly, as in the case of "The Flood," where she says before closing with "This is all" that "Our old people used to tell us about it, saying that's the way it was [and why] that mountain is taboo" (131). Still, in the case of either James or Parrish, the use of formal frames is standard. Sometimes Parrish or James might open by setting the scene, perhaps by giving the location of the action. But even short descriptions

of activities, such as “Preparing Buckeye,” end abruptly. Parrish begins, “I am going to talk about preparing buckeyes”|*bahsa dutatoc e a dici duwan k’e*|, and after a brief description of the process says, “this is all”|*mu ma a e me p i*| (305), just as she does when closing a mythic story. Here myth and description of daily activity—indeed all genres of speech—meet on common ground. We may find terms such as *duwi dici du* (telling about Coyote or Coyote stories), which might be said to serve as special codes keying genre (i.e., Coyote stories), but these terms, often occurring at the beginning of the narrative, do not affect the formal frames opening and closing the texts.

This framing activity had something to do with the context in which the stories were produced. Oswalt’s “original purpose in collecting the texts was to provide a corpus for the study of languages” (10). He wanted language, linguistic units that he could study and translate, and that is exactly what he got—stories that are rendered as separate and complete units, framed so that Oswalt has the story but no context beyond the story in which to understand it. He has information, but it is not engaged with the world from which the information comes. I doubt that Mrs. Parrish would use the same abrupt frames when telling family members about preparing buckeyes. In my entire experience with Mrs. Parrish and among the Kashaya Pomo—nearly thirty years—I have never heard such frames used in English or Kashaya, except in very formal situations, where Mrs. Parrish was preaching to a large Kashaya congregation, and then the situation was again quite different. And just recently when I asked her daughter, Violet Parrish Chappell, about these texts and their frames, she replied, “Mom just did it that way, for the language. He [Oswalt] wanted language. I heard those stories different—when Mom used to tell them when we kids were in bed.”

But one must also consider the possibility that such framing devices, emergent in this context, are also convenient for James and Parrish. Information regarding formalized or “traditional” Pomo storytelling is scanty. Both Mabel McKay and Essie Parrish have talked about listening to old-time storytellers where “you had to sit on the floor and listen.” Parrish told Oswalt, “they [old-time storytellers] say that it is dangerous to relate Coyote stories while sitting up” (Oswalt 119). Any attempt on the part of fieldworkers to recreate the “native scene” risks the danger of denying the present, of displacing the significance of the fieldworkers’ presence and how it affects the speakers’ and ultimately the fieldworkers’ re-creation of the text. In this instance with James and Parrish, we might examine rules and ethics of behavior that are still endemic to the Pomo,

particularly as they might affect how a story is told. Mabel, for instance, mentions regularly that she cannot tell Coyote stories during the summer months. "It is forbidden," she says. "It's an old-time rule. Us old people know that." Equally significant is the pervasive notion of privacy among the Pomo, particularly in terms of sacred objects, songs, and stories. A person's songs and stories are considered valuable property not to be shared openly with strangers. Sacred objects are never handled or touched except by their owners. Given just these strictures we might imagine why James and Parrish presented the stories the way they did to Oswalt, who did virtually all of his fieldwork in the summer months. James and Parrish, as elders and religious people, were in the position of being asked to break taboo and disregard an invasion of privacy. What resulted was a text that reflected, at least to some degree, that situation; the texts, as already suggested, are framed so that they are closed ("This is all"), thus inviting neither further storytelling nor inquiry into their world.<sup>2</sup>

