

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ann Fienup-Riordan, ed. *Qaluyaarmiuni Nunamtenek Qanemciput / Our Nelson Island Stories: Meanings of Place on the Bering Sea Coast*. Translated by Alice Rearden. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. Illustrations, maps. 496 pp. \$50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99135-1.

Reviewed by Ross Coen (University of Alaska Fairbanks)

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For two decades the Calista Elders Council (CEC), a heritage organization in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta of southwest Alaska, has sought to document and share the traditional knowledge of the Yup'ik Eskimos who live in the region. Led by a nine-member board of Yup'ik speakers and composed of translators and anthropologists, the group has developed an effective technique for accomplishing its work. Rather than conduct sit-down, one-on-one interviews, which often restrict the conversation by placing the onus for topic selection on the often nonlocal interviewer, the CEC instead holds gatherings where elders are encouraged to speak with one another in their native tongue. According to Alice Rearden and Ann Fienup-Riordan in the new book, *Qaluyaarmiuni Nunamtenek Qanemciput / Our Nelson Island Stories*, the technique requires “long and careful listening” since the form is as important as the content: “Beyond facts, elders teach listeners how to learn. They share not only what they know, but also how they know it and why they believe it is important to remember” (p. xxiii).

This significant book documents the Nelson Island Natural and Cultural History project, launched in 2006 with funding from the National Science Foundation. Recognizing that stories of place would be more meaningful if told in the places themselves (as opposed to a conference table in a tribal hall), the CEC undertook a circumnavigation of Qaluyaat (the Yup'ik name for Nelson Island) in summer 2007. The 843-square-mile island sits 90 miles west of Bethel on the Bering Sea Coast between the Yukon and Kuskokwim river deltas, a marshy plain the size of Kansas with innumerable birds, fish, and marine mammals on which the Native people have subsisted for thousands of years.

The Nelson Island project was unique from previous CEC elder gatherings in that it included physical scientists who were invited to help establish links between environmental change and cultural history. While biologists, geologists, archaeologists, and others documented the physical characteristics of the environment, Qaluyaarmiut elders from five island villages provided historical and cultural perspectives on changes to the land, ocean, and animals. At the elders' insistence, the party of twenty included a number of young students. For the youth the trip would be “like going to college,” they said (p. xxiv). For two weeks that summer the group visited dozens of historic and prehistoric sites on the island. At each stop the tape recorder was pulled out.

The book features a bilingual text—Yup'ik on one page, the English translation on the facing page—with a brief but sufficient explanation of the Yup'ik language, its different dialects, and the authors' strategy and process for transcribing and translating the text. The book's six chapters are organized by geographic region: “Qaluyaat / Nelson Island,” “Negtemiut-Nunakauyarmiut-llu / Nightmute and Toksook Bay,” “Imarpik / The Ocean,” “Qalvinraaq Avayai-llu / Qalvinraaq River and Its Tributaries,” “Cevv'arnermiut / Chefornak,” and “Niugtarmiut Tununermiut-llu / Newtok and Tununak.” Each chapter consists of transcribed dialogue. Some stories are short, only a few pages. Others include lengthy descriptions of a geographic feature, its name, and how it came to be bestowed, why, and by whom; the animals that were traditionally harvested there; and other cultural information.

Rearden and Fienup-Riordan note that the effort did not begin as a mapping project or attempt to catalog

place-names, yet the elders quickly demonstrate how features of a landscape, including their names, are powerful reference points for holding and transmitting knowledge. Where a nonindigenous cartographer might assign a single name to an entire river, for example, Native residents have distinct, descriptive names for every bend, bluff, and sandbar, often in reference to some long ago event that happened there. (A particularly interesting juxtaposition noted by the authors is that the U.S. Geological Survey lists only a handful of place-names for the entire region, most, like Cape Vancouver, Baird Inlet, and Nelson Island itself, named for non-Native men with no cultural ties to the area.)

In the book's highly descriptive introduction, the authors identify historical changes to Nelson Island that started only in the 1940s, including the introduction of missionaries, schoolteachers, and gas-powered boats and snowmobiles. These transformations came relatively late to the Qaluyaarmiut compared to others in rural Alaska—a fortuitous consequence of the region's lack of gold, oil, and other valuable extractable resources. That such sweeping lifestyle changes all occurred within a single generation has allowed for their interpretation by an intact and still relevant Yup'ik perspective. "Their language and subsistence patterns have remained vital and viable,"

the authors write, "supplemented rather than supplanted by new organizational configurations ... and new ideological patterns" (p. xxi). Cultural preservation and transmission is made easier when the Native perspective incorporates the modern, not the other way around.

This concept is made clear by the Qaluyaarmiut elders' descriptions of environmental change. They do not draw distinctions between human behavior and changes to the land, sea, and animals, nor do they insert caveats in their language as do physical scientists whose conclusions are usually reductionist in nature. The elders often repeat the Yup'ik adage, "The world is changing following its people," to emphasize the connection between humans and the environment (p. xxvi). The book makes clear that the Qaluyaarmiut view these changes with a distinctly Yup'ik perspective.

One cannot possibly describe or even summarize the varied topics about which the elders speak. There are simply too many. It suffices to say that their stories cover the breadth of historical, cultural, and personal experiences living on Qaluyaat, each memory tied to a place with a meaningful name. This book is an invaluable resource for researchers in a variety of disciplines, but particularly so for the Qaluyaarmiut themselves whose relationship with the island is ongoing.

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