

Native Cultures of Western Alaska and the Pacific Northwest Coast
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Project Rationale

by

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This National Endowment for Humanities Summer Institute is broadly designed to advance the professional interests and development of teacher/scholars who may not be specialists in Native American Studies, but who seek to expand their teaching and research in new directions. With reference to the Northwest Coast cultures of southeast Alaska and British Columbia Aldona Jonaitis has shown how within a uniquely challenging mist-forest environment the resident indigenous peoples created one of the great art traditions of the world, along with highly complex social structures and ceremonial practices (*Art of the Northwest Coast* xiii). Similarly, about the Subarctic cultures of the Yup'ik Eskimos of western Alaska, independent scholar Ann Fienup-Riordan has said, “The cosmology and ritual cycle of the Yup'ik people are much more sophisticated than most people ever imagined . . . [and their] ‘oral archive’ challenges nonnative listeners to rethink their concept of history as a record of individual action” (*Boundaries and Passages* xiii).¹ The cultures of this area have been intensively and famously studied for two hundred years by travelers and scholars, including such legendary figures as Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but in many ways they are just beginning to be understood, with the aid of recent new perspectives in research and scholarship.



¹ Please note: works cited here are fully identified in “Institute Texts and Bibliography”

I. People of the North: Regions and Cultures

The core culture area of our project study is the two thousand mile stretch of coastline extending from Glacier Bay in Southeast Alaska to Puget Sound in Washington State, a region known in anthropology as the Pacific Northwest Coast culture area. Within this range, Aboriginal or Native cultures include: the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska; the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) of British Columbia; the Tsimshian and the Heiltsuk (formerly called “Bella Bella”) on the coast of northern British Columbia; and, on northeastern Vancouver Island, the Kwakwaka’wakw (formerly “Kwakiutl”); and, from the southern coast of British Columbia to Puget Sound, the Coast Salish. Scholarly research, however, invokes an even larger contextual field, extending from the Yup’ik, Inupiat and Aleut peoples of northern Alaska, to the Chinookan groups of Oregon and northern California. Thus, our project begins with study of the north Alaskan Yup’ik and Inupiak cultures and continues south with study focused successively on the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka’wakw and Coast Salish peoples.

With such a diversity of Native communities, what were and are the commonalities that help to define Western Alaska and the Pacific Northwest Coast as a cohesive culture area? In *Crossroads of Continents*, co-editor William Fitzhugh, in his essay “Comparative Art of the North Pacific Rim,” stresses the commonalities and likely common origins of the arts of northern Alaskan peoples and of Northwest Coast peoples – commonalities “that cut across the distinctive stylistic signatures of individual cultures” (305). Perhaps even more fundamentally it begins with common life ways dependent upon marine, littoral and riverine resources for sustenance, and shared material cultures associated with fishing and sea-mammal hunting, and the gathering of wild food plants and medicinals, noting that interaction spheres of trade for these and other items such as obsidian and copper are archaeologically evident all through the Pacific coastal regions from archaic through modern times (Ames and Maschner, *Peoples of the Northwest Coast* 165-76).

The life ways of the Northwest Coast cultures have long occupied a special place in anthropological theories of culture and civilization because of what Ames and Maschner call these cultures’ *exceptionality*: “For anthropology, the Northwest Coast has often played a central but paradoxical role in attempts to understand human culture” (*ibid.* 7) -- paradoxical because, with reference to the rise of sedentism, specialization, social complexity and social inequality, “the coast’s cultures contradict many notions held by anthropologists and by the public at large. The coast’s peoples hunted, fished, and gathered wild foods, yet they lived in large communities,

produced one of the world's great art styles and were ruled by an aristocracy" (8). This contradicts many standard textbook axioms that hunting/gathering cultures live in small nomadic bands, with few material possessions and little social differentiation, whereas social complexity would develop only with the shift to an agricultural way of life. Ames and Maschner conclude: "These [Northwest Coast] societies confound ideas about the development of social complexity during human history and many of the traits expressed on the Northwest Coast are exactly those traits widely viewed as the basis for the development of civilization. It has always been assumed by historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and others that farming is necessary for these traits to evolve. . . . Our fascination with the [Northwest] coast is due to that exceptionality" (13 & 8).



