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Anthropological Studies of Native American Place Naming

By Thomas F. Thornton

Throughout American history, indigenous place names on the land have drawn the attention of many curious observers, both amateur and professional. More than a century ago, the likes of Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, and Robert Louis Stevenson were waxing appreciatively over the rich and tuneful aboriginal names on the landscape (see Mencken 1937:525ff). And many a treatise has been written about the origins and meanings of Native American place names, especially those which, despite the enormous selective pressures working against them, have endured to become a part of official cartography.

The study of place names was also an important topic in American anthropology from its earliest beginnings (e.g., Schoolcraft 1844). Lately the study of Native place names has been enjoying a bit of a renaissance within the discipline. One of the most important contemporary scholars to turn his attention to place names is Keith Basso. It was he who a decade ago (Basso 1984a) brought light to the fact that, "The anthropological study of North American Indian place-name systems [had] fallen on hard times...a casualty of scholarly indifference, ethnographic neglect, and the apparent assumption that place name research has little bearing on topics of general interest and theoretical value." In the past decade Basso himself has authored several important papers, recently collected in a book (Basso 1996), dealing with the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of place-naming. In this paper I will trace the development of North American Indian place name studies in anthropology beginning with the work of Franz Boas and ending with a look at the work of Basso and others in recent years. Finally, I will suggest some further directions for research and analyze one recent, successful model of cooperative research on Tlingit place names in Southeast Alaska.

Place names are a particularly interesting aspect of culture because they intersect three fundamental domains of cultural analysis: language, thought, and the environment. As linguistic artifacts and distinct semantic domains in the lexicons of all the world's languages, place names tell us something not only about the structure and content of the physical environment itself but also how people perceive, conceptualize, classify, and utilize that environment. Even more fundamentally, as the work of Basso and others has shown, toponyms, both by themselves and in the context of narratives, songs, and everyday speech, provide valuable insights into the ways humans experience the world

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and appropriate images of the landscape to interpret and communicate their experiences. Thus, in addition to conveying a wealth of detail about the physical environment, place names also convey a great deal of information about the social environment.

The Influence of Boas

Franz Boas, the father American anthropology, deserves credit for making investigations of geographic nomenclature a priority and for defining high standards for such work. Boas began his career as a physicist and geographer before moving to ethnology. He displayed an early interest in the relationship between culture and the environment and helped to pioneer the study of cosmography. In an early paper, entitled "The Study of Geography," Boas expressed some of his views on the relationship between man and his environment that were to shape his approach to the study of culture. Concerned about the segmentation of geography into narrower technical fields, such as geology and meteorology, Boas argued for preserving a humanistic perspective in the discipline. In contrasting the hard scientific versus humanistic approaches to the study of geography, he drew an analogy between physical and historical methods of inquiry. The former, he noted, "claims that the ideal aim of science ought to be the discovery of general laws; the other maintains that it is the investigation of phenomena themselves." Boas (1887:139) positioned himself squarely in the humanistic camp and proceeded to define cosmography as a subfield of geography distinct from the physical sciences:

> While physical science arises from the logical and aesthetic demands of the human mind, cosmography has its source in the personal feeling of man towards the world, towards the phenomena surrounding him. We may call this an 'affective' impulse in contrast to the aesthetic impulse...

Boas maintained that by reducing the study of geography to its natural elements the geographer was missing the forest for the trees. At least as important as the physical elements of geography was the "subjective unity" of the whole of geographic phenomena as interpreted by different cultures. Boas also implied that an overemphasis on the physical sciences ran the risk of lapsing into environmental determinism, whereas the humanistic standpoint was more likely to recognize what he called "the mutual influence of the earth and its inhabitants upon each other." Cosmography, he concluded, "is closely related to the arts, as the way in which the mind is affected by phenomena forms an important branch of the study. It therefore requires a different treatment from that of the physical sciences" (1887:140). The dialectical approach that Boas

came to advocate in evaluating the relationship between human thought and geographic phenomena was an ethnographic one.

