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Living with Stories

William Schneider

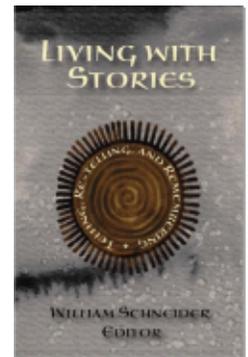
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The Giant Footprints

*A Conversation with Holly Cusack-McVeigh and
Klara B. Kelley*

Holly Cusack-McVeigh and Klara Kelley explore the role of place in Yup'ik and Navajo oral tradition. They discover that the contexts for sharing narrative in both traditions are very different; Cusack-McVeigh finds that her Yup'ik friends see sites like the Giant Footprints as barometers of social well-being and they share with each other how their experiences relate to the traditional story and the site. Kelley, drawing on work with her Navajo colleague, Harris Francis, indicates that the Navajo sacred sites are described in a rich oral tradition that is only told in winter and in the context of ceremonies. Individual Navajo may relate this knowledge to their experiences, but the tellings of the ancient stories and of stories about personal experience with the sites are separate. Young people in Yup'ik and Navajo culture therefore have different types of opportunities to learn, relate to, and participate in their oral traditions. Both Cusack-McVeigh and Kelley acknowledge that there may be fewer such opportunities in these cultures where youth are reminded of the importance of the stories and where they would hear the ancient accounts referenced. Yup'ik elders express concerns over the impacts of a rapidly changing world and, in the Navajo case, children are often not on the reservations in winter when the ceremonies are held and the stories told.

SCHNEIDER: I want to begin with something Holly said in her last e-mail to me. She said that “place anchors memory” and so I thought we should start with that and then see how new events get associated with places in our memory. So Klara, when Holly says,

Klara B. Kelley is an anthropologist who has been working for many years with Navajo people in the American Southwest. She has teamed with Harris Francis, a Navajo cultural expert, to document the cultural meaning of Navajo historic sites. They are the authors of *Navajo Sacred Places* (1994).

“place anchors memory,” how does that relate to your experiences working with Navajo people?

KELLEY: Well, I think places are an anchor for personal and social memory. Of course, people have their own personal experiences, but because there are particular oral traditions that they have been taught to remember in detail, and because these have been handed down through many generations in a particular way, these form what we might think of as a landscape constructed by many generations. Navajo people relate their personal experiences to that ceremonial landscape, and that kind of reinforces the ties between personal experience and the oral traditions of their society, the past and the present. But personal experiences don't get mixed into or retold as part of the oral tradition that is recounted in the ceremonies.

What has always been emphasized for those of us who do research here in Navajo country with oral tradition is how well-preserved the ceremonial narratives are. The narratives are part of ceremonial repertoires—there are a couple of dozen repertoires—and these repertoires also include songs, prayers, paraphernalia, ritual procedures, sand paintings, and body painting. And the repertoires also include rules for combining these elements into a particular ceremonial performance for a particular purpose at a particular time and place. Parts of ceremonial narratives may be told during ceremonies, and each telling is tailored to the reason for the ceremony. But even so, the tellings are closely similar in each retelling. These ceremonial repertoires are big and elaborate and involve a lot of memorization of procedures and instruction on how to do the rituals, sand paintings, dance performances, and so forth. It takes years to learn these things. Well, each of these repertoires has a collection of narratives about its origin and development, and it is always emphasized that these have been handed down and you have to learn them just as told—not verbatim, the way songs and prayers are learned, but with the exact group of actors, events, and so forth. Those who learn more than one version are very careful that they tell one version or another but they don't combine those things and they don't put their own experience in the narrative. They may break out of narrative to comment or something like that, but that kind of personal experience or personal knowledge doesn't get into those narratives as they are handed down and there is a real concern about preserving the integrity of these narratives.

Many of the Navajo stories are only supposed to be told in the context of ceremonies in the winter time. When people like me do research, we haven't been taken out as a child and instructed. I'm more of an institutional link. I do my work kind of like you, Holly, do your work; we come into these communities as professionals rather than as integrated community members who will live in the community and carry on the traditions. But, with that as a caveat, let me give an example that may help to demonstrate the relationship between personal experience, ceremonial knowledge, and places out on the land.

