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Shawn Hunt's Transformation Mask: The Intersection of Contemporary and Traditional Heiltsuk Art

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**Shawn Hunt's *Transformation Mask*:
The Intersection of Contemporary and Traditional Heiltsuk Art**

By

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B.F.A, Ceramics and Art History, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 2016

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to and in memory of the woman who always believed in me, who welcomed me to a new space with open arms, and who always had my back, Danielle Lee Begay. Thank you for all you did. You are always with me. Rest in Power.

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ABSTRACT

Shawn Hunt is an artist of Heiltsuk (Bella Bella), French, and Scottish Canadian ancestry who is at the forefront of contemporary Northwest Coast art in the Vancouver area. Historic artworks of his community have been often overlooked in scholarly literature due to the seeming willingness of the people to adapt to colonization. Viewed as a “tainted” culture, the Heiltsuk have been noticeably ignored in the art historical realm. However, their masks are some of the best examples of traditional regalia that are found in museums across Canada and the United States. Contemporary native artists of the Northwest Coast continue to use these works as examples for their own pieces today – these artists are merely continuing tradition in the modern day.

Hunt is making strides towards blending the “traditional” and the “contemporary” native art worlds into an inclusive, more indigenous notion of art today. His works speak about indigenous identity and what the “authentic” native looks like today. Hunt’s work *Transformation Mask* is the best example of his work intersecting the boundaries of western categories of native art. He is able to blend the ideas of “native,” “contemporary,” and “traditional” through the utilization of oral histories, clan imagery,

and commercial technologies. My thesis discusses Hunt's work in relation to long-standing Heiltsuk art practices. It breaks new ground as the first in-depth examination of Hunt's *Transformation Mask* which explores the issues of identity, respect for ceremony and expansion on traditions, and the resistance to colonial narratives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
Literature Review	8
CHAPTER 1: HISTORIC HEILTSUK MASK TRADITIONS	13
Masks.....	16
Raven.....	21
CHAPTER 2: SHAWN HUNT (HEILTSUK).....	29
<i>Transformation Mask</i>	33
CHAPTER 3: WHAT IS AUTHENTIC?.....	42
CONCLUSION	53
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW WITH SHAWN HUNT	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: ǵvuǵm̃lh (Raven) mask, Heiltsuk, Canada: British Columbia, Bella Bella; ‘Qvuqvai, Collected by George Henry Raley Photographed by Jessica Bushey, Object no.: A1743, Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada	25
Figure 2: [Kotsuis and Hohhug--Nakoaktok, wearing ceremonial dress, with long beaks, on their haunches, dancing(?)], Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), Curtis no. 3546, c. 1914, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Black and white film copy neg., Call no.: LOT 12328 A.....	26
Figure 3: Raven and Raven-of-the-Sea Mask, Kwakiutl, Drury Inlet, Photographed by Stephen Myers, 1988, Jesup North pacific Expedition, American Museum of Natural History Library, New York, New York, Identifier: 3844, 3843 Catalog No: 16/8529.....	27
Figure 4: Kwahwumhl—Koskimo (Dancer wearing raven mask with coat of cormorant skins during the numhlin ceremony), Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), Curtis no. 3596, c. 1914. Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Black and white film copy neg. Call no.: LOT 12328 A	28
Figure 5: Shawn Hunt wearing <i>Transformation Mask</i> , 2017, Courtesy of Microsoft Vancouver and Shawn Hunt	40
Figure 6: <i>Transformation Mask</i> , Shawn Hunt, 2017, Private Collection, Microsoft Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 3D Printed Plastic, circuit boards, lights, metal, speakers, and Microsoft HoloLens, Courtesy of Microsoft Vancouver and Shawn Hunt	41

INTRODUCTION

Having been driven by the Eurocentric canon of western art history, the leading concept of what art entails has become highly subjective; repeatedly, this does not include indigenous cultures like those of Native North Americans or First Nations peoples. The intersection of contemporary and traditional art in the Indigenous world walks a fine line whose boundaries are becoming even more blurred with the integration of new media and techniques into the practices of indigenous artists. Caroline Dean states in her article, “The Trouble with (the Term) Art,” that “calling something art reveals nothing inherent in the object to which the term is applied; rather, it reveals how much the viewer values it” and what kind of environment promotes that.¹

The Heiltsuk, sometimes misidentified as Northern Kwakiutl and known to many as the Bella Bella, are a Northwest Coast tribe from British Columbia, Canada. They are a “status”² tribe and one of many First Nations that populate coastal and inland Canada. The reference, First Nation, indicates a group of people who trace their ancestry back to populations that occupied the land in Canada prior to the arrival of Europeans. “The term ‘nation’ reflects original sovereignty...”³ Nation is now used for larger groups while bands, clans, and tribes often refer to a distinct subgroup or community. The village of

¹ Carolyn Dean, “The Trouble with (the Term) Art,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 27.

² This is in part due to Canada’s history as a British Commonwealth, with no “federal” government until relatively recently, and no recognition process comparable to the that in the United States. Treaty 8 provided resources and reserves to indigenous groups that did not fall under previously established treaties in exchange for the cession of certain lands. It effectively established the land boundaries of various indigenous groups including the Heiltsuk. For more information see the entry titled “Treaty 8” in the Canadian Encyclopedia, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaty-8>

³ Robert Muckle, *The First Nations of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 2.

Waglisla, known in English as Bella Bella, is the principal site of the historic and contemporary Heiltsuk Nation. They have inhabited this location since time immemorial. To the dismay of many scholars, including myself, these people have received little to no scholarly attention, in part due to their smaller population,⁴ questions of their authenticity, and the lack of surviving materials.

Starting from first European contact to today, one of the most collected artworks along the Northwest Coast have been masks. The Heiltsuk were not only fine painters and carvers, but fine mask makers, a fine artform combining diverse skills. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought new contacts, an influx of trade, and tourism to the coastal areas of both the United States and Canada. Missionaries, settlers, and tourists that came to this region wanted to encounter the “authentic” Native or catch a glimpse of a once thriving culture. Sacred items, masks, and many other objects – belonging to a wide range of nations – both benefitted and suffered from the interest in them from tourists, anthropologists, and waging enthusiasts. Masks were one of the many types of objects that received great attention from collectors. Masks are a way of outwardly expressing identity for intragroup ceremonies, for marking individual characters in a known story, or for distinction from others at a joint event; they are a source of national pride in both historic and contemporary environments. These objects, however, are meant as more than just identifiers and as marketable commodities. They

⁴ This was because of a smallpox epidemic that decimated the original population of the Heiltsuk. This was a way for anthropologists to justify their belief in the “vanishing Indian” myth and “salvage paradigm.” However, even though these thought processes were in place, the Heiltsuk were still left to be considered a lesser version of more elaborate cultures, ie Kwakiutl/Kwakwaka’wakw.

are worn in dance and ceremony throughout the Northwest Coast. These masks can represent anything from animals to portraits of specific people to cosmological beings.

In 1833, the Hudson's Bay Company built Fort McLoughlin on Campbell Island to serve as a major trading post within Heiltsuk community boundaries.⁵ Then in 1880, Methodist missionaries began to colonize the Northwest Coast and settled in Waglisla. European contact had a profound impact on the Heiltsuk nation leading to their acculturation which can be seen from their subsequent adoption of European religion and the use of single-family homes rather than community "big" houses. Bella Bella was, in fact, touted by the Canadian government and the Methodist church as a place of assimilation and an example of modern native life.⁶ Because of this, Heiltsuk culture has been subject to ethnological marginalization by scholars due to questions of authenticity. As Martha Black states "Heiltsuk culture was, quite wrongly, perceived as no longer 'authentic.'"⁷

In the nineteenth century, Euromerican pressures from both the United States and Canada began making ceremonies, such as potlatch, illegal. A potlatch is a ceremonial feast and gift-giving event where families and communities come together to display wealth and status, to celebrate events such as marriages and coming of age, to show off the acquisition of a new crest or emblem, or for meeting a social obligation. These events were also put on to reassert status – all regalia worn, and objects used, displayed the ancestry and wealth of the family putting on the potlatch. The ban on these integral

⁵ Barry Pritzker, *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 166.

