Revisiting an Ethnocritical Approach to HCI: Verbal Privilege and Translation

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When I first read Arthur Krupat’s book, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, history, literature* (Krupat, 1992), I was looking for serious, constructively critical interpretations of Native American cultural works. I had become frustrated by the seemingly narrow range of choices that were conventionally available. I wanted more. I wanted some sense of what the Native stories were and are, before they had been domesticated into forms that were easy for the dominant culture to assimilate. And I wanted some help in understanding what I was reading, exactly because I was a member of that dominant culture, and I wanted to educate myself to know more than that culture could teach me.

Krupat’s work did indeed provide me with ways of thinking about Native cultural works. But, somewhat unexpectedly, his work also provided me with new ways of thinking about the difficult issues in ethics, politics, and epistemology that HCI workers face when they work with users who have less organizational power than they themselves. To borrow a phrase from Barbara Kingsolver (Kingsolver, 1989), Krupat’s work helped me to see myself and other HCI workers in “a new perspective on a power structure in which they were lodged like gravel in a tire.” I found that his analysis of an analogous situation provided both an alarmingly precise description of our problems, and a number of heuristic approaches for solutions to those problems. I will explain.

Krupat described the situation of the ethnohistorians during the period immediately after World War II, when the US government was evaluating the claims of hundreds of Native Nations for sovereign nation status. For each nation, tribe, or band of Native Americans, the granting of sovereign nation status led to important advantages in their struggle for cultural survival within a majority culture that operated by different values, different concepts of what constitutes knowledge, different ways of preserving knowledge, different rules of evidence, and above all different ways of making and justifying decisions. A Native Nation that achieved sovereign nation status was allowed to conduct its own limited self-

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government, to manage land that it controlled, and to preserve its own values through education and community resources.

Yet the irony was that decisions about sovereign nation status were determined by rules specified by the US Congress in establishing the Indian Claims Commission, whose working principles were written within the value system and cultural assumptions of the European colonists. Enter the ethnohistorians, who were anthropologists charged with the responsibility to translate from each Native Nation’s language, culture, history and claims, into the language and evidentiary rules that were required by the first-world members of the US Congress. Each ethnohistorian was thus at the cusp of two cultures, and had to face two bodies of knowledge, two ways of thinking about those knowledges, and two sets of rules for legitimating or delegitimating claims based on those knowledges.

The Native Nations had very little power when facing the US government, and thus their survival depended on presenting their histories and making their claims in terms that the majority culture would find persuasive. While an ethnohistorian might understand and sympathize with the native view in a particular case, s/he was required to ignore any knowledge that did not fit into the rules of evidence and argumentation that Congress had specified for the Commission. Ethnohistorians faced a series of challenges, in ethics (how to mediate between two nations of vastly unequal powers), politics (how to argue for the Native Nations while remaining within the limits set by the Act), and epistemology (what did they know? how did they know it? what were they allowed to know?).

But what is the relevance to HCI? I have claimed (Muller, 1995/1997) that, when an industrial HCI worker analyzes the work practices of users, the situation can be eerily similar to that of the ethnohistorians – especially if the users have less organizational power than the HCI worker and the team that s/he represents. Like the ethnohistorian, the HCI worker must translate between the world of the less powerful (the users) and the more powerful (the development team, or the executives who assigned the project to the development team). Like the ethnohistorian, the HCI worker has access to the users’ concepts of knowledge, the users’ ways of using that knowledge, the users’ rules of evidence, and the users’ strategies for making and carrying out decisions. Like the ethnohistorian, the HCI worker must provide a version of the work of the users that fits into the rules of evidence and argumentation that are used by a more powerful constituency – software engineers or executives. Like the ethnohistorian, the HCI worker faces significant problems of ethics, politics, and epistemology.
Many of my own work dilemmas in product organizations now made much more sense to me. When I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating and guilt-ridden about a report or recommendation I had made, I could begin to see my work not simply in terms of analysis and engineering, but rather as a series of political acts, made within a political structure, and strongly shaped by conflicting loyalties within that structure – loyalties to the users, to my project teammates, to my own organization, and to our client organization. How was I to mediate between the nearly powerless users and the very powerful executives who had commissioned our work? How could I represent the complexity and subtlety of the users’ work practices, when my own teammates and their executives wanted simple answers that were often based on erroneous and sometimes dismissive assumptions about the users?

Fortunately, Krupat went beyond problem analysis, to propose a set of principles through which people in his position – i.e., in a position similar to that of the ethnohistorian – could come to understand a culture that was not their own; could learn to criticize the basis of their own power; could analyze how their perspective was unintentionally influenced by that power; and could explore ways of communicating effectively and respectfully across those dimensions of difference and power (Krupat, 1992). Krupat wrote of three major principles:

- **Multiculturalism** in education, including a tolerance for ambiguity, a commitment to dialogue, and an active questioning of the assumptions of any culturally-rooted perspective.

- **Polyvocal polity** in relationships, including an embracing of different views, a commitment to negotiated interactions and conclusions, and a democratic epistemology (my phrase) in which any characterization of a person or group should be stated in ways that allow the person or group to verify or validate the characterization.

- **Heterogeneity as a norm** in ethics, in which judgments and decisions are based in and reflect the interests of all the concerned parties, whose perspective are assumed to have equal validity (if not equal weight).

These concepts resonated for me with the participatory design methods that I had been reading about (Bjerknes, Ehn, & Kyng, 1987; Schuler & Namioka, 1993) and developing (Muller, 1992; Muller et al., 1995; Muller 2003), and provided me with a richer theoretical approach than the then-dominant, purely political rationales to participatory design. I modified Krupat’s approaches to cultural critique, and, drawing on a large body of work in HCI and cultural studies, developed a series of questions or “ethnocritical heuristics” to help me think through the diverse and troubling choices that I faced as an HCI worker (Muller, 1995/1997). These questions focused on the following general areas:
• *The analyst’s location* with respect to the boundaries or hybrid regions between users and other stakeholders (e.g., within one group, or at the boundary(ies) between groups)

• *Translation as a core process in HCI* (see also Muller, 1999), in which the HCI worker translates the user’s domain into terms understandable by the software professionals, and the HCI designer back-translates the system or product concepts into terms understandable by the users

• *Verbal privilege as a core problem in HCI*, in which the HCI worker is required to speak with the other members of the team *on behalf of* or *in place of* the users (see also Roof & Wiegman, 1995).

These concepts have continued to inform my approaches since then. I don’t claim that these concepts have saved me from all mistakes in areas of ethics, politics, and epistemology, but I think that Krupat’s influences on my work have reduced the number and impact of those mistakes.

**References**


