

Psychotherapy in the Wake and Waves of Colonization

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Abstract

Mainstream American systems of mental health care have taken root in rural Alaskan Native communities in order to identify and treat the various forms of suffering and violence that have increased so dramatically in prevalence in the wake and waves of colonization. However, these systems often find themselves at odds with local discourse around the origins and management of distress, and have come to represent for many Alaska Natives a recapitulation or second wave of colonization, as indigenous anthropologies of suffering, systems of meaning, and structures of care are supplanted by those of their colonizers. As the pathologies of modern Alaska Native life are identified somewhat paradoxically as both symptoms of Western invasion (locally) and subject to treatment by Western means (by the institutions tasked with the remediation of their distress), a failure of peace and proximity has emerged: one in which Levinas may have much to offer. Through the lens of both a clinical case study and ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in rural Alaska, this paper will explore the consequences of these divergent narratives of mental health and suffering, as well as some the possibilities for reconciling the complex dynamics of colonization, psychotherapy, and the distinct cultural worlds at play in the indigenous Alaskan arctic.