⁶ Martha Black, *Bella Bella: A Season of Heiltsuk Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997) 35.

⁷ Black, *Bella Bella*, 2-3.

ceremonial practices was a way of assimilating the indigenous communities into the dominantly white Christian society. The Canadian government was intervening in an attempt to in-authenticate the practices of the indigenous people; it was a way of making their culture both lesser than and seemingly nonexistent. Potlatch was historically, and is contemporaneously, an integral part of ceremonial life on the Northwest Coast. For the objects taken from their communities under the Indian Act, fate and collectors put many in the hands of museums and private collections if they were not destroyed all together. This caused an influx of popularity in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries during the Arts and Crafts movement, when there was an increased desire for the handmade object, and again around the 1940s when salvage anthropology was seeing new revitalization. The passing of the Indian Act suppressed traditions and forced art forms to either die out or to go underground. This included the making and wearing of masks – an integral part of potlatch. To the dismay of the greater Canadian community and government, the art forms accompanying potlatching did not die out entirely and, in fact, many flourished and became even more exaggerated and vital. A major turning point in the creation of art on the Northwest Coast was the reversal of Indian Act in Canada in 1951.⁸ Both ceremonies and art forms, like masks, received new energy after the reversal of the act. Willie Seaweed (Kwakiutl) is one prominent artist that continued to carve masks and exaggerate their styles during and especially after its overturning.⁹ The first legal potlatch happened in Mungo Martin's big house Wawadit'la, in British

⁸ Robin K. Wright, et al, *In the Spirit of the Ancestors: Contemporary Northwest Coast Art at the Burke Museum* (Seattle: Burke Museum, University of Washington Press, 2013), 4.

⁹ Bill Reid (Haida) joined Seaweed in his attempts to continue traditions but only after the Indian Act was repealed and potlatching was reinstated.

Columbia in 1953,¹⁰ and led to the increase in new artworks. Scholars have considered this a “renaissance”¹¹ of the Northwest Coast traditions, as if they had been destroyed or lost. This is a misunderstanding as these traditions merely stopped being publicized rather than practiced.

Many of the works that were made before or during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been categorized as “traditional”¹² due to the use of materials and techniques that are grounded in the historical indigenous practices of their communities. This historic nature of the masks makes them – to many outsiders – more “authentic” as Native objects. This determination of authenticity from an outside perspective is not a new concept in relation to Native works of art. The focus on a particular and narrow sense of authenticity that is pervasive in markets, museums, and galleries – as defined by a pre-contact standard – was accompanied by a lack of interest in the actual living peoples. Objects were considered more “authentic” if untouched by the colonized world. “To Euro-North American society, the greatest significance of Indians is what is perceived to be their ahistorical, non-technological culture.”¹³ Because “indianness” is inherently connected solely to the past there is no possibility to include modern technology. However, Heiltsuk existence has always been dependent on the technologies of carving, mask-making, and transformation making the critique of authenticity in

¹⁰ Wright, *In the Spirit of the Ancestors*, 4.

¹¹ David Summers, “What Is a Renaissance” in *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art*, eds. Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004): 133.

¹² I have placed the word “traditional” in quotes due to its problematic nature.

¹³ Deborah Doxtater, “Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History,” in *Revisions*, Edited by Charlotte Townsend-Gault and Mary Anne Moser (Alberta: Walter Philips Gallery, 1992), 25.

relation to technology questionable. I will explore these issues further in chapter 3 titled “What is Authentic?”

Authenticity to anthropologists, archeologists, tourists – and really anyone outside of the culture itself – was viewed as anything associated with or made by an indigenous person. Other qualifiers for an “authentic” native work were that it had a marketable value, it was hand-made, and could be traced to a time when indigenous people lived “primitively.” In reality, many works made today that are considered contemporary are also considered traditional. For various indigenous communities, including those of the Northwest Coast, “...the past does not exist independently from the present.”¹⁴ The past and present are intertwined at all times. In art making traditions in British Columbia, makers are allowed the right to use certain images based on their familial connection to them. These images – having been given to their ancestors – have been their intellectual property since time immemorial. For Shawn Hunt (1975-), a contemporary Heiltsuk artist based in Vancouver, Canada, that means his use of Raven imagery in his works is based on intellectual rights to the image through maternal connections. With respect to his familial ties and his community history, Hunt is breaking boundaries as an artist who makes works with less than traditional materials. His contemporary use and manipulation of these historic connections and images helps to blur the lines of art categories and brings to light larger controversies surrounding the labeling and authentication of native works of art from the Northwest Coast. Hunt’s work entitled, *Transformation Mask*, demonstrates these qualities, which I will explore in a later chapter.

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.

Many believe that the combination of acculturation and government interference destroyed the traditional practices of the Heiltsuk people. However, potlatches and masking traditions never stopped; in reality, they went underground and were no longer publicized in the way they were before. Like Shawn Hunt does with his work, I believe that "...art should make you ask questions, questions of your government, the art form, the role of the curator. The art does not provide the answer but prompts the question."¹⁵ Like his art is meant to do, it prompted many questions for me. What is traditional? What is contemporary? Can hybrid works, such as those made by Hunt, be categorized the same way as those that are made in the style of historic pieces? Is contemporary native art "authentic?" How has the outside audience and what is associated as native or indigenous changed the way we think about traditional art? Who determines the authenticity of the works and what factors affect that decision? In the following chapters, I will establish a brief history of Heiltsuk masking traditions. In chapter 1, I will examine historic mask making traditions of the Heiltsuk people with specific focus on two masks – one a transformation mask and the other a Raven mask – as well as go into the significance of Raven as a culture hero and image. I will then, in chapter 2 and 3, through the examination of the works of Shawn Hunt, attempt to answer these above questions by establishing the importance of identity and authenticity in Northwest Coast art.

¹⁵ Shawn Hunt quoted in Ian M. Thom, et al, *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 67.

Literature Review

Very few scholars have written about the Heiltsuk people for reasons cited, such as inauthenticity, stagnation, and loss of culture. The Heiltsuk are mentioned in encyclopedic volumes on the area but there is little work dedicated to them. For those interested in learning more about the people and their culture, one can consult five publications which offer a glimpse into the art, lifeways, and culture of this nation. Martha Black, Franz Boas, Ronal Olson, and Michael E. Harkin have all written on the Heiltsuk culture and traditions. Notably, and to the dismay of many, the above scholars share a typical background of those writing about this area – they are not from within the community and have an often biased and ignorant perspective on the true life and culture of the Heiltsuk people.

Martha Black's *Bella Bella: A Season of Heiltsuk Art* (1997) surveys the contact to post contact/present-day period in Heiltsuk history. She uses the artworks produced during that time to expand on and teach about Heiltsuk cultural history. Black explores the R.W. Large collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. She focuses on its twentieth-century origins while illuminating the power and continuity of Heiltsuk life and cultural expression.

The R.W. Large collection was assembled by a Methodist missionary, Reverend Doctor Richard Whitfield Large, during his time spent in the area of Bella Bella, WA. This publication details the 139 objects that now comprise the largest single collection of Heiltsuk art in any museum.¹⁶ Though they only represent a brief period of time in the history of the Heiltsuk, these artworks have been the cornerstone for anyone who is

¹⁶ Black, *Bella Bella*, 8.

researching the people of Waglisla. Black's analysis and catalogue deal primarily with the objects of ethnographic and artistic significance that have sufficient documentation associated with them. Her catalogue includes short descriptions of the objects paired with photographs. In particular, due in part to the record keeping of Large himself, Black has been able to piece together artistic biographies of prominent carvers that have been identified as making works in the collection. In the final chapter of her publication "Five Bella Bella Carvers," Black details the work and lives of five Heiltsuk carvers: Chief Robert Bell, Captain Carpenter, Enoch, General Dick, and Daniel Houstie.¹⁷ She uses the works of these artists and those unnamed that have contributed to the Large collection to discuss other works outside the Royal Ontario Museum. This discussion focuses on the ethnohistoric background of the art and the people who made it as well as an art historical conversation concerning their significance. Black's work, though largely based on ethnographic sources, is less focused on obtaining and recording all information she can get about the Heiltsuk. In her publication, however, she cites three scholars working between 1880 and 1940 who took an ethnographic approach to documenting the nation: Franz Boas, Ronald Olson, and Philip Drucker. In the paragraphs that follow I will examine the works of the first two men, while Philip Drucker's work is fragmentary at best and does not warrant long discussion.

