Culture

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Volume 14, Number 1, 1994

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083256ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1083256ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)
2563-710X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Halpin, M. (1994). A Critique of the Boasian Paradigm for Northwest Coast Art. *Culture*, *14*(1), 5–16. https://doi.org/10.7202/1083256ar

Article abstract

Halpin challenges Franz Boas's representationist reading of Northwest Coast art, and the hegemonic discourse that he initiated. In contrast to the Boasian rule-based paradigm, and with specific reference to Tsimshian-speaking peoples, she argues that Northwest Coast Native art is ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, endlessly variable, changing, and productive of the new, the unexpected. Of paramount importance in her analysis is the relationship between crest art and the oral tradition that still gives it meaning, a relationship that Boas did not understand.

A Critique of the Boasian Paradigm for Northwest Coast Art

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> The passage from a concrete to a formal definition of totemism actually goes back to Boas.
>
> Claude Levi-Strauss, 1963

Halpin remet en question la lecture représentationiste qu'a fait Franz Boas de l'art provenant de la côte nord-ouest, ainsi que le discours hégémonique qu'il a initié. En distinguant son analyse du paradigm boasien à base de règles, et en se référant spécifiquement aux peuples qui parlent la langue tsimshian, elle soutient que l'art autochtone de la côte nord-ouest est au contraire ambigü, instable, poétique, sans cesse variable, changeant et producteur de nouveautés et d'inattendu. Primordiale dans l'analyse de Halpin est la relation entre l'art comme blason et la tradition orale qui lui donne encore son sens, une relation malcomprise par Boas.

Halpin challenges Franz Boas's representationist reading of Northwest Coast art, and the hegemonic discourse that he initiated. In contrast to the Boasian rule-based paradigm, and with specific reference to Tsimshian-speaking peoples, she argues that Northwest Coast Native art is ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, endlessly variable, changing, and productive of the new, the unexpected. Of paramount importance in her analysis is the relationship between crest art and the oral tradition that still gives it meaning, a relationship that Boas did not understand.

Introduction

In a recent issue of this journal, Regna Darnell (1992) defends the Boasian text tradition against mid-century British anthropologists who questioned the usefulness of publishing the unedited and unsystematized Native voice, and argues that contemporary critics of Franz Boas are equally misguided. She quotes a 1938 letter from Edward Sapir to Fay Cooper Cole that reads in part, "I like the stuff in the raw, as felt and dictated by the natives.... The genuine, difficult, confusing, primary sources" (quoted in Darnell 1992:42). In the Boasian tradition, according to Darnell (1992:43), "[a]nthropological understanding of a culture comes from its articulation by people who live it. Such understanding is impossible if the ethnographer speaks for the people he/she studies."

In a view similar to Darnell's, Aldona Joanitis (in press) argues that it is wrong to consider Boas a candidate for "postmodern dismissal." In his resistance to premature theoretical closure and his egalitarian ideology, she argues, he "created the space that Native people could ultimately occupy to assert their own agenda and to assert their own voice."

While how to avoid "speaking for" the people we study is perhaps the central problematic in Canadian anthropology in the late twentieth century, certainly in museum work (Ames 1991, Nicks 1992), there remain difficulties with the Boasian paradigm—difficulties that Darnell's equation of it with the supposed purity of text tradition and Jonaitis's valorization of Boas's art history obscure. For Boas was, as British anthropologist Adam Kuper (1988:150) argues, "...above all a theorist," [1] and his "master" theory about Northwest Coast art and, especially, its relationship to the stories that give it meaning, is, quite simply, wrong.

The burden of this paper will be to demonstrate how Boas's work on Northwest Coast art was coloured by his preconceptions, and his need to order and systematize Sapir's "genuine, difficult, confusing, primary sources." I will also demonstrate that, in contrast to the Boasian rule-based paradigm, and with specific reference to Tsimshian-speaking peoples, Northwest Coast Native art is ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, endlessly variable, changing, and productive of the new, the unexpected. Of paramount importance in my analysis is the relationship between crest art and the oral tradition that still gives it meaning, a relationship that Boas did not understand.

Boas's Theory of Culture

Boas's (1966[1911]:63) early theoretical agenda is clearly stated in his "Introduction" to the *Handbook of North American Indian Languages*, where he equates the unconscious origin of linguistic and ethnological phenomena, the latter being subsequently contaminated by "secondary reasoning."[2] He (ibid.:64) is insistent that prior to, and independent of, conscious thought, cultural behaviour "in each individual and in the whole people" is "entirely subconscious" and arises from "automatic repetition." Such habitual activity is patterned under the influence of "fundamental ethnic ideas":

> It seems necessary to dwell upon the analogy of ethnology and language in this respect, because, if we adopt this point of view, language seems to be one of the most instructive fields of inquiry in an investigation of the formation of the fundamental ethnic ideas. The great advantage that linguistics offer in this respect is the fact that, on the whole, the categories which are formed always remain unconscious, and that for this reason the processes which lead to their formation can be followed **without the misleading and disturbing factors of secondary explanations, which are so common in ethnology, so much so that they generally obscure the real history of the development of ideas entirely** (ibid.:66-67, emphasis added).