Boas' advocacy of cosmography and an ethnographic approach is reflected in his early studies of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay Eskimo (1901-07). Impressed by the depth and organization of environmental knowledge among these groups, he suggested that one of the most useful ways of understanding the "mental life" of indigenous peoples was to explore their geographic nomenclature. Ultimately ethnogeography and the study of place names became part of Boas' vision of anthropology, which was to reconstruct the important elements of culture from the inside out by gathering systematic data on all aspects of culture. He defined culture as:

> the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups. The mere enumeration of these various aspects of life, however, does not constitute culture. It is more, for its elements are not independent, they have a structure. (Boas 1938:159)

Boas' *Geographical Names of the Kwakiutl Indians* exemplifies his approach to the study of culture. In this work he attempts not only a comprehensive survey of Kwakiutl place names – some 2,500 toponyms – but also to assay their structure in relation to Kwakiutl language, culture, and environment. He arrived at the general conclusion that "geographical terminology does not depend solely upon cultural interests, but is also influenced by linguistic structure" (Boas 1934:14), affirming at least a weak formulation of what has become known as the Sapir-Whorf or linguistic relativity hypothesis. On the other hand, Boas found that once he came to understand that linguistic structure, he could often guess the names of topographical features, "unless it so happens that specific interests attached to the place interfere with descriptive nomenclature" (i.e., they refer to historic events or other non-physical or latent features of the landscape).[1] Why? It was not simply because the names followed certain syntactic patterns but also because most of them were precisely descriptive of the "form or appearance" of those geographical features they referenced (Boas 1934:10). These distinguishing features of form or appearance were readily apprehensible to Natives and non-Natives alike, and with some knowledge of the linguistic structure, their incorporation into place names became predictable.

Boasian Descendants

Many students of Boas also took an interest in geographic names, although in some cases with different aims in mind. For the pioneer anthropological linguist Edward Sapir, understanding the relationship between language and environment was another reason to explore the geographical nomenclatures of different cultures. In an important paper on the subject, entitled "Language and the Environment," Sapir argued for a stronger theory of linguistic relativity, noting that "the physical environment is reflected in language only in so far as it has been influenced by social factors" (1912:227). Sapir further argued that of all the dimensions of language, vocabulary, including place names, was most reflective of the "physical and social environment of its speakers." Like Boas he recognized that it was "not merely the fauna or topographical features of the country as such that are reflected, but rather the interest of the people in such environmental features." But his conclusions about the relationship between language and the environment were decidedly relativistic. He concluded that "apart from the reflection of the environment in the vocabulary there is nothing in the language itself that can be shown to be directly associated with the environment" (Sapir 1912:227). Whorf (see Carroll 1956) and others were later to make the case for the power of language to shape human views of the environment even more strongly than Sapir.

A few of Boas' disciples took a particular interest in Native American ethnogeography and place names. Those who pursued formal studies of Indian place names included Alfred Kroeber (1916), Samuel Barrett (1908), John Harrington (1916, n.d.), and Thomas Waterman (1920, 1922, n.d.a, n.d.b). To my knowledge, none of these individuals acknowledged the influence of Boas directly, although it seems clear that they were inspired by his work.[2] These anthropologists also cited additional reasons for undertaking the study of Indian place names other than to understand their "mental life" or the relationship between language and the environment.

Kroeber, for example, had a low tolerance for folk etymologies and poor scholarship on the subject, especially when it came to explaining the origins of California place names. In the introduction to his 1916 paper describing the sources and meanings of California Indian place names, he observed that:

> The origin of many place-names in California which are of Indian derivation is very imperfectly known, and has often been thoroughly misunderstood. There is no subject of information in which rumor and uncritical tradition hold fuller sway than in this field. The best literature dealing with this topic – and it is one of widespread interest – contains more errors than truths. (1916:31)

Kroeber also believed that place names were an important means of identifying

cultural sites, migrations, and land use patterns, and for distinguishing between the centers and peripheries of culture areas.[3] Among the many ethnographic tasks that Kroeber, along with Waterman, undertook with Ishi, the last of the Yahi, was to compile a list of place names in his language so that they could determine the cultural geography of Yahi land. Ishi knew hundreds of place names circumscribing the territory of his people and identifying the most important cultural sites within it.[4]

Harrington's survey of Tewa place names, breathtaking in scope and detail, is probably the most comprehensive single-volume study of any Indian ethnotoponymy. At the same time, however, it is almost purely descriptive, offering little analysis and few substantive conclusions about Tewa naming or place naming in general. Indeed, it is not altogether clear why Harrington undertook such a massive study of such a narrow topic. Harrington's other work, including research among the Eyak, Tlingit, and other Native American groups (n.d.), suggests that, like Boas, he had an abiding interest in geographic nomenclature. Apparently, so did the Tewa, for in his opening sentence Harrington remarks that, "The Tewa have a marked fondness for geographical conversation" (1916:94). This is an important observation that is widely applicable to indigenous peoples and, perhaps, reason enough to undertake a study of place names. Other provocative but tentative conclusions offered by Harrington included the following observations: due to the "large proportion of etymologically obscure place-names," the Tewa probably had inhabited their present region for a long time; individuals' place name inventories were closely correlated with their social group boundaries and immediate environments such that few names were known outside of these boundaries; and the arid and relatively unsettled region that the Tewa inhabited may have necessitated "abundance and preciseness" in their geographic nomenclature exceeding that of more diverse and settled environments (Harrington 1916:38, 94). While this last hypothesis has been indirectly challenged by Hunn (1994, see below), who finds a strong positive correlation between toponymic and population densities across cultures, Harrington's other hypotheses remain largely unexamined.

