

Holly Cusack-McVeigh

Stories Find You: Narratives of Place in a Central Alaskan Yupik Community

Abstract: Narrative discourse serves to empower people who have experienced a history of domination and control by outside forces. In Hooper Bay, stories confer both personal and political power, allowing people to instruct others about dangerous situations, and to indirectly make statements about events that are otherwise unspoken for fear of “making bad things worse.” Narrative discourse about place, in particular, makes powerful statements about the health or illness of the community and the world. Such stories illustrate how the land itself is responsive, like a person, to human actions and social stress. Stories also allow people to speak about unspeakable tragedies that reflect the stresses of their relationship with outsiders. Other stories define and exclude those outsiders, such as missionaries and teachers, who are particularly associated with the institutions that represent domination. I argue, then, that for Yupiit in Hooper Bay, stories are not simply symbolic expressions, but are active in social life. As Elsie Mather says, “Storytelling is part of the action of living” (Mather, in Morrow and Schneider 1995:33).