As Richard Handler (1992:173) observes, Sapir and Ruth Benedict[3] also subsequently argued that humans remain unconscious of the formal patterns of their language and culture, and will rationalize those aspects of which they become conscious. From this perspective, it is up to the anthropologist to discriminate between true and unconscious cultural forms and false or secondary explanations.[4]

The Boasian Paradigm for Northwest Coast Art

A famous example of Boas's dismissal of Native interpretations, when these differed from his own, concerns the designs on Chilkat ceremonial robes. At the turn of the century, Lt. G.T. Emmons, naval officer, museum collector, and entrepeneur, reported that the central panel in a particular Chilkat (Tlingit) robe represented a whale and the side panels represented sitting ravens; of the same robe, John R. Swanton, of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, reported that the design represented a wolf with young (both interpretations are cited in Boas 1907:377).[5] Of a second robe for which Emmons obtained the interpretation of a wolf with young, Swanton was told that the design represented a young raven (ibid.:369). For a third, Emmons reported a brown bear and Swanton a halibut (ibid.:372). For another, Emmons reported an osprey or thunderbird, Swanton a beaver (ibid.:354). "The reason for this discrepancy," writes Boas (ibid.:387), "is quite obvious." He explains that the two informants confused "two wing-feather designs which separated the wide mouth" as, alternatively, a beak with nostrils and as beaver incisors (ibid.:388). The "ambiguity" or "vagueness" of the interpretations reported above for the second robe, he writes (ibid.:389), are "also easily intelligible." "The figure which was explained to Lieutenant Emmons as a female wolf, to Dr. Swanton as a raven, lacks all the traits which would definitely symbolize any particular animal; and the uncertainty due to this fact is expressed also by the statement made to Lieutenant Emmons, that the lower portion of the animal represents a hawk." While this last sentence seems to contradict his general point, Boas is clearly attempting to excise ambiguity

by over-riding and correcting Native interpretations from his, presumably, superior understanding. What he saw as Native errors were either dismissed as "fancy," or as due "presumably" to "the totemic affiliation of the owner" (Boas 1955 [1927]:216).

Boas was able to dismiss or reconcile conflicting Native interpretations of Northwest Coast iconography, such as those quoted above, because he firmly believed that each image was that of a natural animal, identifiable by what he called "recognized symbols," e.g., frog's wide toothless mouth,[6] flat nose, and lack of a tail, beaver's chewing stick and cross-hatched tail, etc.[7]

> ...the fundamental rule underlying the art is that the characteristic parts of the animals **must** be shown. Thus a beaver, which is characterized by the large incisors and by the tail, **must** contain these elements, no matter how the rest of the body may be treated. The killerwhale **must** show the large dorsal fin, no matter how the rest of the body may be presented (Boas 1940:539; italics in the original).

He also recognized composite sea monsters and snags according to similarly recognized symbols (see the frequently reproduced list of ten animals and two monsters in Boas 1955 [1927]:202). "Whatever the form may be, he writes (1955 [1927]:217), "so long as the recognized symbols are present, its identity is established" (1955 [1927]:217). "It appears," he writes (1955 [1927]:280), "that what we have called for the sake of convenience dissection and distortion of animal forms, is, in many cases, a fitting of animal motives into fixed ornamental patterns." The ubiquity and persistence of Boas's interpretation and the extent of his influence is such that one would look long and hard for a text written or a lecture given on Northwest Coast art that does not reproduce this argument (Jonaitis, in press).

In 1965, University of Washington art historian Bill Holm continued the Boasian project by publishing *Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form*, known internationally as one of the few classic studies of Native art and known locally as "the Bible" (because of its usefulness to artists learning the forms). Like Boas's earlier study, Holm's is based on a study of museum pieces. His analysis explicates the "rules" of northern Northwest Coast painting and defines three categories of representations (an elaboration of Boas's "fixed ornamental patterns" referred to above): **configurative**, in which an animal is depicted in an undistorted or essentially naturalistic profile; **expansive**, in which an animal's form is distorted and its body parts are reduced to salient identifying characteristics [Boas's "recognized symbols"]; and **distributive**, defined as designs in which the "parts of the represented animal are so arranged as completely to fill the given space, consequently destroying any recognizable silhouette and ignoring natural anatomical relationships" (Holm 1965:13).

It is important to note that Holm's definition, like Boas's, predicates a relationship between the image and a natural animal, even when this cannot be visually confirmed: "Though it may represent a particular animal, the requirements of space-filling have so distorted it that it is difficult or impossible to identify the abstracted animal or the exact symbolism of its parts" (loc. cit.). This, of course, does not prevent "expert" readings in which the identity of a hidden animal is revealed. Macnair, Hoover, and Neary (1980:34), for example, assert that "with an understanding of the principles of form, even the most confusing designs can be dissected and their prototypes identified."