Franz Boas – the founder of modern North American anthropology – was also one of a few scholars who has written extensively on the cultural history of the Heiltsuk people. Boas refers to them as the Bella Bella and has titled his two substantive works *Bella Bella Tales* (1932) and *Bella Bella Texts* (1928). These works contain various

¹⁷ Black, *Bella Bella*, 106.

“tales” or “myths” of the Heiltsuk people. For these people, rather than myths, this is their history; it is their origins; it is their reality. In his work, *Bella Bella Texts*, Boas explains that “the whole culture of the Bella Bella has practically disappeared.”¹⁸ Boas also attributes the beliefs and cultural distinctions of the Heiltsuk to be merely a combination of the Kwakiutl and the Tsimshian nations. His main focus throughout much of his career was on Haida art with artists such as Charles Edenshaw acting as informants. This was likely to skew his perspective on other cultures such as the Heiltsuk. In this case, his comparison to Kwakiutl art is more of an “armchair” analysis of the collections at the American Museums of Natural History. His sources were collecting based on the salvage paradigm in an attempt to “salvage” and save Kwakiutl materials before their impending destruction. Scholars and community members alike know that these beliefs are all inaccurate; in fact, the Heiltsuk, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl people are thriving and modern-day nations. Like many anthropologists working in the 1930s, he presents material culture of the past in the ethnographic present and avoids – or dismisses entirely – the changing ideas and objects of these people by simply declaring them inauthentic.

Ronald Olson was another of the few scholars who has written on the Heiltsuk. However, his publication is significantly less detailed than those of Black and Boas. In his book, *Notes on the Bella Bella Kwakiutl* (1955), Olson collected information about the Heiltsuk people that ranges from crest groups, legends, and brief descriptions of various terminologies to relationships and ceremonies. He also mentions and includes

¹⁸ Franz Boas, *Bella Bella Texts* (New York: American Folk-lore, G.E. Stechert and Co., Agents, 1932), IX.

brief descriptions of the Oweekeno and Haisla who are located adjacent to the territory of the Heiltsuk. Upon reading the title, I knew the information in this book would already be biased or misinformed. The use of the name “Kwakiutl” is a continuation of an incorrect designation. The Kwakiutl (Kwak’waka’wakw) are a separate and distinct tribal group from south of Bella Bella and have no direct affiliation with the Heiltsuk other than their adoption of the Hamatsa ceremony and similar linguistic structures.¹⁹ Like many other scholars who have written on the Heiltsuk, he continued the use of an incorrect term and perpetuated misinformation. However, aside from the use of “Kwakiutl” his information is consistent with that which was gathered and understood by those who also studied this nation.

Michael Harkin, a professor of anthropology and ethnohistorian, focuses his publication *The Heiltsuks: Dialogues of Culture and History on the Northwest Coast* (1997) on critiquing the ethnohistorical approach that has been taken when speaking of the Heiltsuk previous to his work. This book uses his innovative approach to try to better understand the cultural changes that have happened in the last century among the Heiltsuk of Bella Bella. Specifically, he examines the post-missionary period among the Heiltsuk starting with the late nineteenth century. Harkin establishes their importance among the tribal groups that make up the Northwest Coast and their notable contributions of the Cannibal Dance and the Winter Ceremonial that feature significantly in the cultural practices of the nations in the area. He then moves to more contemporary life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with an emphasis on the continued marginalization of

¹⁹ The Kwakiutl, Bella Bella, Oweekeno, and the Haisla belong to the Northern Wakashan language group.

the community and their public identity. He successfully pairs historic and contemporary events in order to examine the aspects of Heiltsuk identity that are based in their past. Unlike many other scholars, he emphasizes the importance of continuance of traditions while maintaining a contemporary presence in Canada. In the final portion of the book, Harkin focuses on dialogues about Bodies, Souls, and Goods. Each of these chapters further explores how Heiltsuk culture intersected with the colonial powers of Euro-Canadian society. He is able to methodically demonstrate the impact of colonialism on the Heiltsuk and their successful endurance through it.

The above-mentioned publications are overwhelmingly guided by anthropological concepts and ethnohistorical approaches to understanding Heiltsuk life. For many of these authors, social and religious life were the focus of their work. However, for the Heiltsuk, and many other nations, one of the very integral parts of all aspects of their culture is art. Both historically and in contemporary arenas today, artists and community members like Shawn Hunt recognize it is more than that; Hunt states that “our art is a language...” and that it means more than just its aesthetic outward value.²⁰ For those within the community, “...it goes back to the beginning. It is a continuum.”²¹

²⁰ Shawn Hunt, “Shawn Hunt Uses Art to Tell His Stories.” Interview by Alexandra Best. BAF Studio, May 11, 2016.

²¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORIC HEILTSUK MASK TRADITIONS

Northwest Coast artists come from a variety of communities extending from Alaska to Washington State. Shawn Hunt, the focus of this thesis, is from the Heiltsuk community. Descendants of the original Heiltsuk²² tribe live at the principal village of Bella Bella also known as Waglisla,²³ meaning “river on the beach.”²⁴ Five Heiltsuk tribal divisions – ‘Uyalitxv (down river people), ‘Qvuqvayaitxv (calm water people), Wuilitxv (people of the inlet), Yisdaitxv (seaward people), ‘Isdaírxv (named for the village ‘Isda)– were all assembled at this singular location in the 1890s.²⁵ However, Heiltsuk ancestral territory extended a much farther-reaching distances that are not recognized today. “The word ‘Heiltsuk’ or ‘Hailh zaqv’ means literally ‘to speak or act correctly.’”²⁶ To speak or act correctly not only denotes everyday behavior but signals the correct way to conduct oneself in ceremonial life. Heiltsuk origin stories state that the Creator put the Heiltsuk people in their territory and provided their values, customs, and language that have been maintained and practiced since time immemorial. “Heiltsuk oral tradition (Nuyem) states that the original Heiltsuk ancestors were set down by the Creator

²² One of the key things to realize about the Heiltsuk is that their classification or descriptive term used was not “Heiltsuk” until very recently. They have also been termed as northern Wakashan, northern Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, Bella Bella, Haishais, Haisla, Heisla and Oowekeeno. Most of these terms are used to describe the Heiltsuk when in reality many are separate nations from the Heiltsuk or are terms used to describe a language group of the area.

²³ Martha Black, *Bella Bella: A Season of Heiltsuk Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997): 2.

²⁴ “The History of Bella Bella.” Heiltsuk Tribal Council, 2015, Accessed November 12, 2018. <http://www.heiltsuknation.ca/about-2/history/>

²⁵ Black, *Bella Bella*, 10.

²⁶ Black, *Bella Bella*, x.

in various areas in the territory now referred to as the Central Coast of British Columbia, before the time of the great flood.”²⁷ Another origin story tells of the first men being born from a clam shell. These stories are some of the many that are depicted in Heiltsuk artworks.