II. Ceremonialism and Art of the Northern Peoples

An important shared tradition in the northern regions was shamanism, along with the basic seasonality of a nomadic summer season of hunting/gathering and a settled winter season of intense ceremonialism. Central to such ceremonial cycles was often the initiation of boys into secret societies along with occasions of elaborate feasting and reciprocal gift giving, as in the Bladder Festival of the Inuit, the Messenger Feast of the Yup'ik, and the *Hamat'sa* ceremony and potlatch of the Kwakwaka'wakw. Central to these ceremonies are artifacts such as distinctive masks and dance costumes, which are among the most valued items of these northern cultures. Songs, dances and oral traditions of the Yup'ik and Northwest Coast peoples, including a vast corpus of Raven myths, are at once distinctive for each group, but recognizably related to each other. Our schedule includes a focus on Native story telling in sessions with Ann Fienup-Riordan

and Nora Dauenhauer, each actively involved in preservation and publication, respectively, of Yup'ik and Tlingit oral traditions.

Similarities exist too in the architecture of the winter communities, especially the structure of plank-built longhouses, often with exterior and interior wooden screens painted with clan crest images and with interior totemic house posts, in some areas elaborated into free-standing totem poles. A work by Aldona Jonaitis and Aaron Glass, *Totem Poles: Myth or Monuments* (forthcoming 2010), will provide the foundation of our Institute seminars on these centrally important artifacts. Also common to the Northwest Coast region is a very distinctive style of painting on wood, cloth and basketry called “formline,” in which animal and anthropomorphic shapes are stylized by means of a system of heavily outlined ovoid forms representing a being or creature bi-laterally split or bisected. Other shared cultural items include artfully made everyday artifacts such as canoes, bentwood boxes, fishhooks, needles, knives and spear points.

In her recent survey *Art of the Northwest Coast* (2006) Aldona Jonaitis sums up the context of material culture: “This spectacular land’s original residents created one of the most extraordinary art traditions in Native America. Their wealth of artistry is impressive: totem poles, large communal houses made of cedar planks, vivid dramatic masks, expertly made baskets, animal-shaped hats, clothing decorated with abstract designs, feast dishes, carved spoons, and so much more. How *did* it happen that so much art, so finely made, developed here, in this strip of land from Puget Sound to Yakutat in Alaska?” (xiii, italics ours). Her question aptly sets the agenda for our Institute’s on-site study and exploration of Yup’ik and Northwest Coast Native art.

The highly stylized art of Native Alaska and the Pacific Northwest Coast had long been relegated to the category of “curios” by European and American collectors, but in the 1930’s it aroused serious interest among Surrealists such as André Breton and Max Ernst when they encountered examples in galleries in New York City (much as African art in Parisian galleries had stimulated Picasso in the early 20th century). After his visit to the Northwest Coast collection at the American Museum of Natural History in 1943, Lévi-Strauss proposed that it would not be long “before we see the collections from this part of the world moved from ethnographic to fine arts museums to take their just place amidst the antiquities of Egypt or Persia. . . [or] medieval Europe” (*The Way of the Masks* 3). Indeed, mid-century shows mounted at the Museum of Modern Art and other fine art venues did help to move Yup’ik and Northwest Coast artifacts from the realm of cultural curiosities to the category of high art.

In *Art of the Northwest Coast* Jonaitis gives equal attention to both historic and contemporary art, to currents of innovation as well as tradition. Institute participants will have the opportunity both to study traditional artifacts in museums and to discuss current directions in meetings with contemporary Native artists, such as weaver Teri Rofkar, whose work is currently featured in a special exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania Museum; master wood carver Nathan Jackson, who says about his own work, “I feel connected to the past because I am who I am – I’m Native, I’m maintaining the culture. What I do is a continuation of the past” (quoted in *Totems to Turquoise* 88); and jeweler Nicholas Galanin, who speaks with special pride about his small commissions for his home community, “Because that piece takes on a life when it’s used and when it’s danced. To see it in a context that has inspired artists for thousands of years” (*Ibid.* 102).

The vitality of Northwest Coast art and its fascination for the general public continues to be evident in recent exhibitions, such as “Totems to Turquoise” at the American Museum of Natural History (2004); “Listening to Our Ancestors” at the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian’s Custom House venue in New York City (2007); and the recent series of symposia and performances mounted in the summer and fall of 2008 associated with the recent restoration of Edward Curtis’ landmark 1914 silent film documentary “In the Land of the Headhunters” (alternate title “In the Land of the War Canoes”), along with the original accompanying musical score. The latter was a collaborative project of Aaron Glass and the U’mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, British Columbia, including descendants of the Kwakwaka’wakw cast of the film. Participants of our Institute will have the opportunity to view and discuss the film with Aaron Glass and with Kwakwaka’wakw living at Alert Bay, on location of the original filming.²



² Aaron Glass, Aldona Jonaitis and Kwakwaka’wakw chief William Cranmer were all cited recently in a *NYT* article on potlatching by John Tierney (*NYT* December 16, 2008, D1, 4).