Accordingly, a century of articles, books, and exhibition catalogues have been presented in which scholars reveal the specific animals both **present** and **hidden** from non-expert eyes. This has the effect of enhancing both the expertise of the scholar and the "genius" of the artist, in that a distributive northern design

> epitomizes the intellect of the Northwest Coast artist. Confronted by seemingly limiting rules, he is able to challenge and manipulate them in a manner that nonetheless maintains their integrity. Surely this is a mark of genius" (Macnair, Hoover, Neary 1980:35).

The thinking I am reviewing lies, as Johannes Fabian (1990:753-754) argues, at the heart of the Platonic or representationist tradition of Western thought (see also Caputo 1987:40 on the hermeneutics of suspicion):

> ...the idea of representation implies the prior assumption of a **difference** between reality and its "doubles." Things are paired with images, concepts, or symbols, acts with norms, events with structures. Traditionally, the problem with representations has been their "accuracy," the degree of fit between reality and its representations in the mind (Fabian 1990:753-754).

That is, the Boasian Northwest Coast art discourse assumes that Native images are in-accurate attempts to re-present or double the reality of the natural world. The work of the analyst is to correct

for what are believed to be distortions of realistic animal forms caused by stylization and space-filling requirements.[8]

Holm's (1990:604) recent summary of Boasian theory links the "needs" for crest [animal] representations — "the principal forces in the development of the remarkably sophisticated arts of the northern province"—to a "rigidly organized... hierarchy" of social relationships. That is, the "meanings" of animal representations are that they herald or identify social groups. "It is as though," wrote Boas (1955 [1927]:280), "the heraldic idea had taken hold of the whole of life and had permeated it with the feeling that social standing must be expressed at every step by heraldry which, however, is not confined to space forms alone but extends over literary, musical and dramatic expression." Boas's (1955 [1927]:350) reduction of the complexities of Native arts to a singular and foundational idea or pattern is required both by his general theoretical agenda and by his more specific theory of "expressionistic art":

> [The] expressionistic element... is common to many forms of primitive art. It is effective because **in the mind of the tribes certain forms are symbols of a limited range of ideas**. The firmer the association between a form and a definite idea, the more clearly stands out the expressionistic character of the art. This is true in the graphic and plastic arts as well as in music. In the former a geometrical form, in the latter a sound cluster, a particular type of musical phrasing, if associated with a definite meaning, evokes definite emotions or even concepts. **A study of these conditions shows also that a uniform reaction to form is indispensable [sic] for the effectiveness of an expressionistic art**, a condition which is not fulfilled in our own modern society.... (Boas 1955 [1927]:350-351, italics added).

Boas is obviously not using the word "expressionistic" in the way of moderns, but in a way termed "naive expressionism" by the British art historian E.H. Gombrich (1984:44). Naive expressionism is, he explains (loc. cit.), "the type of diagnosis beloved of Ruskin and other expressionistic writers down to our own century [and]... only valid on the assumption that the conventions offered by a period [or a culture] reflect the collective mind exactly in the way the expressive movements of the individual express his psychic dispositions" (ibid.: 44-45).[9]

The notion of a "uniform reaction to form" that underlies the Boasian paradigm for Northwest Coast art is surely contradicted by every field worker's experience of, to use Darnell's (1992:43) words again, "the lack, among most Native Americans, of a cultural canon which could, or at least would, label any particular integration of cultural knowledge as invalid...." It is relevant here to point out that the Boasian analysis of northern Northwest Coast art not only assumes a firm cultural canon in the "mind of the tribes," but one that operates from Vancouver Island north to southeastern Alaska. "It is difficult to understand," writes Holm (1965:19), referring to the stylistics of this canon, "how these Indian artists, scattered among the inlets of the rugged northern coast, mastered the complexities of the design system to such a degree that only an occasional piece in the vast museum collections of today deviates from that system. Yet almost every specimen is unique, further attesting to the virtuosity of the native artists, who were able to achieve originality within the framework of rigidly observed rules." That Boas (1955 [1927]:212) held a similarly canonical notion regarding iconography can be seen, for example, in his use of Charles Edenshaw, whom he identified as "the best carver and painter among the Haidas," to identify representations from the Kwakwa'kawakw, Tlingit, and Tsimshian. Not that he always agreed with Edenshaw's interpretations, of course, sometimes referring to them as "entirely fanciful" (1955 [1927]:275), "doubt[ful]" (1955 [1927]:198) and "contradicted" (1955 [1927]:201) by other evidence.