While Bauman and others acknowledge the possibility of emergent forms, particularly in new situations, or, as Bauman notes, "under conditions of change" (42), they still tacitly assume, somehow discounting their presence as recorders/interpreters, that a "true structure" (Hymes 1981) can be discerned. Dell Hymes's "major purpose is to argue for the systematic study of variation in performance" (86) whereby he can compare various textualized forms of the same tale to discover the true, or "authoritative," text. Dan Ben-Amos argues for a kind of holism where fieldworkers should examine "the set of contrastive attributes (thematic, behavioral) [that] represent the structure of relations between distinct genres in the system of folklore communication" (235). Yet if Hymes were to study the variations in performance as discerned solely in the textualized narratives of James and Parrish, what would emerge as an authoritative text would not be a text native to the Kashaya Pomo but to the Kashaya Pomo and a fieldworker, in this case James or Parrish and Oswalt. The contrastive elements that Ben-Amos would discover to determine Kashaya genres of speech would be those predicated on the presence of Oswalt. What we are given by James and Parrish is some-

2. One might question why Parrish and James told stories in the summer at all. Unfortunately, both Parrish and James have passed away. Their motives, I am sure, were many and complex. Parrish was interested in having a dictionary of the Kashaya Pomo language for future generations of Kashaya. The ways in which these recorded tales vary in form and so forth from the ways they have been told in other contexts could be the subject of another paper or book. Suffice it to say, the stories took a given form in the given context with Oswalt.

thing like a note on a door describing what is inside, although the door itself is closed.

If, in this instance, James and Parrish close discourse about their world, Mabel does something quite different. Where James and Parrish present stories as isolated pieces of information devoid of meaningful contexts in which we might understand them, including the opportunity to question, Mabel McKay, as pointed out, makes the interlocutor immediately aware of the present context and of the ways the interlocutor may be framing her world, which does not close the discourse but exposes the chasms between two interpretive worlds over which the discourse must continue. Whether the interlocutor is a student, friend, ethnographer, or myself, the dynamic of Mabel's talk remains characteristically the same. Granted we are left to *read* textualized versions of James's and Parrish's texts, and there my analogy may appear shaky in its attempt to illustrate the difference here, but perhaps that is precisely why Mabel will not allow herself to be recorded—she will not be absent from any discussion of her world.<sup>3</sup> Consider again some examples of her talk.

Mabel has just finished talking about dreaming to a group of non-Indian, Marin County people interested in Pomo culture. A middle-aged woman asks if it is the spirit that keeps Mabel young-looking and what tips Mabel or the spirit might have for maintaining a youthful appearance. "You could try dyeing your hair," Mabel answers. After Mabel had explained how she met Essie Parrish in a dream twenty years before she had met her in person, Mabel was asked if she recognized Mrs. Parrish when Mrs. Parrish walked into the room. "Yes," Mabel answered, "but I think she cut her hair a little." In another instance, where she is talking to a group of social scientists, Mabel tells about a famous Indian doctor who was notorious for escaping from the Lake County jail. Many people claimed he turned into a horsefly and flew through the cell bars. "Do you believe that?" a psychiatrist asked. "No," Mabel says with a laugh before adding earnestly, "I believe he went down the toilet." In a basket-weaving demonstration at Stanford University, Mabel talks about how she must pray for all the materials she gathers (for basket making), and a student asks if she talks to plants. "Yes, if I have to use them," she answers.

3. Here an irony appears. I am recording her talk for the reader of this book, and obviously I am the one doing the textualizing and critical (interpretive) discussion of her talk. Several years ago she asked me to do a book about her life. So much in this essay has been an attempt to understand fundamental principles of such an undertaking. I feel any textualization of her talk should reflect as much as possible the reflexivity her presence as a speaker engenders.

“Do plants talk to one another?”

“I suppose.”

“What do they say [to one another]?”

Mabel laughs. “How do I know? Why would I be listening?”

Any discussion of frames and keying brings to mind Irving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*, in which he discusses the ways in which a particular strip of activity can be keyed and rekeyed. I am thinking specifically of what Goffman calls a fabrication, or “the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on. Those taken in can be said to be contained” (83). Goffman continues “that for those in on a deception, what is going on is fabrication; for those contained what is going on is what is being fabricated” (84). What is essential here is that both parties operate in terms of the rules and premises of a primary framework. And that is the point Mabel elucidates—that she and her interlocutors are not operating from the rules and premises of the same primary framework.<sup>4</sup> Again, questions regarding Mabel’s intentionality are difficult, and, I would argue, unnecessary, to answer. But she is not tricking or fabricating; her talk points to what constitutes difference. In the above examples of her talk, as with the examples I cited at the start of this essay, Mabel is responding to questions, and her responses expose that which is embedded in the question that accounts for the rifts between her world and that of her interlocutors.