Art is considered an integral part of both sacred and secular life on the coast of British Columbia. Many scholars and amateurs alike consider the art of the Northwest Coast a pan-coastal art tradition. However, while there are aspects, which I will discuss below, that are featured prominently among most tribal groups of the area, this is an oversimplification of the distinctions of each group’s artistic style. Usual explanations for the use of certain iconography range from crest imagery, totemic designs, local mythology, and for purely aesthetic quality. Though many of the above arguments may be based in fact, they provide incomplete and often inaccurate answers to questions that have never been fully explored. Each tribal group has its own distinct features and styles that can be seen through careful inspection of their artistic works. That being said, most Northwest Coast art follows a few common organizational strategies. The most dominant, as Bill Holm notes, is formline. Holm states that the “Bella Bella were working in the highly organized northern formline design system in the early 1800s”²⁸ as were their more northern neighbors, the Tsimshian and Haisla peoples. This style of image making was coined by Holm, with the help of Bill Reid, as “formline” in Holm’s 1965 publication *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*. Holm developed of the

²⁷ “Heiltsuk Nation.” Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance (CCIRA), 2016, Accessed October 23, 2018. <https://www.ccira.ca/heiltsuk/>

²⁸ Bill Holm, *Spirit and Ancestor: A Century of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Burke Museum* (Seattle: Burke Museum, University of Washington Press, 1987): 128.

term “formline” in an attempt to analyze – at a deeper level – the compositional structure of Northwest Coast art. Holm and Reid were defining these terms at the same moment that formalism was dominating the art historical discussions of modernist art. This means that the problems of formalism, such as its superficiality and decontextualization, got imposed on Northwest Coast art in order to transform it from artifact to art; therefore, it also reconfigured how the terms “authenticity” and “tradition” got applied. In one sense, authenticity became a matter of stylistic conformity to the descriptors I discuss below.

Formline, rather than referring to the whole design, describes the black lines used to outline forms, hence the name. These lines can vary in thickness along the same form and are often termed curvilinear. This creates interplay of positive and negative space that is an important aspect of formline style art. Ovoids are one of the four common features of formline style. Ovoids are thicker on the top of the oval shape and thinner on the sides and are used to connect other forms. U-forms are also a common feature that directs the movement of the eye around the object or painting. They are thickest at the top and taper to a fine point at the bottom of the U. For Raven and Eagle, they are often used for wings and feathers. Trigons and crescents are the final two common features in formline style that connect other shapes with deeply curved T and Y forms.

Another common organizational strategy that appears throughout Northwest Coast artworks is bilateral symmetry. The use of bilateral symmetry, through an increased emphasis on bold highly contrasting colors – usually black and red – splits imagery in ways that makes three-dimensional images appear two-dimensional. It is a way of combining two-dimensional design with sculpture. This splitting and rearranging of faces, both human and animal, is used in an effort to cover the whole surface of an

object, and places extra emphasis on faces, and exaggerate certain features such as beaks, claws, mouths, and eyes. This emphasis includes the use of faces of both animal and humanoid figures at certain places on the body such as joints, in body spaces, and at the bases of limbs or tails. This convention, which is uncommon in western art, has been a main focus of scholars and one of the many reasons for the exoticization of Northwest Coast culture groups. Currently, we are much farther past simply determining the structure and importance of the surface designs of many Northwest Coast artworks. Masks, objects that were praised for their aesthetics, are more than simply art; as Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk) states “Our art is a language”²⁹ and, in my opinion, deserves further exploration beyond simply its aesthetic values.

Masks

Masks are one of the many “art” objects that are displayed in museums throughout the world as a representation of a “primitive” culture. These objects are often stripped of their accompanying accoutrements, examples of which can be seen in Figure Two and Four, and displayed as sculptures in museums when they were never meant to function or be presented in this manner. A mask in its cultural setting is only one part of a whole and is never meant to be separate from its ceremony, dancers, music, accoutrements, and people. In coastal Canada, the Northwest Coast of the United States, and in Alaska masks are featured in both ceremonies and secular celebrations. The mask designs range from those worn in dance and ceremony, which represent cosmological beings, to portrait masks of specific people to a combination of both. There is meaning in

²⁹ Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk). Interview with Alexandra Best. May 11, 2016. BAF Studio. <http://www.shawnhunt.net>

these works and these works are also part of their meaning in that a mask is both a work of art and, more than that, it represents identity. Mask in this sense, means many things – the sense of mask as an image but also as an entity or a being itself. As Joanne Carrubba notes, “...masks are an outward form of cultural pride.”³⁰

Historic masks created throughout the Northwest Coast were made of materials from the earth such as pigment paints from clays and the wood from specific local tree species. This practice is still continued today, but often with the incorporation of more contemporary materials. In the area of the Heiltsuk nation, colors came from pigments that were locally available such as hematite, ochers, copper minerals, graphite, and charcoal. Native pigment gathered from local sources was mixed with salmon eggs to create a tempera-like medium used to paint historic works. In the 1900s, commercial oil-based paint became the more common medium due to its elasticity and permanence. Serving as the base material for masks, “...alder, yew, and particularly hemlock were the preferred materials among the Kwakiutl.”³¹ This also appears to be the case for many Heiltsuk masks with the inclusion of cedar as an additional option. Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk), when carving, frequently uses red and yellow cedar. Other contemporary carvers also use cedar for reasons such as its fragrant smell and ceremonial connection.³²

Heiltsuk carving conventions are fairly distinguishable from those of groups surrounding them. Heiltsuk carving was notably affected by European contact and has since evolved significantly over time. Though a bulbous carving style is still their

³⁰ Joanne Carrubba, “Types and Markets: Photography and Masks Among the Nuxalk in the Twentieth Century.” (master’s thesis, University of New Mexico, 2001), IV, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/arth_etds/75/

³¹ Holm, *Spirit and Ancestor*, 90.

³² Red and yellow cedar are also highly rot resistant and easily manipulated when wet.

signature, contemporary works tend to blend the traditions of those peoples surrounding Waglisla today. Heavy-appearing masks with exaggerated features, long hooked noses, wide rectangular mouths with often protruding lips, heavy brow and cheek ridges, prominent eyes with sharply cut eye sockets, and a graphic painting style all characterize Heiltsuk masks.³³

The Heiltsuk people have an oral history tradition in which stories and memories are passed to younger generations through storytelling. These histories are conveyed not only through words but through music, dance, and art. For winter ceremonials, potlatches, and dances the purpose of Heiltsuk masks is to make supernatural beings present and visible to the participants. The proper attire at ceremonies and dances, including masks representing a clan figure, are used to gain the aid of that supernatural being. These performances can tell stories, for example, stories of an ancestor meeting a supernatural being. The meeting of an ancestor with that supernatural figure gives the family the right to represent and use the figure in their art and everyday life. Along with the actions and regalia, the environment helps tell the story as well. Bill Holm describes an example of this below:

...They bring a masked dancer into the firelight – the being into which the disappeared novice has been transformed and who embodies the dance prerogative to which he is heir. The dance proceeds around the fire, the masked figure performing according to the character of the creature he represents.³⁴

In this example, the dancer is not impersonating the supernatural being but rather *is* the figure or embodies the being. In this sense, the mask not only aids the wearer but also

³³ This is especially true for masks that are depicting human or humanoid faces rather than animals.

³⁴ Holm, *Spirit and Ancestor*, 108.

contain the power of the represented being. It is thought that sometimes these masks when worn would be possessed with the spirit represented on them, making the movements of the wearer those of the spirit. Potlatches and the materialization of certain beings allow the people present and those representing them to renew their relationships with that being and the supernatural world. This power of the dancer and the dance is why masking and the entire ceremony are integral to maintaining tradition; it continues the relationship formed from time immemorial when that figure is represented at significant events. These depictions represent more than just the image but a kinship relationship and the social organization of the tribes/groups.