I almost always work with one particular Navajo colleague. His name is Harris Francis. I guess it was about this time of year. We had talked to a ceremonialist for quite a while. This was a ceremonialist that Harris was fairly close to, and he had already told us a particular story. It is one of the ones I guess like the "Giant Footprints," one that kids tend to be told, not one of the more esoteric (and secret) ones. This was one that everyone knows, one you hear over and over again in different versions. This telling by the ceremonialist is the only one we have encountered that traced a route of travel on the ground for the heroes of the story. The ceremonialist had named a series of places and identified them for us in relationship to current landmarks and towns, and stuff like that. (That's the background.) Then, one time Harris and I were with this ceremonialist in view of one of those places, and the ceremonialist related how once in the past, he had driven down there and encountered these giant ants. In this case I can't say there was a clear moral lesson there, but I think in a way the point the ceremonialist was making to us is that this is not something we normally encounter and that this was a sacred zone. The unexpected happens in those kinds of places. That was his personal experience in this place that was named in this very ancient and well-known story. Most people can't even approximate where the place of that name is on the ground, but he could (because of what he had been told) and he was bearing witness to us that he had experienced something counterintuitive that validated what he had been taught about that area being a sacred zone. So when there is personal information like when you go to a place and someone alludes to an episode in one of these ceremonial stories, they will treat it the way the ceremonialist treated his experience with the ants, but those ants would never get into the age-old narrative of the heroes. The personal stuff is kept separate from the more traditional telling, but it's not

unrelated; you just have to be careful how you structure your discourse to make those distinctions clear. You have to step out of the story if you want to apply a personal lesson. That's the way it is here, at least in my experience.

CUSACK-McVEIGH: Interesting, because I can think of several situations where a teller will shift (in the same breath) from a well-known narrative to a more personal narrative describing an encounter, like the one you described with the giant ants, that is known to be out of the ordinary. And, as you said, it is a place marked by unexpected events. I have often wondered if that becomes more emphasized for the outside audience as another way to establish the value of the oral tradition, the old story that is the referent.

In one instance, an elder described an encounter with several otters and how they just weren't right; there were too many in one place. He knew right away he was at a place that was more significant than other places where one might encounter otters.

Another example where story, place, and social conditions come together is the shaman's grave at Hooper Bay. One teller alluded to this grave, explaining that in Yup'ik tradition, people were buried above ground. You can look out onto the tundra and still see these old graves today. On my first visit to Hooper Bay, I was told about the shaman's grave by a woman who had learned about it from her mother. Only once did she explicitly state to me that the shaman's grave was sinking (becoming level with the tundra) and that this was a sign of worsening conditions in her community and the larger world. She alluded to this place, I think, by way of getting me to recognize and take notice of the grave as a sign of conditions. Each time I returned to her village she would greet me by saying that "the shaman's grave is getting lower." This teller knows that I have enough cultural context to understand that this means, in her mind, things are much worse. This is also an example of how in Yup'ik discourse, some things are just too dangerous to mention directly. To speak explicitly of a painful event would be to invite it into one's own life. So the place of the shaman's grave provides this speaker a way to talk about things that cannot be otherwise spoken. And this works because I know the story and the place.

SCHNEIDER: In the Yup'ik examples you gave us, one's personal experiences in a way confirm the old stories, and the places reinforce the message.

CUSACK-McVEIGH: Yes. The places and the stories are reminders of how to behave and the potential consequences of not following the rules of the society. The story of the “Giant Footprints” is, however, one of the strongest examples I have encountered in different contexts.

SCHNEIDER: Yes, that is one of the strengths of your paper: the attention to how the story is used. It seems clear that the “Giant Footprints” is really a cautionary tale and as such it is meant to be applied and told in the context of giving an indirect lesson, as opposed to telling someone directly that they are not acting right.

CUSACK-McVEIGH: Well that is one of the things that it does. It is a cautionary tale particularly and primarily for those who are of the culture and are thought to be getting further and further from their cultural traditions. In many Native communities, that is a primary concern, because kids drift from their cultural values and social situations worsen. It also serves as a cautionary tale for those outside the culture who don’t know the dangers and cultural ways.

KELLEY: Yeah, I think that is a concern around here too. There are some Navajo people who have been raised as Christians or are younger and are thought to not know anything about their culture. People are skeptical of them because all they have experienced is public school. Sometimes they are lumped into the same category as outsiders, and the attitude toward them is linked to the admonishment: “don’t put aside your traditions. This is who you are, and you’ll be nobody if you don’t keep learning these things.”

CUSACK-McVEIGH: Yeah, these stories point out the real potential danger of letting the cultural traditions go. Places don’t just remind people of story, places respond to human thought and action. Through stories of place, listeners can learn from the mistakes and naiveté of others. The place of the giant footprints remains significant in contemporary times because it speaks to people about the importance of following the words of their elders.

SCHNEIDER: It is appropriate that our discussion has brought us to the role of stories in establishing and maintaining the social order and the support systems of a culture. We have seen the power of story to operate in the personal sphere, as in your experiences, Holly, and through what you, Klara, have called the “received oral tradition.” The linking of story to place in both ways anchors experience and memory to the landscape and is a strong form of reinforcement.