It is also significant to my argument that in the whole of his study of Northwest Coast art, Boas ignores both the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) and the Coast Salish. He does refer to the design of a whaling scene on a Nuu-cha-nulth basketry hat as a "rather clumpsy" [sic] attempt to represent perspective" (1955 [1927]:78), and uses a series of whalebone clubs to "prove the existence of a fixed art style in the region, representative, but differing in character from the style of the Northwest Coast... although in many cases the outlines are so crude that the elements of the composition are recognized with difficulty only" (ibid.:286). Crude and clumpsy and, as Wardwell (1978:15) and others later echoed, not **real** Northwest Coast art. The enduring consequences of Boas' judgment have been that Nuu-chah-nulth and Coast Salish objects are seldom studied or exhibited. Why? Because Nuu-chah-nulth and Coast Salish arts do not fit the Boasian model of natural species used as heraldic emblems of social groups. Indeed, only the arts of the northern, matrilineal societies—Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Haisla, Heiltsuk—and the "late exuberant development" of the northern "symbolic"

style among the Kwakwaka'wakw (Southern Kwakiutl) [and the Nuxalk (Bella Coola)] qualify in his terms as Northwest Coast art. In terms of the argument I develop in this essay, however, the excluded arts of the southern province can be seen as conceptually much closer to the more valorized arts of the northern Northwest Coast than the Boasian model allows. Wayne Suttles (1976:69), for example, writes that representations of vision experiences in Coast Salish art are expected to be "vague, ambiguous or covert." Nuu-chah-nulth historian Ron Hamilton (1994) told me that their so-called Thunderbird, much like the Tsimshian supernatural birds to be described below, fragments into 25 distinct entities associated with each tribe. I do not, however, claim that the Tsimshian example can be extrapolated to the entire coast; it should be taken heuristically as a caution **against** generalizations. Cultural phenomenon of this complexity are local, specific to place, and should be investigated as such.

An Alternative Paradigm

Fortunately, there is another and extensive body of evidence from which to challenge the Boasian discourse. It is contained in the texts collected by Marius Barbeau and William Beynon during 42 years of fieldwork among the Tsimshian-speaking peoples of the Nass and Skeena Rivers, and the islands and inlets to the south (Duff 1964, Halpin 1978, Preston 1976). They are preserved in the Salle Barbeau at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and have been indexed by John Cove (1985).

Boas's own work with Tsimshian-speaking peoples was limited.[10] As best as I can determine, it began in Victoria in 1886 when he worked with a Coast Tsimshian from Metlakatla. The man's name was Mathew (Rohner 1969:21-25) or Matthias (Boas 1902:69), and Boas elicited texts from him for about five days before the man failed to return for an appointment. Boas later made three short field trips into Tsimshian territory: to Port Essington (Coast Tsimshian) in 1888 (8 days); to Kincolith (Nishga) in 1894 (30 days); and again to Port Essington in 1897 (15 days). On the 1894 trip, he collected Tsetsaut as well as Nishga texts, and he spent a good part of the 1897 trip working with Haida artist Charles Edenshaw. The actual time spent collecting Tsimshian data, then, was only a part of the seven weeks he spent in Tsimshian territory.

There is no evidence that Boas ever met Henry Tate, who sent him the texts that formed the bulk of his *Tsimshian Texts* (1912) and *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916). Tate began sending texts to Boas at Columbia in 1903 and continued until his death in 1914 (Maud 1988). Nor is there any indication that Boas trained Tate in phonetic transcription (as been assumed, for example, by Harris, 1968:302). Tate wrote Coast Tsimshian in the alphabet devised by Bishop Ridley of Metlakatla for translating the gospels. He wrote the materials he sent to Boas in English first, and then translated them into Coast Tsimshian (Maud 1988:158). Boas had the first set of Tate narratives that he published in 1912 read to him in New York by Archie Dundas of New Metlakatla (Alaska), then attending the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, while Boas rewrote them phonetically; "a practice," as Ralph Maud writes, "fraught with dangers" to the integrity of the Tate texts. Although space precludes reproducing his argument here, Maud (1988:159) also reveals a number of instances where "Boas's intrusive role in the collaboration crucially affected the results in certain ways."

By contrast, Marius Barbeau spent eight field seasons (1914-15, 1920-21, 1924, 1926, 1927, 1929, 1939 and 1947), working in partnership with William Beynon, a native speaker of Coast Tsimshian, whom Barbeau trained as an interpreter and ethnographer. The two spent time in "virtually all of the Tsimshian[-speaking] villages, working with several dozens of informants" (Duff 1964:66). For each of the 26 groups, they obtained information on from 13 to 46 Houses (matrilineages) in the village, their crests, territories, personal names, and *adaawk*, or traditional histories. "When Dr. Barbeau has on occasion referred to the census-like completeness of these notes," writes Wilson Duff (1964:67), "he has not at all exaggerated."