Figure Three is a representation of a complex transformation mask that changes from a bird form such as Eagle or Raven into a human-like face. In transformation masks, the larger mask on the outside depicts a traditional crest figure. The inside of this mask reveals another face when opened. This allows the mask and wearer to transform at key points in the dance. Lévi-Strauss describes an example of a transformation of masks and their spectacle below:

For the spectator at initiation rites, the dance masks (which opened suddenly like two shutters to reveal a second face, and sometimes a third one behind the second, each one imbued with mystery and austerity) were proofs of the omnipresence of the supernatural and the proliferation of myths.³⁵

In this quote, Lévi-Strauss is describing a complex transformation mask that is both representative of the being and the human aspect within. A transformation mask is one of the many types of masks that are used in ceremony. “The most widely known

³⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982): 5.

transformation masks achieve their effect by splitting to expose an inner face” like the mask shown in Figure Two.³⁶ In this case, the mask is constructed so that the outer mask could be opened to reveal another inside. This revelation plays on the inter-relationship of a certain being with another.

Like many other art objects from communities across North America, “...masks...cannot be interpreted in and by themselves as separate objects.”³⁷ They are a form of communication that tells the viewer something more than the obvious characteristics, something more than the “universal reaction”³⁸; they indicate something within that culture other than its outward aesthetics. In northern Haida territory, masks were worn at feasts by the head of the household; these were worn as a representation of his clan emblem. South of Haida territory, the Kwakiutl wore masks during the winter initiation ceremony held by the Cannibal society that is more well known by the Haida term, Hamatsa. The Heiltsuk also participated in this practice, both ceremonially and artistically, as Bella Bella is the place in which Hamatsa originated. It was on the central coast of British Columbia “...in the south that the transformation mask reached its highest development.”³⁹ Raven is one of the few bird figures that is frequently used in transformation masks and is described below in detail.

³⁶ Holm, *Spirit and Ancestor*, 114.

³⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, 12.

³⁸ Roy L. Carlson, “Change and Continuity in Northwest Coast Art” in *Indian Art Traditions of the Northwest Coast*, ed. Roy L. Carlson (Burnaby, B.C.: Archaeology Press, Simon Fraser University, 1982): 197.

³⁹ Allen Wardell, *Objects of Bright Pride: Northwest Coast Indian Art from the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Center for Inter-American Relations and the American Federation of Arts, 1978): 38.

Raven

In the Heiltsuk community, there are four main crest groups: Eagle, Orca, Wolf, and Raven.⁴⁰ Raven is the highest-ranking clan within the Heiltsuk community and is highly regarded when used in an artistic manner. Raven has a prominent place in mythology and art on the Northwest Coast and appears in many forms and manifestations. There is a culture hero – Raven – most well-known to the public as the bird who stole the sun and made the day. Figure Four is an example of a mask that was used to teach about Raven and present stories related to him. This Raven passes on traditional knowledge not related to sacred rituals. According to oral histories, raven is often described as a shape shifter, and the dancers are able to change from bird to human and back again by opening and closing their masks. “Everywhere that ravens and humans come together the bird is perceived both as a mysterious being and as a reflection of the flawed character of humans.”⁴¹ These masks, like most raven masks, are made of two pieces of wood joined down the middle to allow movement rather than as a single piece. The fine integration of carving and paint makes the eye move from one place on the mask and design to the other. It allows the subtle grandeur of the paint and design to be the focus. Raven, represented on the right side of Figure Two, is the man-eating bird and “cannibal spirit” known as Gwágwakhwalanoóksiwey.⁴² He plays an important role in the cannibal dance known as the Hámatsa. He is represented with a very long black beak, an

⁴⁰ Interesting enough, though there are many animals that live in this area and sustain the community as food, the raven, crow, and eagle are never used as sustenance, nor are their eggs.

⁴¹ Holm, *Spirit and Ancestor*, 124.

⁴² Bill Holm, *Crooked Beak of Heaven: Masks and Other Ceremonial Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974): 17.

ovoid eye socket and nostril, and a mouth lined with red paint. Tendrils of cedar hang below and above the head, covering the figure wearing the mask so as to obscure his human identity. Like typical cannibal raven masks, this mask would open and close at the mouth to create a snapping noise, signaling Raven's hunger.

Raven stories are ones that are typically accessible to all, even those outside the community. However, some people divide certain stories related to him into categories of sacred and secular. Because Raven is attributed with having determined the order of things in the world, he is considered more than just a culture hero and often his stories are kept in intimate spaces and not shared. For the Heiltsuk, many stories of Raven have been published and shared by the community with those in the public realm allowing a better understanding of their origins and cultural practices. Rather than remaining distant, this allows community members to be a part of their own culture when not within community bounds. The creation and display of these masks in non-sacred arenas is also a way of connecting far-flung communities. Hunt revealed to me that he would like to be able to share these stories and his mask-making practice with those outside the community in the hopes of achieving a greater understanding of Central Coast British Columbian Native communities.

Raven, both in the natural world and as the culture hero, is infamous for thievery and for messing with the placement of objects. As a culture hero, Raven "...is...a relentless schemer and practical joker, lustful, impulsive, cunning, shameless and without remorse."⁴³ He is a meddler in affairs, a lover of shiny things, and omniscient. He also

⁴³ Cheryl Shearar, *Understanding Northwest Coast Art: A Guide to Crests, Beings, and Symbols* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000): 88.

has the power to transform himself and others. He is the “transformer of all.”⁴⁴ His transformative powers also provide an aspect of explanation for his frequent use in transformation masks. His overwhelming power and influence are two of the many reasons Raven is prominent in Heiltsuk art.

Raven masks are fairly easy to identify; they sport long, clearly cut beaks that are curved on the top and flat on the bottom. The Hamatsa Raven masks are usually much more elaborate than any other form of Raven within a community’s tradition. The masks tend to stick to a strict color palette of red, black, and white with an occasional use of green or blue but very sparingly. Unlike the Hamatsa Raven masks, other Raven masks often lack red cedar bark fringe but rather include furs as shown in Figure Four. In other art forms, he is characterized by a long straight beak, flared nostrils, and his wings (if shown) are folded close to his body. Red cedar bark is featured on top of his head and in fringes hanging down. Generally, he is painted entirely with black paint and his eyes take up a large portion of his head.

Though Hunt’s work, *Transformation Mask*, is a reference to Raven as a supernatural figure, it is not necessarily a reference to Raven the cannibal. The raven that Hunt represents appears to be more akin to the Raven represented in Figure One. This Raven mask has a moveable beak that can be opened and closed by way of a string. It features four colors – blue, white, black, and red. It has an oval eye socket that is surrounded by a dark blue area. The rest of the face is black, which extends into the beak which features the typical red lips. This work from the Museum of Anthropology at the

⁴⁴ Shearar, *Understanding Northwest Coast Art*, 88.

University of British Columbia (UBC),⁴⁵ is made of wood, leather, paint, metal, and fibers. It was made in BC, Canada by the Heiltsuk of Bella Bella. Unlike other raven masks, this particular piece does not feature the ovoid nostril on the beak.

As demonstrated above, Raven masks, transformation masks, and Heiltsuk masks in general played an important role in the life of Heiltsuk people historically. But they also play an important role in contemporary life. Current artists, such as Shawn Hunt, continue the tradition passed on to them by their elders. Though his works are not the same as the traditional masks discussed above, his creation of them and his connection to the community ensure the renewal and continuance of tradition in contemporary society.

⁴⁵ Anthropology museums and the discipline are understood and worked with in ways that indigenous cultures in the United States have not had the opportunity too. Collaboration with anthropological disciplines and museums is a large part of reclaiming and reasserting the dominance and importance of indigenous Northwest Coast cultures in Canada today.



Figure 1:
ǵvúig̓m̓lh (Raven) mask
Heiltsuk, Canada: British Columbia, Bella Bella; 'Qvuqvai, collected by George Henry
Raley Photographed by Jessica Bushey,
Object no.: A1743
Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada



Figure 2:

[Kotsuis and Hohhug--Nakoaktok, wearing ceremonial dress, with long beaks, on their haunches, dancing(?)]

Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), Curtis no. 3546

c. 1914. Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Black and white film copy neg.

