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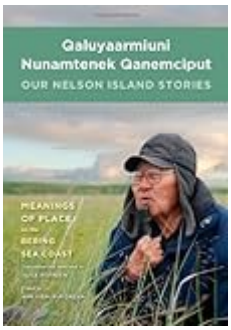

Ann Fienup-Riordan, ed. *Qaluyaarmiuni Nunamtenek Qanemciput / Our Nelson Island Stories: Meanings of Place on the Bering Sea Coast.* Translated by Alice Rearden. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. Illustrations, maps. 496 pp. $50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99135-1.

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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 Yupâik Eskimos who live in the region. Led by a nine-member board of Yupâik 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 âlong and careful listeningâ since the form is as important as the content: âBeyond 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 rememberâ (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 Yupâik 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 eldersâ insistence, the party of twenty included a number of young students. For the youth the trip would be âlike going to college,â 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–Yupâik on one page, the English translation on the facing page–with

a brief but sufficient explanation of the Yupâik language, its different dialects, and the authorsâ strategy and process for transcribing and translating the text. The bookâs six chapters are organized by geographic region: âQaluyaat / Nelson Island,â âNegtemiut-Nunakauyarmiut-llu / Nightmute and Toksook Bay,â âImarpik / The Ocean,â âQalvinraaq Avayai-llu / Qalvinraaq River and Its Tributaries,â âCevvâarnermiut / Chefornak,â and âNiugtarmiut Tununermiut-llu / Newtok and Tununak.â 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 bookâs 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 regionâs 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 Yupâik perspective. âTheir language and subsistence patterns have remained vital and viable,â the authors write, âsupplemented rather than supplanted by new organizational configurations ... and new ideological patternsâ (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 Qulayaarmiut eldersâ 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 Yupâik adage, âThe world is changing following its people,â to emphasize the connection between humans and the environment (p. xxvi). The book makes clear that the Qulayaarmiut view these changes with a distinctly Yupâik 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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