In a seldom cited review of Boas's *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916), written from galley proofs during his first field season at Port Simpson (1914-1915), Barbeau (1917:561) took Boas to task for his reliance on Henry Tate, who collected the texts that Boas (1916:31) believed constituted "the bulk of the important traditions of the Tsimshian," and for publishing crest lists that were "inaccurate, and never indicate their owners." The fact of the matter, according to Barbeau, was that the Tate/Boas collection consisted of those narratives, notably the Raven Cycle, that were of the least importance to the Tsimshian. Boas published only a dozen or so *adaawk*, the family-owned narratives that told of migrations and supernatural encounters during which crests

were acquired, and failed to appreciate their importance (see below). Since the *adaawk* number in the many dozens and form the bulk of the materials collected by Barbeau and Beynon, it is indeed a sobering thought that their significance was missed by Boas, the great collector and publisher of texts, and it is, I think, worthwhile quoting Barbeau's (1917:553) explanation in full:

> Why did Tate collect general myths and tales rather than local or special ones? The reasons for this are fairly clear. The narratives of the first type are the property of all; any informant may know and repeat them. Quite on the contrary, the second belong restrictively to a clan, a house or a chief. Not even the breakdown of the old order of things has yet abolished the deeply seated jealousy of the natives as to what formerly was their exclusive privilege. No native, especially in the presence of another, will related the tradition that concerns another; it would be, to say the least, a breach of etiquette. We have noticed, moreover, that these are little known, except by hearsay, to outsiders. Tate, who shared in his compatriots' corrosive diffidence, does not seem to have overcome these barriers. He is not likely to have consulted many outside of his own family members. Hardly any of our twenty-five representative informants had been utilized by him. The fact that he himself belonged to the lower class... may not have made him *persona grata* with most of the chiefs—royal or other.

As a result of Tate's not having collected and properly identified the *adaawk*, Boas missed the significance of the crest/myth relationship, which Barbeau (1917:560) described succinctly in that same review:

> So exclusive and restrictive was the ownership of any valuable crest, among the Tsimshian, that not a single one really was the common property of a collectivity. Hardly any crest, except a very low one, had replicas and could be used by more than one person at a time, each being known singly under a special name.... A crest without a myth to explain its origin and its connection with the owner was an impossibility; and such a myth was in the patrimony of a clan [lineage] or a family.... **The virtual rule is: one crest, one owner** (emphasis added).

Boas's (1916:527) statement that "[o]wing to the small number of subgroups and the similarity of their crests, there are only a few crests that are not the common property of the whole exogamic group" could not be more in error (see also Cove 1987:112-125).

The Crest/Adaawk/Territory Relationship

In 1916 (p. 565), Boas defined the *adaawk* as "myths," which he defined as "pertain[ing] to a period when the world was different from what it is now" and "when animals appeared in human form," and claimed that they "formed a unit in the mind of the Tsimshian." He distinguished them from *ma'lEsk* or tales, which he defined as entirely historical in character, although sometimes containing supernatural elements. Barbeau (1916:770) questions this dualistic distinction, and suggests that, while many categories of stories are discernible, a more useful distinction is between general stories that "drift from tribe to tribe" and the myths of origin of a clan, a crest, or the power of a chief that have local importance. Recent ethnographers among Tsimshian-speaking peoples (Cove 1987, Seguin 1985) have completely supported Barbeau on this point. But, more importantly, so have Native people themselves.

In 1987, 51 hereditary chiefs representing 6,000 people organized into 133 Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Houses brought legal action in the BC Supreme Court against the provincial government, claiming ownership of their territories in the Upper Skeena and Bulkley river valleys (some 54,000 square kilometres of crown land). The case was unique in the nature of the evidence presented: portions of Gitksan *adaawk* and Wet'suwet'en *kungax* ('trails of song') were told in court by the chiefs themselves (Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw 1989, Cassidy 1992, Miller 1992, Monet and Skanu'u 1992).

The Barbeau/Beynon field notes were used by researchers for the Gitksan (e.g., Susan Marsden in Monet and Skandu'u 1992:139, Cove 1987:3), although Chief Tenimgyet of Kitwancool referred to these as containing the "short forms" of the *adaawk* (ibid.:78). Cove (1987:44) also quotes one of Beynon's informants as saying that what he had just told would normally take a full day to narrate. What is most important here, however, is that the living carriers of the oral tradition **publicly enacted *adaawk*** in a courtroom (see Cruikshank 1992), affirming the *adaawk*/crest/territory relationship, especially as it is expressed by the erection of totem poles. Gyolugyet, Lax Gibuu Chief of Guldo Village (quoted in Monet and Skandu'u 1992:28) discussed *adaawk* in court as follows:

> *Adaawk* in Gitksan language is a powerful word describing what the House stands for, what the chief stands for, what the territory stands for is

> the *adaawk*. It's not a story, it's just how people travelled is the *adaawk*. And it's the most important thing in Gitksan is to have an *adaawk*. Without *adaawk* you can't very well say you are a chief or you own a territory. It has to come first, the *adaawk*. Names come after, songs come after, crests come after it and the territory that's held, fishing places, all those come into one: that's the *adaawk*. It's not a story, it's *adaawk* to the Gitksan people.