Even more than Kroeber and Harrington, Waterman had an intense and abiding interest in the study of Indian place names. Like Kroeber, Waterman was partly motivated by his distaste for existing scholarship on the subject. He was dissatisfied not only with the misinformation promulgated by amateur writers pursuing the "legendary" origins of place names, but also by the ease with which Indians' names were set aside in favor of the English toponyms. Waterman found most American place names to be unreflective and lacking in topographical content. He vented his frustration over these issues rather forcefully in an unpublished manuscript (n.d.a) on the subject of Indian names, complaining that:

> The way we have of ignoring the Indian place names and plastering on the map such atrocities as Brownsville (English and French),

> Hydaburg (American Indian and German) and silly names like Cloverdale and Bella Vista, from novels, mythology, poetry, and geography of the Old World and the New is to be deplored. There is some reason for the use of the names of great men, Columbus, Washington, Madison and (most popular of all for some reason) Franklin, but even this has been carried to extremes. The chief engineer of a railroad, an acquaintance of mine, was once sitting in a bunk house naming the stations of a railroad he was surveying. Running out of names his roving eye chanced to light on a package of breakfast food. Unhappy town which lacked a name at that moment, has been Ralston ever since. Such a way of naming places is certainly unsystematic and meaningless, indicating to the outside world merely that we have no ideas and certainly no place names of our own. The primitive names of every region always mean something, and there are countless thousands of them. Primitive geography is precisely characterized by a wealth, a redundancy of names.

In an obscure publication entitled "The Geographic Names Used by the Indians of the Pacific Coast," Waterman confessed his obsession with Native place names, noting that "Whenever sojourning among a tribe, I have endeavored to get every geographical name they knew, the 'meaning' of it, and the exact spot on the map to which it referred" (1922:175). These three requirements – recording the name, its meaning, and precise location – remain the essential hallmarks of toponymic investigation.

But Waterman made other observations about the study of place names that also bear repeating. First, he cautions that "Place names often come down from a hoary antiquity, and the original meaning is often not known to the latter-day people who live in the region"(1922:176). Imagine asking the average man on the street to expound on the origins of the name Boston, he asks his reader, suggesting that probably only one person in a thousand could tell you that it is derived from the town of Boston in Lincolnshire, England.

Second, Waterman emphasizes the extraordinary durability of place names which are "likely to persist even through migrations and conquests, when the spoken language shifts and one tongue is replaced by another." Thus, in Southeast Alaska (Waterman n.d.b, Thornton 1995a), we find that Tlingit place names persist in what is now Kaigani Haida and Tsimshian territory to the south and Eyak and Chugach Eskimo names endure in what is now Yakutat Tlingit territory to the north. Their durability, according to Waterman, ensured that place names would remain "puzzles and conundrums for new generations" (1922:176).

This leads to a third relevant observation by Waterman concerning the vulnerability of place names to "folk etymologies" or what he also termed "deceptive explanations." While Kroeber was bothered by the zany folk etymolo-

gies of Indian names supplied by whites, Waterman understood this to be a universal problem. He recognized that there was a "psychological factor" motivating folk etymologizing, namely that when people are invited to engage in a search for meaning, they are prone to finding explanations that seem credible, regardless of their basis in fact. If these etymologies are plausible, they tend to replace the more obscure interpretations of names simply because they are more meaningful, or at least more entertaining. While he assured his reader that "the greatest care has been taken to get the etymologies as accurately as possible," Waterman also admonished that folk etymologies surely existed in his own notes on Indian names (1922:177).

Drawing on his studies of place naming practices of Indians of the Pacific Coast from the Yurok in California to the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska, Waterman highlighted a number of contrasts between Native and non-Native toponymies. To begin with, he was impressed with the density of Indian names on the landscape, commenting that the Indians were "extraordinarily industrious in applying and inventing names for places." The names were so dense, he complained, that his U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps could not accommodate them. He estimated that on Puget Sound alone there were in excess of 10,000 place names, of which he claimed to have recorded about half (although only a few hundred appear in his 1922 article). The other half had either been forgotten or otherwise become extinct. Waterman notes that the phrase "The old people could have told you all" was a familiar refrain. This sentiment is one still often conveyed to ethnogeographic investigators.