Call no.: LOT 12328-A



Figure 3:
Raven and Raven-of-the-Sea Mask, Kwakiutl, Drury Inlet
Stephen Myers
1988, Jesup North pacific Expedition
American Museum of Natural History Library, New York, New York
Identifier: 3844, 3843 Catalog No.: 16/8529



Figure 4:
Kwahwumhl—Koskimo (Dancer wearing raven mask with coat of cormorant skins
during the numhlin ceremony)
Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), Curtis no. 3596
c. 1914. Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Black and white film copy neg.
Call no.: LOT 12328-A

CHAPTER 2: SHAWN HUNT (HEILTSUK)

Shawn Hunt was born in 1975 in Vancouver, Canada. He is of Heiltsuk (Bella Bella), French, and Scottish Canadian ancestry.⁴⁶ He began carving in 1994 and learned over the course of a decade how to carve from his father, J. Bradley Hunt, with whom he shares a studio.⁴⁷ His brother, Dean Hunt, is also an accomplished carver working in the family studio. Shawn Hunt has also apprenticed with Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (Coast Salish) in painting.⁴⁸ Hunt has a diploma in studio art from Capilano College and a BFA from the University of British Columbia where he majored in sculpture and drawing.⁴⁹ He received the British Columbia Creative Achievement Award for First Nations Art in 2011. He currently lives and works in Vancouver, Canada, known as the Sunshine Coast, where his pieces are shown in various galleries such as Spirit Wrestler Gallery and MacCauley & Co. Fine Art.

Hunt is both a three-dimensional and two-dimensional artist working in traditional and contemporary materials. Shawn's three-dimensional works are created through what he calls "assemblage carving"⁵⁰ which mimics collages on paper but in three-dimensional forms. These works are usually carved out of red or yellow cedar which is indigenous to the area. Through this assemblage carving his sculptural works imitate the organization

⁴⁶ Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk). Interview with Alexandra Best. May 11, 2016. BAF Studio. <http://www.shawnhunt.net>

⁴⁷ Hunt, Interview.

⁴⁸ Shawn Hunt, Resume. MacCauley & Co. Fine Art. March 16, 2019, http://mfineart.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/1ShawnHunt_CV_2017.pdf

⁴⁹ "About," Shawn Hunt, posted April 1, 2009, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/?cat=8>

⁵⁰ Shawn Hunt (@shawn_hunt), "Getting close to finishing this one #assemblagecarving," Instagram Photo, January 31, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BtVDiWIhbtD/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=1of1z0jrressil

of his paintings. It is a way of what he calls “shapeshifting” because he is literally manipulating shapes to adjust their placement or their perceived limits of their form in both his carvings and his paintings. His paintings seem to mimic his masks in their almost three-dimensional quality as if they were trying to confuse the viewer into questioning whether they represent faces or masks themselves.

Like his shapeshifting of forms, Hunt’s focus for his works shifts from questioning subversion to preconceptions of Northwest Coast art to fluid meanings of images sometimes all within the same work. He is most well-known for his innovative carving style that expands on the form line tradition, in both silver jewelry and in wood. His works are based in performance and ceremony but are contemporaneously linked to current-day identity politics and authenticity. Hunt addresses issues that are far beyond the ethnographic interpretations and boundaries determined by the dominant culture; his works explore personal and cultural identity in the twenty-first century, historical and political commentary, and systems of belief that place him within his cultural context. His works are intended to make the viewer think rather than to provide answers; this makes it difficult to define and put into them categories such as “traditional” and “contemporary.”

Being of mixed heritage, like many artists today he is both colonized and colonizer, which plays into his explorations of identity politics. More prominently than his European heritage, his works feature combinations of multiple culture heroes and figures from his Heiltsuk ancestry, especially Raven. This organizational strategy plays on ideas of transformation and shape-shifting which are prominent in all of his artworks. Working in new and diverse forms of art and media, Shawn Hunt is both continuing

traditional forms while inventing new innovative styles of Heiltsuk art. He embraces tradition but is not bound by it.

Though the focus of this thesis is on his seminal work, created in collaboration with Microsoft Vancouver and the Garage, two of his other works, *Raven GT* (2011) and *Artifact* (2006), set a background for his later works. These works can be found pictured on his website, <http://www.shawnhunt.net>. *Artifact* is a silver carved bracelet that was created in 2006. It depicts Raven (ǵvùí)⁵¹ and Frog (h'zí) discussing the term “artifact” at a gallery opening. These two figures are exploring this term in relation to a Raven rattle that is carved on the outer surface of the bracelet as if it were on view in a gallery space. Like his other works, this piece prominently features Raven and brings to the forefront discussions of “art” and “artifact.” The discussion of the dichotomy of art versus artifact is a current debate that is found centered around native art in often ethnological and anthropological contexts. “Art” is integral to the expression of living Native culture and is a reflection of the environment in which it was made; this includes not only the physical space it was created in and around but also includes the political and social environments as well. Within many Native communities, the visual expression of ideologies is not described as art. In the Heiltsuk language there is no word for art, as “art” is a part of everything in Heiltsuk life it is not distinguished from other words. The word “artifact” implies that the culture and its material culture remain in the past. This is very much the opposite of the reality. Instead, certain objects have their own words in the Heiltsuk language; for example, the word for mask is yíǵmł, while Raven mask is

⁵¹ For the purpose of clarity, I will list the Heiltsuk word for specific items next to the English translation but will continue to use the English word throughout the text.

ᑭᖃᕐᑭᑦᑭᑦ. *Raven GT* is a wearable Raven mask (ᑭᖃᕐᑭᑦᑭᑦ) that is more akin to the traditional Raven masks pictured in chapter one. Like those masks, the beak opens mechanically through pulleys and strings. It is completely black in color with the exception of the inside of the mouth, which is painted red. It has the distinctive ovoid eye shape and nostril. Just below the eye and next to the hinge of the beak bottom appear the letters “GT.” The sleekness of the mask, the racing stripe down its beak, and the label “GT” are all references to sports cars; these aspects are meant to make the viewer think more about the speed and luxury of these cars. These contemporary vehicles are a symbol of status and wealth in contemporary society with on which Hunt is commenting. This piece appeared in Hunt’s first solo exhibition at the Blanket Gallery in Vancouver, BC which was curated by his former master, artist Paul Yuxweluptun in 2011.

This mask, like many masks made today for galleries and museums, is not meant to be danced. Though not supported by a mount, this mask has no mechanism for operation and use. It still represents how Raven should be portrayed in a more traditional manner than his other works; however, that is not to say that this work is traditional. Though not as spectacularly colored as historic masks, this piece is a commentary on the current social life of contemporary individuals. It is not ceremonial but is an art piece and is noticeably similar in form to his later work and the subject of my discussion, *Transformation Mask*.

Transformation Mask

As mentioned above, the work of most interest to this study is a complex transformation mask that was created in collaboration with Microsoft Vancouver and the Garage in 2017. The artwork, *Transformation Mask*, features the prominent shapes and colors of other Heiltsuk raven masks described in Chapter 1. However, in this case, rather than use natural materials and hand carving the surface, *Transformation Mask* is made of contemporary materials and, through the use of cutting-edge technology, becomes more than just Raven – he becomes a “cyborg.”⁵² *Transformation Mask* was 3D printed, features robotics, and the Microsoft HoloLens.⁵³ It is made up of more than 20 components all of which are 3D printed. This piece was originally shown in an exhibition entitled “Shawn Hunt: Transformation,” which was centered on the theme of transformation in Indigenous art. This piece begs the question: can technology change the way that we experience traditional art forms? And can these forms evolve into something new?