III. Impact of Pacific Northwest Coast Cultures on Anthropological Theory

A recent gala at the American Museum of Natural History (November 14, 2008) featuring the restored Curtis film was the opening event in the Museum's current celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Franz Boas, called "Revisiting Franz Boas and the Northwest Coast," noting how Boas' extensive work with the Kwakwaka'wakw people of British Columbia, recording their language and culture with pioneering techniques, proved to be foundational for the formation of anthropological method. It is now widely acknowledged that the Pacific Northwest Coast cultures had a decisive impact on the very formation of anthropology as a discipline in the U.S., a subject addressed by several of our Institute scholars. Boas, the formative figure of 20th century American anthropology, formulated his ideas of culture largely with reference to the peoples of the Northwest Coast. For ten years (1895-1905) as curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Boas built up the museum's paramount collection in this area, depending heavily upon the collecting endeavors of his Kwakwaka'wakw collaborator George Hunt. Aldona Jonaitis, who was curator at the AMNH in the 1980's, will discuss the formation and character of this influential collection, as documented in her catalogue, *From the Land of the Totem Poles* (1988).

Institute seminars will explore the ways in which twentieth century anthropological discourse grew out of research into the Northwest Coast cultures, from Boas' cultural relativist challenge to cultural evolutionism through Lévi-Strauss' structuralist analyses of Kwakwaka'wakw masks and Tsimshian mythology.³ The work of these researchers has had a great impact on anthropology for a generation, but as the organizers of an important recent conference of international scholars of Northwest Coast cultures convened in Paris to assess the transition to new approaches in anthropology declared, "it appears that the time is ripe for such a reassessment and overview," as conditions in the field and in the academy have changed enormously, especially in recognition of Native agency and ownership of cultural property, and Native involvement in cultural (self-) representation (*Coming to Shore*, xi).

As the editors of the volume growing out of this Paris conference -- *Coming to Shore: Northwest Coast Ethnology, Traditions, and Visions* (ed. Mauzé, Harkin and Kan, 2004) -- point

³ Serendipitously, the intellectual world was celebrating Lévi-Strauss's one-hundredth birthday (*NYT* November 29, 2008, C1, 8), just as the discipline of anthropology was celebrating the sesquicentennial of the birth of Franz Boas.

out, this collection of papers “represents the first collaborative collection on Northwest Coast ethnology” in forty years. While much of the earlier scholarship remains indispensable, the new scholarship reveals how heavily invested the earlier anthropology was in describing and collecting, whereas, today, collecting, exhibiting -- and repatriating -- have emerged as highly controversial issues. A notable example is the work that Louis Shotridge, himself a grandson of a prominent Kwakwaka’wakw chief, undertook on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania’s University Museum from 1912 to 1932; using his “insider” status, Shotridge removed many important ceremonial objects under false pretenses, raising contemporary repatriation issues. These issues form a main subject of our seminars at the Anthropology Museum at the University of British Columbia, while at the U’mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay participants will view repatriated Kwakwaka’wakh artifacts that had been confiscated by the Canadian government during the period when potlatching was criminalized.



IV. Native Voices and Native Agency

In contrast to much past practice, as our Institute scholars will show, ethnographic research is now conducted in close consultation with Native communities; sources who once would have been called “informants,” are now acknowledged as Native ethnographers, and the collection and display of artifacts is now carried out with respect to Native sensibilities. A further step in this direction can be seen in the number of Native-organized communitarian museums now found

throughout the Northwest Coast region and serving as cultural centers and examples of what scholar Patricia Pierce Erikson calls “autoethnography” (in *Coming to Shore* 339). Institute participants will have the opportunity to visit several of these cultural centers and to discuss with curators their experiences and policies.

A keystone of the new scholarship is the abandonment of the idea that modern Native communities are essentially remnants of an imagined “culturally pure” pre-contact past, or representatives of the “ethnographic present” so familiar from museum dioramas of “timeless” cultural moments or activities. Aldona Jonaitis argues instead that it is crucial to foreground contemporary Native understandings of identity and sovereignty, and of history and tradition, including current negotiations of cultural traditions and cultural innovations. “This is very much in keeping with the times,” Jonaitis says, “and represents a monumental shift in relationships between Native and non-Natives” (*Art of the Northwest Coast* 250). As the editors of *Coming to Shore* put it: “One of the biggest changes that has occurred in Northwest Coast studies since the 1960’s. . . is a move away from an ahistorical or synchronic representation of native societies toward an ethnology that is deeply concerned with historical changes” (xiv).

