PREFACE

My First Day in Hooper
A Cautionary Tale for the Anthropologist

On the evening in 1996 when I first arrived in Hooper Bay, Alaska, summer was in full swing on the Bering Sea coast. The tundra was alive with activity. The return of waterfowl and long days had signaled the beginning of a very busy time in the village. The beauty of this place struck me before the plane ever touched the runway. As we made our approach, I suddenly recalled the words of a kass’aq man I had met in the Bethel airport (the regional hub) earlier that same morning. The Yup’ik Eskimo word kass’aq translates to “white person” or “outsider.” When I told him where I was going, he simply replied, “Oh, you will love the beach.” It struck me then, as it does now, a strange comment to make about a community. His words left a lasting impression. It is true that this is a beautiful place, but this outsider’s statement felt strangely incomplete. What about the people in this place? That kass’aq wasn’t wrong, I did love the beach, but I also came to have many close, lasting friendships in the community.

The gravel airstrip is bordered on one side by a vast expanse of grass-covered sand dunes and flat, dark sandy beach that extends as far up and down the coast as the eye can see. Towards the village there is a stretch of grassy tundra interspersed with hundreds of tiny ponds and Napareayak Slough, a winding river that flows to the Bering Sea. Farther inland from the village is another wide expanse of open, grassy tundra that stretches away from the coast toward the Askinuk Mountains.

Shortly before the plane touched the gravel airstrip, several people gathered down below, coming by four-wheelers to greet family members or to claim mail-order groceries and supplies. I got off the plane, clutching the large foam board poster that proudly displayed a sampling of the archival black and white photographs I hoped to “visually repatriate” to the community. The wind whipped at the poster as I awkwardly...
looked around for my ride. A woman finally approached me, “Holly?” I nodded as she smiled and said to me, “Welcome to Hooper Bay.”

In an instant I was sitting on the back of her four-wheeler (all-terrain vehicle), racing down the long stretch of gravel road that leads from the airstrip to the village. I was holding on to the four-wheeler, my luggage, and the project poster with everything I had. The poster board was almost torn from my hands as it flung wildly from side to side. I thought about the numerous flights I had taken that day to get here and how I had insisted on carefully hand-carrying the item. I laughed to myself as I imagined the irony of losing it somewhere on the tundra in those last few miles of my journey.

When we reached the Sea Lion Hotel, an ATCO unit (modular building) owned by the Sea Lion Native Corporation and situated at the edge of town, she shut off the engine of her four-wheeler and helped me carry my bags to the weathered, wooden boardwalk. She sat with me for a few moments and we visited. I told her that I was a graduate student in Fairbanks. We talked briefly about our families and my reason for coming to Hooper Bay. Before long she was telling me a story about a kass’aq woman who had come to Hooper Bay to work on a similar project. She told me that this woman “drove the elders crazy” with her insistent questioning.

Soon after that, we parted company, she on her four-wheeler and me still sitting on that boardwalk pondering her words. She had directed the story about the kass’aq woman who “drove the elders crazy with questions” at me. Her tale was a cautionary one and it would serve me well in the weeks, months, and even years to follow. Her message was simple: there is a right way and a wrong way to learn from the elders; find the right way!

It does not escape this author that I’ve opened with the well-worn trope of an anthropologist entering “the field,” but my first impressions of this place and the ways in which stories began to find me are important in terms of framing this book.

Most of the stories and personal narratives in this work were shared with me in the context of daily life and, only later, were some recorded. Stories found me sitting on the riverbank fishing, around the table sipping tea after dinner, in a steam bath with friends, or busily collecting driftwood on the beach.
These stories—of place and in places—are an active part of day-to-day living in Hooper Bay. Experiencing them allowed me to understand something about a lived sense of story and place, an approach that follows in the footsteps of other scholars like Julie Cruikshank, Phyllis Morrow, and Bill Schneider.

I have adopted a style of writing that reflects the way these narratives came to me personally as a listener and learner, on more than one occasion over several years. I am telling a story myself. My story reflects the nature of the information people conveyed and the manner in which I learned it. This style allows me to show readers how I have learned particular narratives. As anthropologist Carol Zane Jolles reminds us, “Native experts and non-Native researchers interweave their life histories and storied lives in the course of field research” (Jolles 1994, 86). I cannot offer an emic analysis (inside perspective) of the stories that have been shared with me over the years. I can, however, offer explanations and raise questions that are informed by an emic understanding of Yup’ik places as expressed through story and personal narratives.