Rather than competing with technology, Hunt is using it to his advantage to tell new as well as traditional stories. Through the use of robotics and human interaction, the mask is able to open and close independently of the wearer. Other contemporary mask makers choose to use new media to their advantage as well. Red cedar, acrylic paint, and

⁵² Microsoft Vancouver, “UPDATED: Transformation Mask | Shawn Hunt + Microsoft Vancouver,” Youtube video, 5:39, July 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=DT9qsRRARYk

⁵³ Microsoft Vancouver is a co-owner of the work *Transformation Mask*. I recognize that the interest of and collaboration with a corporate entity further complicates the issues discussed in this thesis. Not only does it bring up questions of interest in indigenous identity but also the gentrification of the Northwest Coast and the issues surrounding the monetary investment of a corporation in an artist. These issues would require further explanation that is not the focus of this thesis.

commercially made metallic hinges are often used on masks today to achieve the same function as those masks made historically; they retain all of the drama of these pieces but through independent means. Original transformation masks were historically carved from cedar and the “transformation” would be mechanical using a fiber string and pulleys. Cloaked in red light, *Transformation Mask* opens to reveal a portrait mask of a human face– the wearer’s face; the human “performer” wearing the mask becomes a part of the piece. The virtual reality headset they look through, the Microsoft HoloLens, reveals a dazzling video of a crackling fire and transforming Raven on the real plinth several feet in front of the mask. In this piece, Hunt is connecting the past and present by using technology to invoke the transformational and vision-like experience that has been passed down by his ancestors through oral traditions. Through the use of the transformation mask form and the virtual reality headset, this work is able to bring the physicality of the object and the ephemeral experience of being a part of a transformation together.

Interaction is key to the artwork as it communicates through Bluetooth hardware that, upon contact, synchronizes the visuals in the HoloLens with the physical mask. Until Hunt’s *Transformation Mask*, in this context, the HoloLens had never been used in a sculptural art piece. Hunt explains that he was interested in how a mask and the HoloLens together could be used to tell a story. However, stories are told through not just visuals. The virtual reality may take precedence in this piece, but the actual reality – the gallery – is also important. The environment surrounding the mask contributes to the understanding and effectiveness of the piece overall. In previous exhibitions, this piece has been surrounded by total darkness – perhaps referencing the environment of a big house with the sole sources of light being the fire in the middle of the dance floor and the

smoke hole in the roof. Though it is not meant to mimic a specific Northwest Coast ceremony, its transformation of the gallery space is meant to emulate the feeling or experience of wearing and dancing a mask such as this. Like this environment, all eyes become fixated on *Transformation Mask* when it opens to reveal bright red lights and whirring noises.

Though this transformation mask physically changes, the viewer is also able to change their “reality.” The wearer is able to access another world inside the mask through the HoloLens. The video shown through the device is a digital rendering of a roaring fire and can only be seen by the wearer. It was drawn by Hunt himself using virtual reality software. This fire then seems to transform before the wearer’s eyes to reveal crest figures such as Eagle, Whale, and Raven himself. This “virtual reality” mimics the power and connection to the supernatural realm that a dancer would have when wearing a traditional mask in ceremony. Figures in this virtual “world” are drawn using an unconventional application of the complex formline style synonymous with the Northwest Coast. Hunt has called his style “neoformline”⁵⁴ as it uses the style of Northwest Coast artists but is manipulated to push the boundaries of what traditionally is considered formline. However, Hunt says that it is meant to emulate the experience of wearing a transformation mask not to simulate a ceremony itself.⁵⁵ With all of these aspects in mind, this work becomes a complete audio and visual experience for those wearing and watching the transformation.

⁵⁴ Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk). Interview with Alexandra Best. May 11, 2016. BAF Studio. <http://www.shawnhunt.net>

⁵⁵ Terese Lukey, personal communication with Shawn Hunt, March 1, 2019.

The mask features many aspects of a traditional Raven mask (ḡvũíḡmł) including its form and outward appearance. The form of this mask begins with an elongated, bulbous triangular shape connected to an ovular form on its far end – this creates the head and beak of Raven. The departure from the handmade surface can be seen in the clarity of line and the sleekness of the beak. Though the surface of the mask is not hand carved, it is faceted to mimic the way the hand would have altered the surface. Two thirds of the way down on either side of the beak are two circles that have within them intertwined lines creating a mesh. These are meant to represent Raven’s flaring nostrils. Along the lower portion of the beak is a red line that is bisected by a cut on either side; there is also a cut that bisects the top and underside of it. All of these openings meet at the apex of the beak. Though these are subtle cuts, they suggest that the mask has a mechanical function in which it is able to open and close. The subtlety of its mechanics allow the viewer to be surprised by the transformation within. On either side of the head are two rectangular-shaped forms which are surrounded by the same mesh that is seen in the nostrils on the beak. Around the mesh, on either side, is a red line that draws on formline style due to its ovoid shape. The rectangles within the almond areas are meant to represent Raven’s eyes. These eyes reveal another technological advancement on the transformation mask that is atypical. The eyes blink like they are real eyes, however, rather than this being achieved through ropes and pulleys, they are animated through the use of digital phone screens. Like the rest of the eye, the pupil is also red. There is an emphasis on clean lines and fluid design elements. The mask features three colors – red, white, and black – which appear throughout the piece. The main body of the mask is black while prominent features, such as the eyes, lips, and nostrils, are outlined in red. These are all fairly typical

conventions for a Raven depiction. But unlike traditional masks, this piece is supported by its own mount and does not actually sit on the wearer's head or face. Instead of wearing the mask, the "wearer" stands behind the mount and places their head into the HoloLens glasses and mask. Hunt can be seen standing behind the mask in Figure Five.

The inner portion of the mask is another access point to understanding Raven and his transformations. On each portion of the three segments of the mask are featured aspects of a more typical Raven. Again, he sports ovoid eye shapes in the formline tradition. Just below the eyes and extending along the length of the beak is a striking line of red lights. The lower portion of the mask, the jaw, also features formline designs in red that through the use of bilateral symmetry fill the inner space of the jaw. Hunt is able to manipulate and explore this structure while still maintaining the fundamentals of traditional formline. Where the face normally is on a "traditional" transformation mask appears a pair of clear glasses – a virtual reality headset known as the Microsoft HoloLens. Below this feature are a myriad of lines created by the mechanics and wires used to open and close the mask. This inner portion is just as complex as the outer façade. This is the same way that transformation masks were traditionally treated and an example of such can be seen in Figure Twenty Four.

Raven, featured within or a part of most of Hunt's work, is the trickster that is the focus of *Transformation Mask*. J. Bradley Hunt says that he gets most of his inspiration from Raven, the crest figure on his grandfather's side of the family.⁵⁶ This familial connection to Raven gives Shawn Hunt the right to use Raven in his art. It is a familial

⁵⁶ "J. Bradley Hunt, Heiltsuk (1946-)," Spirit Wrestler Gallery, Accessed November 24, 2018. http://www.spiritwrestler.com/catalog/index.php?artists_id=697; In Heiltsuk, the word for Raven Crest is ḡvũixdán̓x̓v.

tradition to be a carver that has been passed on to him by his father just as his clan imagery was passed down as well. Clan crests were usually created and upheld by the head of the household. This connects generations and ensures the endurance and survival of the culture and its practices. Included in the rights to this image, "...members of societies inherited the privilege to perform certain masked dances..."⁵⁷ that accompanied them. Though this mask will never be danced, it retains aspects of traditional performance in its mechanical "transformation" abilities.

By seeing a mask made from modern-day materials, Hunt allows outsiders to get a glimpse of Heiltsuk life while not revealing sacred knowledge. The mask allows the viewer and user to have a deeper connection with the culture and better understand an aspect of Heiltsuk life. Hunt states that he wants to "evolve [this practice] in new ways to tell our stories."⁵⁸ Typically, when you see masks today, they are floating on a wall in a museum behind glass; in this context, you are not seeing this piece as part of a culture or even as a mask but rather as sculpture. This makes the piece devoid of all spiritual and cultural connections. It becomes an object with a label on an armature in a place meant to educate about what that object is. In museums, masks become simply "art" or "artifact" and nothing more. Hunt states that *Transformation Mask*, "...has a purpose and a function that is both of this world and another"⁵⁹ making it more than just an object to the Heiltsuk people. Thus the same way that all transformation masks act within the

⁵⁷ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006): 100.