In 1920 Barbeau (quoted in Cove 1987:49) recorded a similar statement from John Brown of Kispiox:

> A group that could not tell their traditions would be ridiculed with the remark, "What is your 'history'?". And if you could not give it, you were laughed at. "What is your grandfather's name? And where is your crest? How do you know of your past, where you have lived? You have no grandfather. You cannot speak to me, because I have one. You have no ancestral home. You are like a wild animal, you have no abode". Grandfather and tradition are practically the same thing.

The telling of the *adaawk* at a potlatch validates the right to claim and display the crests—and claim the lands—associated with it. In the shorthand of ritual action, crests become visual symbols of the economic resources of the group. This is what the people of Kitwancool meant when they wrote in their history (in Duff 1959:37) "when a clan raises a totem pole and puts their rightful crests on the pole, it means a great deal to them, as every pole has a hunting-ground."

This is a fact of a different order than the function ascribed to crests in the Boasian discourse, which is that crests express the social identity of their owners. To be sure, they do. By displaying his or her crests, an owner expresses clan affiliation, in some cases lineage membership, and, among the Coast Tsimshian, offers clues to rank (see Halpin 1973, 1978). But it must be pointed out that these are qualities of social position already known to his/her fellow actors. They do not need to "read" a pole or a crest robe in order to know how to act towards its owner.

Nor were crest items worn in everyday social interaction (viz., the quotation by Boas above that "social standing must be expressed at every step by heraldry"). Sapir (1915:6) reports for the Nishga that "one cannot even pay a neighbour a visit and wear a garment decorated with a minor crest without justifying the use of such regalia by the expenditure of property at the house visited." Some thirty years ago, Edmund Leach (1965:15-16) pointed out that "neglect of formal structure is essential if ordinary social activities are to be pursued at all." Crest display on the Northwest Coast occurs during the potlatch context and is about property rights.

Nor is the crest/animal relationship as simple as the Boasian discourse would have it. Two years after Boas published *Primitive Art*, Barbeau published *Totem Poles of the Gitksan* (1929), an underappreciated work based upon direct ethnographic inquiry of the names of some 525 figures on 109 totem poles in the Gitksan villages of the upper Skeena River. Here, in the only remaining "forest of totem poles" to survive into the 1920s, far from the urban museums in New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Ottawa, Victoria, Toronto, and Chicago, where the totemic code of the Northwest Coast was being systematized under Boas's leadership, Barbeau and Beynon recorded the "genuine, difficult, and confusing" memories of the people who had seen these monuments erected, and heard the *adaawk* recited when the poles were erected in the period 1870-1900. Far from the natural species used as crests in the Boasian model, the crests recorded and described by Barbeau and Beynon are mementos of ambiguous and composite **supernatural** beings. Indeed, it is the momentary eruption of the extraordinary that marks an experience as supernatural and worth adopting as a crest. Various summary lists of the crest figures on Gitksan totem poles (Barbeau 1929:158-191) reveal their complexities and ambiguities. There are, for example, 51 crests representing "Objects, Devices, Masks, and Charms" and another 74 representing "Human-like Beings or Spirits" (Barbeau 1929:171). No wonder Bill Holm (1990 : 616) refers in the Smithsonian's new *Handbook* to "the bewildering array of Tsimshian crests," meaning, of course, that Tsimshian crests are difficult to systematize, they don't fit the Boasian model.

In 1973, I completed a major study of some 750 named Tsimshian crests, based upon the Barbeau/Beynon materials, augmented by examination of some 1600 Tsimshian pieces and their associated documentation in museum collections (Halpin, 1973, 1984). In their simplest manifestation, that of the four pairs of animals (grizzly and killerwhale, frog and raven, eagle and beaver, black bear and wolf) that distinguish four matrilineal clans, Tsimshian crests operate as the unambiguous social identifiers of the Boasian model. Barbeau (1917:560) called

these "low crests"; Cove (1987:123) refers to them as "generic crests." Beyond these, however, frogs and bears sprout wings, killerwhales migrate to inland lakes, wolves and ravens turn white, eagles and grizzlies merge into thunderbirds, humans spring up everywhere, and the entire "system" transforms into one of hybrid and ambiguous creatures. I could only discover one social feature that distinguished the eight primary animal crests from the more complex bestiary to which they seem to give rise: the eight could be claimed and represented by any person born into the appropriate clan; all the rest required a legitimating family or *adaawk* story detailing their acquisition. It is this associated family narrative, which can only be told by authorized family members, that renders ambiguous images meaningful. Thus, with the exception of the primary animal crests that can be represented without authorizing narratives, crests in the north, like their related images in the south, are based upon specific encounters, by oneself or one's ancestor, with supernatural beings. In the north, such encounters more often occurred in the past; among the Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth, they continue to this day.