However, it was not only that the Indians were more prolific in their naming, but also more selective. Waterman observed that "A special name will often be given to a rock no larger than a kitchen table while, on the other hand, what we consider the large and important features of a region's geography have no names at all" (1922:178). "Persistent inquiry among the Indians concerning romantic-looking peaks, towering up against the sky arouses no reaction except boredom," he confessed (n.d.a:17). Mountain ranges, rivers, islands, and bays might remain nameless, although dozens, even hundreds of place names might be applied to portions of these features. For example, Yuroks gave Waterman twelve names for places on the slopes of a single mountain but no name for the mountain as a whole. Similarly, despite his "persistent inquiries," he could extract no Native name for Bainbridge Island in Seattle, despite documenting some 300 names for places on that island. Waterman concluded that the level of abstraction in place naming was "a cultural index to some degree" with more "evolved" cultures displaying a higher level of abstraction (1922:182). Although his arguments on this point are sketchy and unconvincing, they represent an early attempt to develop a cross-cultural theory of place-naming.

In addition to examining what features of the landscape were named, Waterman also offered insightful commentary on the semantic references contained within Indian place names. In contrast to the "mawkish" and "styled"

place names that were ascribed to Indians (such as Mt. Rainier reportedly having an Indian name meaning "nourishing bosom...on account of the numerous streams which spring from the glaciers"), Waterman found the poetry of Indian naming to be more subtle and less sentimental than such "far-fetched metaphor" and "weak and transparent allegory" (1922:182). For Waterman, the poetry of Indian place names lay in their descriptiveness and their ability to relate the landscape to important aspects of culture. Paramount in their "geographical psychology" was the procurement of food: "It is not astonishing, therefore, to find that a large number of Indian geographic names bear directly on his food supply," Waterman remarked, offering the names "Dog-salmon place" for an inlet and "Wild-potato place" for a meadow as representative of this "prevailing mode" in place naming. Similarly, he observed that sites where materials were obtained for "technological processes," such as house building, were also important in the geographic nomenclature. In addition to these categories, Waterman recognized myth, non-food plants and animals, and the human body as other important semantic referents in Indian place-naming.

Although he never fully developed his cognitive theories on place-naming, Waterman took the study of Native place names further than any of his predecessors, a feat for which he has received little credit. He probably recorded more Indian place names than any other anthropologist. And his linguistic ear was formidable, especially considering that he had little direct contact with some of the languages for which he documented names. To my knowledge, Waterman was also the first anthropologist to develop a working typology of Indian place names – a typology that is still largely serviceable today (see Table 1).

Table 1. Waterman's Typology of Puget Sound Indian Place Names (1922:185).

Place Names Consisting of	*Number of Such Names*
Descriptive terms	202
References to mythic episodes	67
References to animals	35
References to food supply	34
References to human activities	33
References to plants	24
Unclassified terms	49
Untranslated terms	137

Another student of Boas who deserves mention is Melville Jacobs, who did extensive linguistic work among the Sahaptin-speaking groups of Eastern Washington and Oregon. Jacobs' interest in recording Native stories and texts led him to discover a new genre of Indian oral literature that he dubbed the "geographic

text." Working with the Upper Cowlitz Indian Jim Yoke, Jacobs describes how his informant launched "spontaneously" into an epic travelogue narrative consisting largely of place names, "The motivation apparently being to parade knowledge derived from a lifetime of travel in the local region, in the hope that both the visiting ethnologist and the younger natives squatting about the tipi might be properly edified and impressed" (Jacobs 1934:228; Hunn 1990:6). The text introduces the audience to more than 250 named sites along the main routes of Yoke's travels, and serves as a geography and history lesson *par excellence.*

Other Boasians, such as Cora Du Bois (1935) and Frederica de Laguna (1960, 1972) to name just two, while choosing not to focus on ethnogeographic nomenclature per se, were attentive to place names and cosmography as part of their general ethnographic endeavors. These scholars saw indigenous geography and place names as key elements of culture that conveyed large amounts of information specific to that culture's language, environment, and world view. As de Laguna put it: "I don't know that I was specifically influenced by Boas' study [of Kwakiutl place names]: I simply accepted that place names, like personal names and words for things, were part of a specific culture and that the ethnographer should utilize any opportunity to record these" (1994, personal communication). In her encyclopedic study of the Yakutat Tlingit, de Laguna (1972:58) stressed the importance of names in another way:

> The ties between the people and the land are close, and no mere geographical description is adequate unless it attempts also to display the associations which make the *Lingít-aní* ["Tlingit-land"] a Lebensraum. These associations are in part conveyed by the names given to places, sometimes descriptive of the locality, sometimes referring to historical or legendary events which have occurred here. Even when the names are in a foreign tongue they serve as reminder of those who once occupied the land and are now gone.... The human meanings of the landscape...involve not simply places visited and transformed by Raven in the mythical past, but places hallowed by human ancestors. For individuals of course, the world has special personal meanings, for there are places about which their grandparents and parents have told them, spots they have visited in their own youth, or where they still go. None of these personal associations are completely private; all are intermeshed through anecdote or shared experiences. Not only is the world the scene of happenings of long ago, yesterday, and tomorrow, but it has human significance for what it offers in food resources, scenery, easy routes for travel, or places of danger.

De Laguna showed a similar attention to Native geography in her study of the Tlingit community of Angoon (1960), which contains well over a hundred

Tlingit names and their symbolic and material connections to important archeological and historic sites in that area.[5]

A New Generation, A New Direction

In his brief review of place name studies in North American anthropology, Basso identifies de Laguna and Floyd Lounsbury (1960) as the lone stars in the otherwise dark field of post–World War II Indian place name studies. While this is largely true, if we include works sensitive to cosmography and space, as well as place name studies of Native American groups by linguists, geographers, historians, and other onamasts, it is obvious that the field remained a fertile one.

One anthropologist who provided an important theoretical link between the Boasian particularists and the modern cognitive and symbolic place name theorists was A. Irving Hallowell. It was Hallowell who developed the concept of the culturally constituted "behavioral environment" which, along with other natural forces, served to constrain and define human experience. With regard to cultural factors in spatial orientation, he wrote:

> Perhaps the most striking feature of man's spatialization of his world is the fact that it never appears to be exclusively limited to the pragmatic level of action and perceptual experience. Places and objects of various classes are conceptualized as having a real existence in distant regions. Even though the individual never experiences any direct perceptual knowledge of them – since information must be mediated through some symbolic means... – such regions are, nevertheless, an integral part of the spatial world to which he is oriented by his culture. (Hallowell 1967:187)

"In functional terms," argued Hallowell, echoing Sapir, "it is not only the direct experience of the terrain which assists the individual in building up his spatial world; language crystallizes this knowledge through the customary use of place names....Place names function integrally with the geographical knowledge and experience of the individual" (1967:193). Hallowell emphasized the role of place names and other symbolic references to place as integral to how people experienced, interpreted, and acted on their environments.

The relationship between place names, cognition, and experience was taken up again in the 1980s by Keith Basso and others. Unlike Waterman, Basso came to focus on place names not out of a particular love for geography, but because he was abruptly instructed one day by one of his Western Apache teachers to "learn the names" (Basso 1984a:24). He did, mapping some 296 Apache place names in the vicinity of Cibecue (from *deeschii' bikoh*, "valley with elongated red bluffs"), a village on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation,

over the course of a summer. Like Harrington among the Tewa, Basso found that his Apache friends had a genuine fondness for "talking names." He remarks upon overhearing an Apache cowboy reciting a long list of place names quietly to himself in travelogue fashion while working. This goes on for some ten minutes, punctuated only by expectorations of tobacco juice. "Why do you 'talk names'?" Basso asks. "I like to," the informant responds, adding a phenomenological twist: "I ride that way in my mind." Other Apaches similarly take delight in pointing out particular named sites and reciting their names once, twice, or even three times. Why? "Because we like to," or "Because they are good to say," they tell him. Even more often Apaches explain their appreciation for their place names by citing how precise and descriptive they are. "That place looks just like its name," someone explains, or "That name makes me see that place like it really is," or "Its name is like a picture" (Basso 1984a:27).

Like Waterman, Basso found it useful to develop a taxonomy of the Native names according to their linguistic structure and semantic references (Table 2).

Table 2. Basso's Typology of Western Apache Place Names (based on Basso 1984a).

Type of Place Name	*Number of Such Names*
Descriptive	268
Alluding to former activities	9
Referring to dangerous places	6
Alluding to historical events	13

And, like Hallowell, Basso found the Indian preference for richly descriptive names to be a function of the power of names to convey enormous information about the landscape in crystallized form, so much so that a speaker who has never even been there can visualize its features. In this way, particularly illustrative place names become part of a culture's iconography.

