



**The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory.** Julie Cruikshank. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 211 pp.

**MICHAEL MARKER**, *University of British Columbia*

Julie Cruikshank has learned exceedingly well from First Nations elders that stories come from real places where they both define and are defined by the landscape. This book goes further than her earlier work *Life Lived Like a Story* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) by showing us how stories from the past serve as moral narratives that are placed in the present moment. This work displays the multiple layers of meaning that oral tradition creates as it evolves in time. Beginning with the interwoven aboriginal character of land, history, and genealogy in the Yukon, Cruikshank situates the works of Bourdieu, Rosaldo, and others on the landscape of political and linguistic tensions from which these stories come. The seven chapters show problems in linking indigenous knowledge with empirical science, illuminating how nontransportable native knowledge is; this knowledge resides in actual places on the landscape rather than in abstract domains.

Chapter 1 gives historical background on the Yukon integrated with the personal narratives of elders and the ways they experience belonging to the land. Chapter 2 takes a single story from Tlingit oral tradition and explores the ways it turns and shifts as it is told in different context eras. Such stories maintain their fundamental qualities as they are embedded in cultural and moral cosmologies.

Chapter 3 views the dissonances that arise from attempts to incorporate these complex narratives into bureaucratic and management contexts that constrict the life forces of the stories and generate strange, difficult repertoire choices for native speakers.

Chapter 4 is a revisiting of Cruikshank's well-known discussion of "a Klondike gold rush incident." This is perhaps the most carefully refined explication of the collision between oral tradition and textual accounts of the past. This section unravels the complexities of the subtle relational knowledge of native people in conflict with the constrictive and exclusionary voice of the state.

Chapter 5 explores the deep reciprocity between artifacts and stories, art and lived experience, in relationship to the land. We see not only that text is problematic in displaying oral tradition but that museums "exhibiting culture" are contentious ideological zones. The life forces that surround elder Kitty Smith's carvings defy the conventionalities of museum displays. We are shown that words, things, and human



activity must all be connected to manifest meaning. In chapter 6 we are provided with fresh and surprising insights about the historical development of prophecy narratives. The author explores the epistemological subsurface of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and its historic ideological competition with lived experience.

Chapter 7 brings us to consider how storytelling is a profoundly destabilizing force when it confronts conventional notions of pedagogy and performance. This book is saturated with a stern reverence for indigenous narrative and knowledge while offering an important caveat against postmodern presuppositions about native understandings: "Narratives arguably connect analytical constructs with the material conditions of people's daily lives, leading in directions quite different from postmodern relativism" (p. 162). This book has obvious usefulness for anyone interested in Canadian ethnohistory and ethnography, but it should not be overlooked by people in cross-cultural education. It is a clear and crisp explication of what tribal people have always insisted: We must be patient with stories and allow their mysterious and seemingly opaque qualities to be animated by local knowledge and moral imperatives. Cruikshank's work gives educational ethnographers a glimpse into what the "ethno" part is all about. When we collect narratives from schools or use narratives to teach, we need to acknowledge that those stories are compressed and narrowed by the local context of what is possible to be said and heard. Institutions, particularly schools, delineate and control what is and what is not intelligible: "An institution differs from a dialogue in that it sets constraints on what stories can be told and when they are admissible. There are things to be said, and there are ways of saying them" (p. 95).

This book should inspire educators and anthropologists to seek the remnants of oral tradition in the local context of how stories are told; such stories are both descriptive and prescriptive with regard to relationships and moral conduct. They should be viewed, as Cruikshank says, as "a part of the equipment for living rather than a set of meanings embedded within texts and waiting to be discovered" (p. 41).

With a solid and impressive bibliography of ethnographic and theoretical research, this volume should be valuable as a text and reference in ethnohistory. The handful of photographs of elders and carvings give the text helpful coordinated images. If the book has a fault, it is that, although some anecdotes from the United States are utilized for examples, there is no cross-border comparative reflection on how the historic cultural and political power of the United States has created a discursive context this is apart from how aboriginal people are able to speak and be heard in Canada. Perhaps this is not so much a criticism as an advocacy that such work be enacted.



# Anthropology & Education

QUARTERLY

Never hasty or redundant, Julie Cruikshank has written an enormously dense 211-page book that displays a respectful pondering on the ways that stories and life are inseparable. This book should generate some important new conversations.

© 1999 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited and indexed in the September 1999 issue (30:3) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.