Tsimshian composite crests were most often described as bird-like creatures, often with recurved beaks (beaks that turn down and, usually, point into a mammalian mouth), which were subject to transformation into still other forms, such as sea monsters and humanlike creatures. Significantly, Barbeau and Beynon's informants had difficulty providing English glosses for the Native names of these crests, resorting to such terms as "extinct," "hawklike," or "like an eagle, but not an eagle," indicating a lack of natural prototypes. Some examples of monster crests (and there are many others) include the *gibelk*, said variously by their informants[11] to be a large monster with a head like an eagle and a large fin protruding from its back, also said to have wings and human forms around its face, also said to be related to the supernatural mosquito, also said to resemble a human being. The *semgik*, or "real" mosquito, was also said to be a winged grizzly, a woodpecker, a thunderbird, and to have a long, straight beak. The *xskemsem* was said to be a bird like an eagle but with a more recurved beak, also said to be an extinct bird like an eagle, also said to be a hawk. The *tsagaxtlo* was said to be a bird with a recurved beak, with characteristics of a thunderbird, also said to be a human being with a long, hooked, recurved nose, also said to be a human being with a large belly and a sharp or glasslike nose. The *laxom* was said to be a supernatural bird with a long, straight beak, also a human being with a long nose, also a human being with a recurved beak. The *hagwelox* was described as a sea monster, usually a killerwhale but also having aspects of grizzly; another was said to be a large box full of humans, with a fin, that swam as though alive. The *winil* was described as a bird with a long, recurved beak. Most of these crests were claimed by families in more than one clan.

Some examples of the narratives told about such crests reveal their ambiguity. The Gitsiis crest of the *asewelget*, for example, came from the experience of some people in the house of *Gwishayaax* who went to the head of Work Channel to hunt mountain goats. "One day they heard a noise as of thunder from the river, and saw a winged grizzly bear with human beings under each wing and on its chest. It flew close to them and the men decided to take it as a crest" (H. Wallace to Beynon, 1915). The crest Supernatural Raven (*naxnogemgax*) came from the experience of some other Gitsiis of the house of *Gaxgat* as they were preparing to hunt seals. "A large bright flew down and said, 'I want offerings of seals, burn it that I may eat it." They did so, and the bird cawed like a raven. As it flew off they saw live human beings under its wings. They at once returned and adopted it as a crest" (ibid.). In a specific version of a widely told story, the crests of *laxom* (a huge bird), rainbow, sun, and thunder[bird] owned by two related Gitlaan (*'Anaanax* and *Niishaboot*) houses were given to the children of a woman taken in marriage by the son of the sun when the children returned to earth. Far from the natural species said to be used as crests in the Boasian model, these crests are mementos of **supernatural** experiences (Cove 1987).

Complex crests are not only ambiguous and unstable in description, but in representation. For example, the Den of Bear crests, owned by Semedik, an Eagle Chief at Kitwanga on the upper Skeena River, is described in the lists as a hole in a totem pole through which guests entered; also as a person on a totem pole with a hole in its stomach to represent the entrance. There is a photograph of Semedik wearing this crest on a robe, where it was represented as a human-like being with bear paws for hands and feet and a hole in its stomach (Halpin 1973:Plate 80). Without knowing that an Eagle chief owned this crest, one would assume it to belong to a clan using the black bear or grizzly as a primary crest. Another robe, owned by the Eagle Chief Manesk of Gitlaxdamiks on the Nass River, also shows a human being with a hole in its stomach (Halpin 1973:Plate 83).

This time, however, the crest represented is the Person of Glacier.

Chilkat robes, chief's chests, boxes, masks, coppers, and rattles were **not** listed as crests by Barbeau's and Beynon's informants.[12] (The *hagwelox* crest mentioned above, however, was described as a living box.) Instead, crest representations were a limited category, restricted primarily to architectural features, including housefront paintings and totem poles, potlatch costumes, including robes and headdresses, and large ladles used at feasts. This is a far cry from Boas's (1955 [1927]:280) statement that "[i]t is as though the heraldic idea had taken hold of the whole life and had permeated it with the feeling that social standing must be expressed at every step..." Finally, the great number of human images used in composite crests also deserves comment, since Boas (ibid.:217) and his followers assume that when an animal symbol is applied in a human context, it is "not intended to represent a human being." That is, the human element is assumed to have no signification.

The above, I hope, renders somewhat ridiculous the matter of identifying animal representations, which a reading of Boas (1955 [1927]) suggests is the basic task of analysis, and which is considered by Holm (Holm and Reid 1976:108) to be "the most dangerous game in Northwest Coast art.... No one has ever successfully done it." Yet he and others **do** keep trying.[13] Is it that accepting ambiguity itself as canonical would be far more dangerous to the symbolic order upon which the discourse, though not the art itself, is based?