These iconic names are practical not only for physical navigation of the landscape, but also for discourse and storytelling. "All these places have stories," Basso's teacher, Nick Thompson, later informs him, "We shoot each other with them, like arrows" (Basso 1984a:33). In a later article, Basso (1988) examines this specialized practice of place narrative, which he calls "speaking with names," in more detail. "Speaking with names" is only deemed appropriate under certain social conditions that the Apache term "taut" and "heavy." In such situations the longer descriptive forms of place names tend to be used because they provide narrators with a powerful and ready means for appropriating the significance of a named cultural site and "turning it with brisk efficiency to specialized social ends." Basso shows how a simple utterance such as

tsé hadigaiyé yú ágodzaa ("It happened at 'line of white rocks extends upward and out,' at this very place!") may accomplish at least eight important social actions simultaneously:

> (1) produce a mental image of a particular geographic location; (2) evoke prior texts, such as historical tales and sagas; (3) affirm the value and validity of traditional precepts (i.e., ancestral wisdom); (4) display tactful and courteous attention to aspects of both positive and negative face; (5) convey sentiments of charitable concern and personal support; (6) offer practical advice dealing with disturbing personal circumstances (i.e., apply ancestral wisdom); (7) transform distressing thoughts caused by excessive worry into more agreeable ones marked by optimism and hopefulness; (8) heal wounded spirits. (Basso 1988:121)

Because they are so potent in their ability "to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations," Basso argues that place names are "among the most highly charged and richly evocative of all linguistic symbols" (1988:103). This is the reason why PLACES WORK LIKE ARROWS, to use Nick Thompson's metaphor. It is also the reason why so much of discourse, not only among Native Americans but among all indigenous peoples, is anchored spatially through the use of place names and why important narratives often include a litany of place names. Van Valkenburgh (1974:17-18), for example, observed that Navajo ritual, songs, and prayers often include an oral gazetteer of familiar and sacred place names, and that "Such a gazetteer is often accompanied by a census of the inhabitants (usually supernaturals) of the places named. It seems that in nearly every myth there is an attempt to establish the boundaries and landmarks of the Navaho country and to locate the pantheon therein."

The use of place names as mnemonic pegs and tropes is not limited to collective oral traditions but also may be central to the construction of individual experience. For example, as Cruikshank (1990a, 1990b) has shown, place names may serve as touchstones in autobiographical narratives. She found that her Northern British Columbian Native female consultants often related and interpreted their own lives "like stories," modeling and interpreting their own experiences in the context of the geography and exploits of their ancestors.

Along with this burgeoning and fruitful research on the symbolic dimensions and pragmatic uses of place names over the past two decades, there have been other significant contributions to the literature which hearken back to earlier theoretical issues in the study of place names. One is the analysis of place names as clues to the natural and ethnoecological history of areas, including major geological events and human land use patterns (e.g., Cruikshank 1981, Hunn 1990). Another has to do with relationships between place name inventories, social groupings, and human cognition (e.g., Basso 1984b: Hunn 1994).

Hunn, in particular, has broken with the particularistic tradition of examining place naming traditions within cultures and attempted to lay the basis for defining and examining place names as a lexical domain (as has been done for plants, animals, colors, etc.) across cultures. His comparative studies of place naming patterns among Sahaptin and other groups have led to intriguing universalist hypotheses about what motivates and constrains human beings as place namers, including the importance of plant and animal references in place names (Hunn 1990, 1996) and the thesis that place name densities are closely correlated with population densities and may be ultimately limited by the "Magic Number 500," a hypothetical "domain-size limitation imposed by the constraints of individual human memory" (Hunn 1994:85).

Directions for Further Research

In reviewing the rich literature on Native place names in American anthropology, I have attempted to summarize some of the major analytical discoveries made over the past century regarding this important domain of human knowledge. These include the following:

(1) Place names are an important domain of human knowledge worthy of study both in themselves and in relation to other elements of culture and human behavior;

(2) Place names are cherished among Native American peoples who have a rich appreciation for their own geography and toponyms and relate place names to their sense of being;

(3) As cultural artifacts, place names are durable and provide important clues to the historical and cultural geography of a region;

(4) What is named is determined in part by cultural interests such as subsistence and navigation, but is also constrained by the character of the physical environment and the limits of human perception and cognition;

(5) The structures and capabilities of specific languages also influence how places are defined and named;

(6) Individuals' place name inventories are limited in comparison to the total cultural name set, but most are familiar with names beyond the realm of their own direct experience. The structure or hierarchy of individual place name inventories is typically related to patterns of social differentiation. Also, a strong correlation appears to exist between population and place name densities.

(7) Place names are powerful linguistic symbols that evoke a wide range of poignant associations, both mental and physical. As such they are important tools in narrative, story, and other forms of

verbal art and everyday speech. People learn to think "with" the landscape and not just "about" it (Momaday 1974).

