

Notes On The Snanaimuq

The Anthropology of Northwest Coast Oral Traditions

Brian Thom

Abstract. This paper is a critical history of anthropological research on the oral traditions of the cultures of the Northwest Coast of North America, where much influential work has been done using the vast text collections compiled by Boas and his collaborators. The paper reviews the development and legacy of the Boas collection and analyses of Northwest Coast texts. In addition the paper analyzes responses to this body of work by functionalists who have looked to Northwest Coast myth as a way of understanding property, and responses by structuralists who have sought ways of understanding underlying meanings in these traditions. Recent contributions have focused on a more literary analysis of oral traditions. Finally, suggestions are made as to some future avenues for future study of Northwest Coast oral traditions.

Oral Traditions and Theoretical Approaches to Discourse

For Anthropologists working in Native North America, the verbal, textual, performed, and artistic discourses of the people that we study are the central, if not the defining elements of how we come to understand and describe other cultural systems. Anthropologists studying the cultures of Native North America have built an academic tradition by discussing their positions in these discourses and their continuing efforts to reposition and recontextualize themselves within them. Anthropologists have written, presented, testified, exhibited, and sometimes even acted out our ever-changing understandings of the discourses of the communities in which we work. The message we have tried to express has changed since Boas collected his first Native text, but the objects of our study, Native discourses on myth, legend, folklore, history, life history, and (auto-) biography, have remained a core focus for the production of meaning and understanding within our discipline.

This paper presents a critical history of anthropological writing about Native Northwest Coast oral traditions. Emphases and perspectives have changed throughout this rich history of study, ranging from Boas' expansive collection of texts to studies of the social function of oral traditions, to interest in symbol, structure and meaning of myths, to a more literary interest in the ethnography of speaking. Though not reviewed here in detail, oral traditions of Northwest Coast Native people have also been at the core of the current political and legal debates in Canada over aboriginal title and rights (Thom 2001).

The current theoretical position of many contemporary Americanist anthropologists is relevant to the study of Northwest Coast oral traditions. This position holds that culture is a system of symbols, and that underlying culture is a complex interplay of basically inseparable elements of language, thought, and reality (Valentine and Darnell 1999:6). By focusing on one kind of Native discourse—oral traditions—a rich set of texts is generated, which can be studied to learn some-

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