Conclusion

What Boas did in 1897 was to create a model or a system of rules about Northwest Coast art that permitted him and successive generations of anthropologists to write and lecture about it **without connecting it to the family stories told about it in the Native context**. I hope to have demonstrated that by artificially separating Northwest Coast art from its stories, by creating a system of rules for the art so that it could be interpreted without reference to these stories, Boas and the anthropologists who followed him, and they are many, seriously misunderstood it. Furthermore, by separating art from its stories, Boas and his followers separated art from the community context which gave it meaning and life, and, finally, obscured the vital connection between art and the land which, whether intentional or not, was part of the colonial enterprise of separating Natives from their lands.

The purpose of this paper has perhaps been accomplished. It was to call into question the representationist reading of Northwest Coast art. The meanings of art are contextual and communicate with those who are co-cultural with its creators. As scholars, we can grasp those meanings to the extent that we grasp that context. Our ability to be 'experts' on Northwest Coast art is necessarily considerably diminished under this mandate, for it can no longer be a function of learning and applying simple rules to complex phenomena.

Ackowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 1992 at the University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, the Aboriginal Art Symposium, Port Edward and the UAAC / NASAC joint meetings, Victoria. I am grateful to Martin Silverman for drawing Boas's 1911 "Introduction" to the *Handbook of North American Indian Languages* to my attention, to Carole Farber for helping me at the critical moment to draw the argument together, and to the members of the "Feminist Camp" at the Margaret Seguin-Anderson's house in Prince George for giving me the courage to present it in public for the first time. I am also grateful to the two readers for this journal, whose expert and cogent advice is, for the most part, heeded here.

Notes

1. Darnell (1992:45) also argues that Boas was a theorist.

2. This argument also pervades Boas's 1911 [1963] *The Mind of Primitive Man*, but had disappeared from the articles he selected for reprinting in *Race, Language and Culture* (1940), suggesting that he changed his mind. Harris (1968:280-281) argues that "[i]t was at some point during the decade of the 1920s that Boas finally abandoned the heritage of the nineteenth-century search for developmental uniformities" and "[i]t was during the twenties that Boas most famous female students received their training and were sent out with his encouragement to probe the neglected relationship between the individual and culture."

3. And, as one of my readers pointed out, Benjamin Lee Whorf's notion of transcending the patterns of habitual thought grows from the same context.

4. Darnell 1992:44 summarizes Boas's theorical position.

5. Emmons, presumably, collected interpretations along with the robes; Swanton's were elicited from "the Indians of Sitka" from photographs provided by Franz Boas.

6. Two of my favourite objects in the UBC Museum of Anthropology are Heiltsuk bowls in the shape of frogs with with teeth (Catalogue numbers A404 and and A405). They were collected at Bella Bella around the turn of the century by Frank Burnett.

7. The Boas system for animal identifications was in place by 1897, when he published it in his "The Decorative Art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast." There he writes (1897:123)

> It has been shown that the motives of the decorative art of many peoples developed largely from representations of animals. In the course of time, forms that were originally realistic became more and more sketchy, and more and more distorted. Details, even large portions, of the subject to be represented, were omitted, until finally the designs attained a purely geometric character.
>
> The decorative art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast agree with this oft-observed phenomenon in that its subjects are almost exclusively animals. It differs from the other arts in that the process of conventionalizing has not led to the development of geometric designs, but that the parts of the animal body may still be recognized as such. The body of the animal, however, undergoes very fundamental changes in the arrangement and size of its parts. In the following paper I shall describe the characteristics of these changes, and discuss the mental attitude of the artist which led to their development.

8. Also relevant here are the feminist arguments that 19th century realism in art was ideologically related to positivism, e.g., "...the confining of the artist to the accurate observation and notation of empirical phenomenon..." (Nochlin 1971:43), and the 'common sense' attitude that painting and model are identical (Bal 1993:381).

9. Compare Richard Handler's (1990:178) discussion of Ruth Benedict's (1932:24) characterization of cultures as "individual psychology thrown large upon the screen, given gigantic proportions and a long time span."

10. In a masterful understatement, Barbeau (1917) writes in his review of *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916) that "[t]he phonetic signs and transcriptions used by Dr. Boas in representing Tsimshian sounds and words show an astonishing grasp of the language, especially for one who has had little direct contact with the natives.

11. These descriptions are taken from the Barbeau/Beynon files maintained in the Salle Barbeau at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and indexed by Cove (1985). The data are summarized in Halpin (1973).

12. With few exceptions. For example, a realistic, untypical Chilkat showing killerwhales flanking a bear is in the Canadian Museum of Civilization. It was a copy of a housefront painting and was used as a crest; an almost identical robe and its pattern board are shown in Boas, 1955, Figure 584 a and b.

13. It should be mentioned that other writers on Northwest Coast art, including Wilson Duff, Claude Levi-Strauss, George MacDonald, and Aldona Jonaitis, constructed various kinds of structuralist arguments in the 1970s and 1980s that go far beyond animal identifications, and that a new generation of British Columbia scholars, including Victoria Wyatt, Marcia Crosby, and Ron Hawker, are once again redefining the discourse. But elsewhere in the world the Boasian paradigm is still secure, especially now that the structuralist movement has waned.

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