These insights suggest the utility of place names as a frame for cultural analysis and exciting new directions for further research.

While mapping, transcribing, and interpreting place names remain important and foundational tasks, it is clear that from an anthropological standpoint there are additional issues to consider about the role of place and place naming among indigenous peoples. Particularly among Native Americans, concepts of place and being are intimately linked. These links are expressed in both the patterns of naming and the pragmatic references to place in the context of social life. Thus place names are not simply linguistic artifacts on the landscape; rather they should be considered "cultural resources" in the most basic sense of the term. As such, the conservation of place names, along with named places, should be a vital component of land and resource management regimes (cf. Kelley and Francis 1994) and not simply the object of intellectual inquiry. This entails defining a process that involves Native Americans in researching, conserving, interpreting, and representing their own geographies.

A recent cooperative project between the Hoonah Indian Association (HIA), the tribal government of the Tlingit village of Hoonah in Southeast Alaska, and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Division of Subsistence, illustrates one fruitful approach to place name documentation as well as the many links between place and being among the Tlingit. The mapping project, initiated in 1993, focuses on Tlingit names for sites within Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. Though earlier researchers had feared Native names lost for good (Bohn 1967:50; cf. Thornton 1995b), more than 150 Tlingit toponyms were documented in the area along with their cultural associations. Since then, the mapping project has been expanded to include the rest of Huna Tlingit[6] territory and received additional support from the Southeast Native Subsistence Commission and the National Park Service. An agreement is now in place between Glacier Bay National Park and HIA to publish the Tlingit map of Glacier Bay, including a "backside," to be produced by members of HIA, describing and representing Huna Tlingits' historical and cultural ties to Glacier Bay.

Despite the fact that Tlingits were dispossessed of their lands and subsistence rights within the park – their traditional "icebox" – and their toponyms were nearly erased from the official geography, the Tlingit names were not forgotten. They survived, especially among Huna Tlingit elders, because of their strong symbolic links to core elements of Tlingit identity and being. The most important of these links is ancestry (*shuká*). Four of the six major Tlingit matrilineal clans now residing in Hoonah stem from Glacier Bay. Of these, two (the Chookaneidí and the T'a<u>k</u>deintaan) derive their names from natural features in Glacier Bay National Park. For example, the Chookaneidí ("People of *Chookanhéeni*"), a clan of the Eagle moiety, take their name from a creek within

the park known as Berg Creek, or *Chookanhéeni* ("Beach Grass Creek") in Tlingit, which they traditionally inhabited and utilized for salmon fishing and other activities. Personal names and titles passed down through Chookaneidi and T'aḵdeintaan clan matrilineages similarly refer to landmarks and events rooted in Glacier Bay. Thus, simply *being* a Chookaneidí or a T'aḵdeintaan means belonging to Glacier Bay. The social and physical geography are intimately intertwined; one cannot be invoked without evoking the other.

Cultural ties and prerogatives in Glacier Bay are further sanctified by *at.óow* or "owned things." These possessions include geographic places themselves and representations of these sites as embodied in songs, stories, regalia, crests, names, totem poles, and other cultural icons. For example, the T'aḵdeintaan claim *Tsalx̱aan* (Mt. Fairweather, the park's highest mountain) as a crest – an emblem of their social group. The mountain is represented on regalia, including dance blankets, shirts, hats (see Figure 1), and face paintings and referenced in names, songs, stories. The village's dance group is called the Mount Fairweather Dancers. Similarly, the Chookaneidí claim a glacier in the bay (*Sít'k'i T'ooch'*, "Little Black Glacier") as a crest and represent it on a blanket. The blanket tells the story of how the "first ice age" came to Glacier Bay when a young Chookaneidí woman, *Kaasteen*, violated her menstrual seclusion by beckoning the glacier. A sentient being with its own agentic spirit, the glacier responded by advancing and destroying the Tlingit's main settlement, *L'awshaa Shakee Aan* ("Village on Top of the Glacial Sand Dunes"), claiming a Chookaneidí woman's life and compelling the clans to withdraw temporarily from Glacier Bay (see Marvin 1987:260-291). As a result of these events, the Chookaneidí came to possess the landmark as a symbol of these events and of their suffering. The blanket itself is conceptualized as historical document and a deed of trust to Glacier Bay; it represents Chookaneidí identity with and sovereignty over Glacier Bay just as T'aḵdeintaan regalia represent their identity and sovereignty over Mount Fairweather and other sites in Huna territory.