Many of the stories were recorded only after a friend or community member had shared the story with me in a personal context. For example, I simply asked tellers, “Do you remember that story you told me about the giant footprints? Could we sit down with a recorder so that I could get your words to paper exactly as you told the story to me?” Sometimes people declined to retell their story with a recorder running. But more often than not, I already had rapport with the tellers and they accommodated the request in spite of their discomfort, teasing me about my lack of memory and insistent habit of “getting it right.” Some of the stories presented here were originally recorded as part of my doctoral dissertation research at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

When we sat down to record, I presented a consent form. While community elders were often reluctant to sign something that signifies a “transfer of title, interest, and copyright,” given a well-grounded historical distrust of “outsiders,” we were always able to work through these tensions. One Hooper Bay community elder, when I asked him to sign a release, teasingly stated that if I didn't have his permission I wouldn't be sitting in his kitchen having tea and listening to stories! Similarly, Pomo elder Mabel McKay told author Greg Sarris to write
her story but not to record her words. She trusted him, her friend, not the recording machine, to tell her story (Sarris 1994). Many tellers did prefer to remain anonymous. For one reason, many Yupiit do not wish to go on record as some kind of “cultural expert” (Mather 1985; Hensel 1992). People freely share stories but are often reluctant to claim the knowledge as somehow individually “owned.” They are also concerned about making mistakes. Although I would like to acknowledge each teller by name, I have honored each individual’s decision.

Like people everywhere, Yupiit imbue places with story. But for Yupiit, places—and the land in general—also respond to people. This experience and the strong feelings it evokes are consonant with long-held understandings. But beyond their general connections with Yup’ik cosmology/worldview, physical changes in certain places are, in a more specific sense, a barometer of social and personal wellbeing. And, as I will demonstrate in the final chapters, the stories associated with human-made places are a barometer of intergroup social relations and the resultant tensions.

One of the greatest honors bestowed on me over the years has been the opportunity to visit and work with elders at Hooper Bay. It is they who have helped me to understand these relationships between stories and particular kinds of places. I use the term “elder” to refer to those community leaders who are respected for their knowledge and life experience. Through various projects, we have shared happy and sad times. I consider them my teachers and hope that my deep respect is clearly felt throughout this work. The knowledge freely shared with me not only informs this book, but, more importantly, it has guided me to “live right.”

I am writing with two intended, overlapping audiences in mind. This work is largely grounded in anthropological and folkloric theory and, as such, I write for an academic audience. I draw upon a body of established literature. I have, however, another intended audience. With each line I write I ask myself how a Yup’ik audience will see and respond to my words. While anthropologists used to assume that their “informants” would almost never read what was written about them, I both hope and expect that Yupiit will.

I also aspire to produce a book that gives all my readers, Yup’ik and non-Yup’ik, academic and nonacademic, food for thought. Perhaps it
will stimulate dialogue between audiences and lead to a better understanding of how people relate to places—and places to people. My greatest hope is that my deep respect for Yup’ik culture and worldview is strongly felt by all of my readers and that the way I have interpreted and presented Yup’ik narrative is viewed not as distant analysis, but rather as a heartfelt struggle to better understand what people have shared with me and why.

In July of 2015, the Hooper Bay Traditional Council asked me to give a community presentation at a Native Village of Hooper Bay and City of Hooper Bay joint public meeting on some of the past cultural heritage projects the council and I had collaborated on over the years. Among the projects discussed was the long, hard journey of returning Hooper Bay ancestors and their funerary objects from the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. At the completion of the presentation, and to my great astonishment, the tribal chief announced that they had decided to make me an honorary tribal member of the Native Village of Hooper Bay. No greater honor could be bestowed upon me. With this status comes even greater responsibility to make a difference in the community by continuing to give back. I have a responsibility to share my knowledge and understanding with the generations to come and I take that role very seriously.

As I have worked over the years to understand these teachings and shape this book for publication, one very important audience has remained on my mind and in my heart: the youth of Hooper Bay. These young people are the knowledge bearers for generations yet to come. Having worked with Hooper Bay youth on several projects over the years, I am inspired by their resilience and resolve. It is another small way to “put back” into the community that has given so much, but all royalties from the sale of this publication will go directly to the Hooper Bay Youth and Elder group.

Yup’ik storytellers at Nunivak Island employed a particular phrase when concluding their tales. They ended their stories by saying, “May all my small mistakes go into their places and make little noise” (Himmelheber 1993, 84). This understanding is especially relevant when one considers the potential power that words possess, a power that is considered especially strong for Yupiit. As the author of this book, I am
cognizant of this responsibility as I put words to the page. I’ve done my best to convey what I have learned and it is my hope, above all else, that my deep respect is abundantly evident and that my own mistakes will go into their places.

A note to the reader concerning archival sources: When I began my archival research, I was accessing the material on microfilm. The microfilming of the Alaska Mission Collection followed the organization of the Oregon Province Archives and contained 730 manuscripts (49,816 pages) written by Jesuit missionaries in Alaska from 1886 to 1955. Documents were separated into mission stations (reels 1–25) and biographical material on the missionaries (reels 26–42). In 2014, Gale Cengage Learning launched Indigenous Peoples: North America, an online database sourced from both American and Canadian institutions. The collection consists of thousands of archival records including the Alaska Mission Collection. The online materials for the Alaska Mission Collection do not follow the original ordering of the microfilm rolls and thus, I cite them differently and include the last access date. In-text citations labeled “AM Collection” were accessed on microfilm, while citations labeled by the specific names of the mission or missionary (i.e., John P. Fox Collection or the Hooper Bay Collection) refer to Alaska Mission Collections that were accessed through the Gale Cengage Learning online database.