Recognition that the Northwest Coast peoples have a rich, complex and interactive historical past – rather than a “timeless” cultural essence – extends back to the pre-European contact era as well as to the early contact era and to modern and contemporary times. The sources for this history include not only archaeological evidence and European colonial archives, but Native oral tradition as well. In “Oral History as History,” Judith Berman notes that, “The Natives of the region traditionally maintained a deep historical consciousness of almost astonishing detail” (in *Coming to Shore* 130); she gives examples of genealogical information twenty-five generations deep, and of correspondences between Native oral tradition and early Russian written texts. Owing to the fruitful collaborations of ethnographers and Native elders, an impressive literary canon of the region now has been published and translated, forming the largest body of literature transcribed in any native language north of Mexico. Anthologies of such indigenous literature include: Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: the Classical Haida Mythtellers and their World* (1999); *Wise Words of the Yup’ik People*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (2005) and *Words of the Real People*, ed. Fienup-Riordan and Lawrence Kaplan (2007); and *Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*, ed. Richard and Nora Dauenhauer (1990).

Institute discussions will explore how issues of ownership and of the legitimacy of transference of cultural traditions are in the foreground today, as Native communities debate questions such as whether women can be granted the right to participate in previously all-male ceremonials, or whether rights can be given to a generic group such as the American Indian Dance Theater to perform dance rituals that have hitherto belonged exclusively to specific Native communities (*Coming to Shore* 294). Ann Fienup-Riordan will present her collaborative work on such issues with the Calista Elders Council and Nora and Richard Dauenhauer will conduct a seminar on how Tlingit communities negotiate issues of preservation and innovation with regard to what constitutes and who “owns” tradition, especially as the stake-holding of tradition shifts from clan authority to the civic community and to individual prerogative. Other seminars will focus on oral histories that deal with archaic times and with inter-Native community interactions, including historic stories of cultural exchange. Such testimony can recount how the ownership and rights to the use of certain specific songs or ceremonies, or masks, totem images or other cultural property have passed from one group to another. An example would be the story told by Aaron Glass of how the *Hamat’sa* initiation ceremony, for which the Kwakwaka’wakw have long been noted, were in fact acquired by the Kwakwaka’wakw in the early 1800’s from Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) neighbors to the north, either by intermarriage or warfare (*Coming to Shore* 282).

Archival and oral sources for the period of European/Native early encounters are voluminous, although, as the editors of *Coming to Shore* point out, it is only in the last few decades that ethnologists have begun seriously mining the archives to reconstruct that history of Indian-white relations in the north (xiv). Ann Fienup-Riordan and Richard and Nora Dauenhauer have been in the forefront of preserving and publishing oral archives of, respectively, the Yup’ik and Tlingit peoples. These materials represent a significant addition to our existing repertoire of Native American history and literature. The Dauenhauers have worked especially with Tlingit and Russian texts from the time when Sitka served as the capital of Russian America. The Institute will devote a seminar to the history of Russian/Tlingit relations based on the sources anthologized in their recent award-winning volume *Russians in Tlingit America: The Battles of Sitka 1802 and 1804* (2008).

Sitka remained the capital of Russian America until 1867, when Alaska was sold to the United States, without, as Institute Native scholar Rosita Worl points out, the Tlingit and Haida Indians having any voice or role in this historic transfer (*Crossroads* 323). Institute seminars will discuss

the ways in which in the late 19th century and 20th century Pacific Northwest Coast cultures underwent somewhat parallel but distinct experiences in Alaska and Canada, at the center of which were two policies paradoxically pulling in opposite directions: assimilation and segregation.

In Alaska, as Richard and Nora Dauenhauer will discuss, Native rights issues were pursued by the Alaska Native Brotherhood, organized in 1912, which spearheaded successful movements to give Native adults the right to vote and Native children the right to attend non-segregated public schools – movements that preceded the civil rights movement in the Lower 48 by decades. In Canada a key policy was the criminalizing of potlatch ceremonialism in 1884, a ban that was not lifted until 1951, a topic that will be discussed by scholars Bruce Miller and Aron Glass, and which will be a focus of our study visit to Alert Bay, where the U'mista Cultural Centre features the repatriation of confiscated Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch artifacts. While treaty rights of First Nations peoples in Canada were acknowledged in the Constitution Act of 1982, issues of land rights and control of resources have remained contentious subjects of ongoing negotiations, as Jennifer Kramer, Charlotte Townsend-Gault and Bruce Miller will discuss at our University of British Columbia seminars.

Today it is evident that contemporary Native communities of Alaska and Canada are not the “exotic” tourist destinations they were often showcased as a hundred years ago, but rather that they function as modern twenty-first century communities with complex and self-defined relationships both to non-Native visitors and institutions, and to their own cultural traditions, including both preservation and continuity, innovation and change. As Aaron Glass sums up these issues, sense of place and sense of language remain the two key anchors for understanding the situation of the Native peoples of Alaska and the Northwest Coast.