What Waterman characterized as the "redundancy" of Native names on the landscape in the case of Glacier Bay is better interpreted as an ensemble. For instance, there are three different names for Glacier Bay itself, each referring to different eras in the bay's development. The first and oldest name, *S'é Shuyee* ("End of the Glacial Mud"), hearkens back to a time when the bay was just beginning to form and consisted of a large morainal valley with a single, muddy river flowing through it (Thornton 1995b:297). Later, as the glacier continued its retreat, it began to form a waterway, which Tlingits named *Xáatl Tú* ("Ice Bay") for its large quantities of icebergs. Finally, as the retreat of the glacier began to accelerate, the bay earned a third name, *Sit' Eeti G̱eeyi* ("The Bay in Place of the Glacier") which neatly characterizes the hydrological process contributing to the formation of the present Glacier Bay.[7] Collectively, these and other place names in Glacier Bay tell an epic story about the natural and human history of the region, a history replete with cultural and scientific les-

sons. As Tlingit elder Richard Sheakley put it: "Every one of these [place] names has a story behind it...stories about the land and our people." Without the names, however, there is a danger that the stories will not be told at all.

The Glacier Bay place names project is just one example of a constructive partnership between Natives, anthropologists, and land management agencies to conserve and enhance Native American place names and geography. The process of documenting Tlingit place names in Glacier Bay and other areas has helped not only to reveal the multi-dimensional associations of the indigenous toponyms, but also to revitalize the Native geography of Southeast Alaska and

Figure 1. The late Richard Sheakley (*Yei Yeilk'*), former leader of the T'a<u>k</u>deintaan clan of the Tlingit Indians in Hoonah, Alaska, displays a ceremonial hat or *shakee.áat* of his clan which encapsulates a story of the clan's history along the outer coast of Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. This is one of many Huna Tlingit *at.óow* ("owned things") referring to named places in their territory.

spawn other related projects. Tlingit place names are now being utilized for buildings, in textbooks and documents, as well as in everyday discourse.[8]

Unfortunately, while Tlingit and other Native American place names have shown remarkable endurance to date, they are in fact fragile linguistic artifacts. Most Native American languages are either dead or dying. Moreover, unlike other widely shared domains of knowledge, such as plant and animal terms, place name knowledge tends to be highly localized. To learn the Tlingit geography of Glacier Bay, we cannot ask just any Tlingit speaker; rather we must consult the much smaller circle of experts who are descendants of Glacier Bay and have experienced the landscape both first-hand and through the rich intellectual traditions of their ancestors. This is the paramount reason why conservation of indigenous place names and their cultural associations should remain a research priority in Native communities, anthropological circles, and beyond. For, as the Swedish botanist Linnaeus said, *Nomina si nescis, Perit cognito rerum* – "If you don't know the names, your knowledge of things perishes."

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Notes

1. Boas' work on Kwakiutl geographic names is also noteworthy because of its interest to the Kwakiutl themselves. At least one elderly informant was critical of the study because Boas "failed to put the soundings on the charts showing the halibut fishing grounds" and their geographic names (Boas 1966:xxv). This oversight apparently detracted from their utility significantly.

2. There is also evidence to suggest that Boas encouraged some researchers, particularly Native American ethnographers working with their own groups, to be attentive to place names. For example, it was probably Boas who directed the Tlingit geographic ethnologist Louis Shotridge (n.d.) to gather material on Tlingit geographic names.

3. This was also a concern of Kniffen (1939) among others.

4. These notes are on file in the anthropological archives of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

5. Tlingit identity and sense of being are still very closely linked to their ethnogeography and

concepts of place. For a an extended consideration of cognitive, material, and symbolic associations of Tlingit place names see Thornton (1995a).

6. "Huna Tlingits" refers to those groups that traditionally inhabited the Glacier Bay area and later became consolidated at the present-day village of Hoonah.

7. One of the remarkable features of Tlingit is its ability to incorporate a verb or relational noun phrase into a name. There is evidence to suggest that the English name "Glacier Bay" is a gloss of the Tlingit place name, but it misses the glacial *process* conveyed in the Tlingit name, perhaps because of the awkwardness of incorporating such relational phrases into conventional English binomial compound toponyms (see Thornton 1995b).

8. And also in political discourse. For example, in a recent proposed piece of legislation for the U.S. Congress concerning Huna Tlingits' resource use rights in Glacier Bay, the Hoonah Indian Association used the "traditional Tlingit name" for the bay, *S'é Shuyee*, to signify the area "identified by the federal government as 'Glacier Bay National Park," (HIA 1994). While issues over resource use rights are still pending, the Tlingit reappropriation of Glacier Bay geography continues at the symbolic level.

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