What happens with longer forms of talk, say the stories Mabel tells? Here for purposes of my discussion I am arbitrarily separating longer forms—stories and extended conversations—from other forms—idle chitchat and responses to questions—since in reality they are often integral to one another in a variety of ways. Concerning a tale or anecdote, or what he calls “a replaying,” Goffman claims it “will be something that listeners emphatically insert themselves into, vicariously reexperiencing what took place” (247). If the longer speech events are associated with, and engender the same effects as, the shorter ones, as I am suggesting, it is not emphatic identification and vicarious reexperiencing that Mabel’s tales and anecdotes elicit but rather the limits of such.

As mentioned, I have heard her stories since I was a child, since that

4. Goffman observes “a strip of activity will be perceived by its participants in terms of the rules or premises of a primary framework, whether social or natural, and that activity so perceived provides the model for two basic kinds of transformations—keying and fabrication” (247).



first day I walked into her home with Marshall, her adopted son, and heard her talking to some woman about a sacred mountain. But it wasn't until one winter evening during a visit home from college that I began thinking seriously about Mabel and the nature of her talk. I think the story of that visit can illustrate how the longer and shorter speech events resemble one another and, at the same time, further my exploration of Mabel McKay's talk.

First a story.

What happened, a man poisoned.

See, them girls' grandmother, ——'s mother, she got fixed that way. How it happened, a man poisoned her.

He wanted her, this man. She was beautiful, but she would do like this: doctor somebody, then get up and leave her equipment. If she liked a man she would do like that: get up and go out that way. Maybe not come back until the next day.

Well, this man, he wanted her. But she was already married to another man, —— . She said, "I don't want you." See, he was old at that time already. He was an old man and I guess she liked the younger men, I don't know [chuckling].

He got mad then. He told her, don't be fooling around no more, no leaving your doctoring here and there.

Then I don't know what it happened, but she got pregnant AGAIN. Some older man, not her husband, I understand.

Then HE got mad. He got REAL mad. Then he got sick, the old man. Send for —— , he was saying: I'm dying and I need her to pray, he was telling somebody.

So she went there. And that's how it happened, they say. He tricked her, took something of hers while she was singing—I don't know what, maybe a pipe, cocoon, something anyway—and fixed her with it. And that's how they found her in the morning. She was already dead with that baby, frozen they say. And he's the one cursed all them with that man-wild business. For generations, he was saying.

Anyone familiar with Pomo lore and ethnography might discern recognizable features in this story. E. W. Aginsky noted that "there is no phase of Pomo life that [he] could discover which did not have some taboos connected with it" (321) and "that every death and misfortune was the result of indirect or direct retaliation from (1) the 'supernaturals' or (2) from some individual" (319). According to Bean and Theodo-

ratus, “illness could be caused by ghosts but was most often caused by poisoning” (297). Depending on the different ethnographic descriptions used and how the story is viewed in terms of those descriptions, the typical and atypical Pomo features can be discussed endlessly. Likewise, a closer reading of the text might suggest ways that elements of language and narrative format determine meaning. Deconstruction would unveil Mabel’s hidden agenda.

Mabel told me this story about the man who poisoned the beautiful woman doctor when I was trying to solicit answers from her to questions raised by a professor of mine. He had “done some work on the Pomo”—we read his article in an introductory anthropology course—and he was impressed that I knew Mabel McKay, whom he deemed “impossible to crack.” He gave me a list of questions about doctoring and the use of crystals and herbs. Mabel promptly circumvented the questions. It must have appeared odd to her that I was suddenly interested in such things. Then again she knew I had been to the university, and now seeing me at home for the first time, she may not have been so surprised. After all, she had had more experience with college than I. She had been answering student and faculty questions for over forty years.

