

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Crow Is My Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder.  
By Kenny Thomas Sr. Edited by Craig Mishler.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/240458j6>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Carroll, Jennifer L. L.

**Publication Date**

2005-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

for Cherokee history and as part of the larger subject of the Native American political resurgence of the modern era—but it is found in only a few widely available sources. It can be a tricky story to tell, since Cherokees today maintain sharply divided opinions of many of the events, organizations, and individuals involved in the reemergence of the nation. Conley's account may inspire others to investigate these crucial episodes. We need studies of modern Native American politics far more than we do another book about Removal or one more description of a colonial borderland.

As the University of New Mexico Press notes in its promotional material, Conley's book is the first history to be "endorsed by the Cherokee Nation and written by a Cherokee." This may be a claim to authority, but it is something else as well. The book is intended to be useful to citizens of the Cherokee Nation. It is meant, it seems, to encourage contemporary Cherokees to emulate the vigilance and creativity with which their ancestors defended their rights and sovereignty. The Cherokee Nation today enjoys a strong position in Oklahoma and the West, but, as Conley notes in his conclusion, "Federal policy changes [and] public opinion shifts" (242). Cherokees, he suggests, may need the lessons of their past. Conley's book, then, is not only a history of the Cherokee Nation but an expression of Cherokee nationhood.

*Andrew Denson*

Western Carolina University

**Crow Is My Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder.** By Kenny Thomas Sr. Edited by Craig Mishler. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. 288 pages. \$32.95 cloth.

Oral biography has become an increasingly popular form of self-expression and cultural preservation for Alaska Natives. From the collaboration between Jimmy Huntington and Lawrence Elliot in *On the Edge of Nowhere* (1966) to the Yukon-Koyukuk School District's oral history series collected and published in the 1980s to Harry Brower Sr.'s *The Whales, They Give Themselves* (2004, with Karen Brewster), oral biographies have commemorated important individuals in the Alaska Native community, as well as provided important and personal insights into Alaska history. *Crow Is My Boss* is the latest book in this tradition and is a fine addition to the literature.

Although there are many terms used for this genre—life history, oral history, oral autobiography, oral memoir, to name a few—I believe that the term "oral biography" best captures the genre's collaborative nature. William Schneider defines oral biography as "the story of a person's life told in their own words, but compiled and edited for publication by a writer" (. . . *So They Understand*, 2002, 112). *Crow Is My Boss* is the oral biography of the life of Kenny Thomas Sr., an Athabaskan (Tanacross) elder from Tanacross, Alaska. Told in Thomas's own words and compiled and edited by Craig Mishler, the stories cover topics ranging from his early years hauling freight for John Hajdukovich to the Tanacross potlatch tradition.

Many Alaska Native oral biographies emphasize traditional culture; the preservation of ancestral knowledge and stories is often the primary aim of both the teller and the compiler. An excellent example of this type of work is Johnny and Sarah Frank's *Neerihinjik: We Traveled from Place to Place* (1995), also edited by Mishler. Other works combine discussions of traditional culture with recollections of historical events and cultural changes, placing the focus on an individual's life seen in its larger context. *Crow Is My Boss* tells Thomas's personal story of negotiating a changing culture and landscape.

For the reader interested in Alaska's history and economic growth, the book is a treasure trove of information and anecdotes. Thomas took part in many of the commercial and industrial developments that ultimately opened the state, and the interior region in particular, to broader interaction with the rest of the United States and the world. Following his parents' deaths from a flu epidemic when he was twelve, Thomas supported his younger brother and sister by trapping for furs in the winter and hauling freight on the Tanana River in the summer, working with many of the well-known and lesser-known early traders and trappers in the region. He briefly tried his hand at prospecting and learned heavy equipment operating, driving Cat tractors on road and airport construction projects. He worked as a fire boss for Bureau of Land Management for fifteen years, fighting fires throughout Alaska and the lower forty-eight states. In all of these endeavors Thomas emphasizes how much he learned from others, both Native and white, and how he wishes to pass on his own knowledge to the younger generation of Tanacross people.

In 1942, Thomas went to war. While this event took only four years of his long life, it had a profound impact on him and distinguishes this book from other published Alaska Native life histories. His military adventures are eloquently albeit reluctantly discussed, including the horrors and stress of war and the loss of his buddies. Thomas's troubling experiences at war, coupled with the changed world he found when he returned home, set off a two-year struggle with alcoholism. His subsequent recovery and healing inspired him to establish a treatment center in Mansfield. This brief portion of the book will appeal to any person interested in war memoirs and the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Readers interested in both traditional and modern Tanacross culture will find real-life examples of cultural norms and how they affect the lives of individuals. Thomas is careful to emphasize the subjective nature of his stories, and states, "I don't want to talk about something I never seen" (27). The importance of primary knowledge and experience over secondary knowledge is one that anthropologists have repeatedly attributed to Athabascan cultures, but here one can see how that value is put into practice in a person's life.

*Crow Is My Boss* reflects on other topics in traditional culture, such as the importance of clans, potlatch, shamanism, and subsistence. Thomas is particularly interested in describing the difference between the Tanacross culture of his youth and that of today and accounting for the transformation. The hardship of the life experienced by their elders is something that youth everywhere find hard to believe, and the children of Tanacross are no exception. Interestingly, Thomas reserves the word *work* for wage employment,

emphasizing the difference between the integrated life of subsistence and the compartmentalized life of modern wage labor. Although he is clearly saddened by many of these changes, his goal is to preserve the most important aspects of Tanacross culture while preparing youth to live successfully in the modern world; the clan structure and its centrality to the potlatch is of particular interest to Thomas. One of the more remarkable sections of text describes subsistence in present-day Alaska and how subsistence practices have been curtailed by Western-style management and laws. Any person who flippantly has suggested that Alaska Natives should just go back to the old ways if they aren't happy with the new should be required to read this passage.

Like most oral biographies, the book is not a "tell-all" in the Western literary tradition. Thomas deliberately holds back some information, most notably regarding his war experiences and the nature of power in Tanacross culture. By taking this approach, he is tacitly acknowledging that, although his book is meant to help keep young people "straight," many of its readers will probably be people who are not Tanacross.

Readers unfamiliar with the Tanacross vernacular, or with unedited transcribed speech in general, may initially find the book difficult. Thomas's words are printed exactly as he spoke them, thereby preserving the authenticity of his voice. The conversational nature of his exchanges with Mishler has also been maintained, reminding the reader that the work is a collaborative effort. In some oral biographies the compiler's voice intrudes on the storyteller, sacrificing some of the truth and immediacy of the story to clarify and provide context for the uninitiated reader. Mishler carefully explains his editorial decisions at the beginning of the book and supplies brief background comments for each chapter, but the primary voice is always Thomas's. My only quibble with the editing is that Thomas's comments in the Tanacross language are translated without the original Tanacross transcriptions included. I personally enjoy seeing the original language and know that it would be useful for students of the Tanacross language.

*Crow Is My Boss* contains the memories and teachings of a man who lived a long and productive life negotiating numerous changes in his land and culture. Like his ancestors, Thomas leaves his words behind in the hope that they might help the future children of Tanacross.

*Jennifer L. L. Carroll*

University of Alaska, Fairbanks

**The Earth's Blanket: Traditional Teachings for Sustainable Living.** By Nancy J. Turner. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 298 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

Two books holding promise as guides for living sustainably on the earth based on traditional ecological knowledge of Native peoples appeared in my mailbox on the same day. One was *Tending the Wild* by M. Kat Anderson (2005) and the other the subject of this review. Perhaps this simultaneous arrival is a