I remember it was quite late. I looked at the clock above her head on the kitchen wall. It was raining too, and though I lived only a couple of miles up the road, I wanted to get on.

“Now what was I saying? Oh, yeah. About the laundry. Do you know ——?”

Thinking of going home, I had not been following. For the last hour I had contented myself with this same idle chitchat about people and daily routine. I was tired. “Yes,” I said, finally catching up with her. I told her how I knew the woman’s daughters in high school. Marshall and I both had known the girls.

“Oh, yes?” Mabel took a sip of her coffee, then set her cup carefully on the table. “Hmmm,” she said. “Well, I seen her for the first time today, first time since she was a girl. At the laundromat I seen her. She said to me, ‘Are you Mabel?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ Then I seen who it was.

“It happened I seen her coming. I seen her in the car with those grandkids, the black ones. She was trying to hide them from me, even yet. Keeping them in the car when she was talking to me. Looking around to see if they jumped out. It was funny the way she did that.

“After while Marshall says, ‘Who is that, Mama?’ I say it’s relatives, some kind. He says, ‘Oh, do we have to claim them too?’ I start up laughing [chuckling]. ‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘we do.’

“Well, not relatives that way, but way her mother, —, took in Grandma dancing up there by that place they call Rattlesnake Island.”

I tried to explain why Marshall might feel the way he did. I made a few derogatory remarks about the woman’s loose daughters and about the woman’s sister, the girls’ aunt, who got stuck between the bars in the county jail while reaching for a man in another cell.

Mabel looked up, over her glasses, admonishing. “You don’t know the whole story,” she said. “What happened, a man poisoned . . .”

Paul Ricoeur suggests “the absolute here and now” of the dialogical “we” is “shattered by writing” (35). By inserting the context of the storytelling event here, which, granted, the reader must accept second-hand, I feel I can at least produce a representation of the dialogical “we.”<sup>5</sup> This representation helps to illustrate how the story, like the shorter speech events cited earlier, interrupts preconceived notions on the part of the interlocutor. The story was not a response to a question but rather a response to a statement made about the subject of a conversation. Intentional or not, the story commented on a specific statement about the subject and simultaneously pointed beyond the statement and immediate subject. If I had to reconsider *how* I saw the girls in the story, I would also have to reconsider *how* I saw other things—doctoring, crystals, and herbs. The story opens dialogue about two personal and cultural worlds, exposing what makes for the “we” in “the absolute here and now.”

Here I am not simply indicating the limits of a text-centered approach nor extolling the virtues of contextual studies.<sup>6</sup> It is the dynamic of the speech event in context that I am talking about, not as it may be geared to a particular person or persons, say, with a specific moral in tow, but as it works to establish a premise from which a moral or ethic emerges.

5. James Clifford and others (e.g., Stephen Tyler 1986:122–140) suggest that any textualized dialogue between individuals, say between a fieldworker and an informant, in a cross-cultural context will remain a representation of that dialogue as rendered by the textualizer. However, Clifford offers that fieldworkers “can resist [the] pull toward authoritative representation of the other [depending] on their ability fictionally to maintain the strangeness of the other voice and to hold in view the specific contingencies of the exchange” (135). I have attempted to make “the strangeness of the other voice” as it reveals “the specific contingencies of the exchange” a central subject in this essay. Thus I must present (or represent) Mabel McKay as she presents herself to me.

6. Many others, notably Tedlock, Toelken and Scott, and Basso, have demonstrated the importance of the story-telling context in the study of oral literature. Tedlock, for instance, notes that “the speaking storyteller is not merely addressing a hypothetical future audience, unlike the writer. The world evidenced by the audible text, considered in its entirety, includes not only the world projected by the story proper but the world of the performer and audience” (10).