⁵⁸ Microsoft Vancouver, "UPDATED: Transformation Mask."

⁵⁹ Shawn Hunt, and Robert Butterworth, "Behind the Mask: Exploring the Origins of the Transformation Mask," interview by SIGGRAPH, May 17, 2018, <https://blog.siggraph.org/2018/05/behind-the-mask-exploring-the-origins-of-the-transformation-mask.html/>

community, *Transformation Mask* is a way for the viewer to connect to both the historic and the contemporary culture of the Heiltsuk nation.

Shawn Hunt is creating by using traditional elements and motifs, and even sometimes traditional methods of making, but is dealing with modern issues of identity, revival and respect for ceremony and ancestors, and resistance to colonial histories and narratives. Like most masks made by contemporary Northwest Coast artists, *Transformation Mask* was not made to be worn or danced. In this case, there is a fine line between functional and artistic which is blurred or impossible to determine. There is opportunity for critique in his overt use of ceremonial forms in non-native places; some might argue that he is playing to the voyeuristic non-indigenous community and that he is promoting the fetishization of native culture, however, I disagree. Rather than be a traditional ceremonial piece, *Transformation Mask* is meant to be situated in a different kind of ceremonial place – the atmosphere of the museum where viewers come to experience and to be educated. By avoiding specific stories and offering a way to access the material through non-traditional means he seems to circumvent that critique. It is more than a transformation mask in this case. Literally, it is meant to transform ideas and notions of an already established tradition and offer a way to interface with a different world. In a way, it is making tradition a part of the here and now.



Figure 5:
Shawn Hunt wearing *Transformation Mask*
Courtesy of Microsoft Vancouver and Shawn Hunt



Figure 6:
Transformation Mask
Shawn Hunt
2017, Private Collection, Microsoft Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
3D Printed Plastic, circuit boards, lights, metal, speakers, and Microsoft HoloLens
Courtesy of Microsoft Vancouver and Shawn Hunt

CHAPTER 3: WHAT IS AUTHENTIC?

Transformation Mask approaches the subjects of authenticity and what it means to be indigenous in a way that touches on traditional roots while incorporating contemporary issues and media. Hunt uses technology as a way to expand traditional practices to allow the interpretation of the work to be limitless. However, with an extreme departure from traditional materials, can Hunt's contemporary pieces be considered traditional? And how do his works touch on contemporary issues of authenticity and indigenous identity? What are the criteria used to authenticate Heiltsuk art, by whom, and to what end? And is there such a thing as native art which is not "authentic?"

First generation artists working in the same mediums as Shawn Hunt and others continuing that tradition today often refer to their works as "traditional" or "authentic." Contrary to this, many current-day – often younger – artists are concerned about the overuse and incorrect use of these terms that historically were employed by non-native peoples to confine and control what indigenous art was and is. It is another way to assert colonial dominance. Authenticity has been a major subject of discussion since colonial powers began regulating non-western cultures throughout the Americas. It is used to distinguish the valuable from the worthless and too often does not include an application of criteria that reflects an indigenous value system. "Authentic" native art was created during the times of salvage anthropology and the Arts and Crafts movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States as an attempt to preserve native culture and the "vanishing Indian." Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner discuss in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* that when authenticity comes into question it inherently reveals more about the people collecting the

objects than the maker. Those that were visiting these areas for the sole purpose of collecting were more interested in “preserving” the works that portrayed the past more than the period in which they were actually collecting. Like the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in the United States, Canada has a British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts Society that assures authenticity of objects. These outdated government organizations need to be changed or discontinued entirely if we are to move forward into a more inclusive understanding of native, because, quite obviously, Native peoples never vanished, and their art did not need preserving making this all obsolete and mis-informed. Paul Chaat Smith reminds us through a quote by Henry Louis Gates that “‘authenticity’ is among the founding lies of the modern age.”⁶⁰

In *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art*, Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault offer various chapters on topics such as identity politics and colonialism which have dominated the art and anthropology literature in the last two decades in relation to the work of Bill Reid (Haida). This text is compiled of papers from a symposium focused on Reid and his legacy. Though the first two sections are steadily focused on Reid’s work and influence on Haida art, the last two sections touch on more general ideas of indigenous identity and modernity. Section three is focused on the Northwest Coast and the art traditions of the people living in this area. The focus taken by many of the chapter authors is the revival of artistic traditions and how this was constructed during Bill Reid’s lifetime. The final section features chapters concentrated on how modernity in native art was shaped by European constructs and continues to

⁶⁰ Page 1 of *Luna Remembers*, Paul Chaat Smith, from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of looking at a Black Man* (1997)

shape our understanding of native life, culture, histories, and identities. Of most interest to this study is the discussion of revival and renaissance on the Northwest Coast. The use of the word “renaissance” to describe the revival of historic Haida art styles is as controversial as using the word “authentic” to describe any object of native culture. By using the word “renaissance,” scholars are imposing a western term on a very non-western field. It is inaccurate in many cases because for there to be a renaissance there had to be a preceding death or a decline of a culture and its practices. The same goes for authenticity – if something is “authentic” then something else has to be “inauthentic.” Each has an equal and opposite reaction, which is too black and white to describe native histories. David Summers notes in his chapter “What Is a Renaissance?” that E.H. Gombrich expresses in his text, *Story of Art*, that “progress in the imitation of appearance is the aim of art...”⁶¹ What he is saying is that art that is made based on the development of other ideas and goals (and not to imitate other works) is considered “early,” not “primitive,” and needs to be brought into a more modern sense; as Summers puts it, “...up to cultural speed.”⁶² This idea expressed by Gombrich and further explained by Summers is at the root of primitivism and art and primitivist notions of art. It is problematic and does not allow change. It allows native art to more easily fall into the categories of “authentic” and “inauthentic.”

Markers of modernity in native art are often said to be the abstraction and adoption of Western styles of depiction and techniques. In this way, “...the definition of

⁶¹ David Summers, “What Is a Renaissance” in *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art*, eds. Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004): 134.

⁶² Summers, “What Is a Renaissance,” 134.

the modern is as artificial as the definition of traditional...”⁶³ This makes the term “art” as problematic as modern, traditional, contemporary, and even the designation of “native.” If the intention of the piece being created is not to be an art object, can you call it art? Calling something art elevates it in the western world. Art also establishes identity and allows societies to respond to their environment. The degradation of the native community by white settlers inspired both a repulsion toward the people as well as a nostalgic view of “traditional” Indian life before the “contamination” of the Western world.⁶⁴ This is why there is no globally accepted definition of art⁶⁵; it is far too subjective, and many cultures do not have the language to even describe it as such. “The debate on whether or not such works (masks) are ‘art’ obscures their meaning and intent.”⁶⁶ Hunt’s works offer a better way to understand and navigate being a contemporary artist in an environment that favors tradition.

Through the text *Privileging the Past*, art historian Judith Ostrowitz clearly asks the question: what makes Northwest Coast Native American art authentic? And, why is traditional art what is so deeply valued by contemporary artists in a world of art history that is focused on the avante-garde? She examines case studies of both historic and contemporary arts and their displays. Ostrowitz argues that Northwest Coast art has been perceived, judged, and valued by those outside the community, such as curators, for their historic accuracy. They have been judged by their resemblance to styles, makers, and

⁶³ Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1904-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 29.

⁶⁴ Janet Catherine Berlo, *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992): 89.

⁶⁵ Carolyn Dean, “The Trouble with (the Term) Art,” *Art Journal* 65.2 (2006): 24.

⁶⁶ Peter MacNair, Robert Joseph, and Bruce Grenville, *Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998): 53.

other objects from the pre-colonial past. She also asserts that contemporary native arts cannot be compared to other contemporary arts where originality is prized most of all. She notes that contemporary artists are fully aware of the values of the Western art historical canon and the power that museums have to define the fit of works within it. Unfortunately, she follows suit with many other scholars by focusing on the collection and display of identity through replication in Northwest Coast art. Like many other scholars, she suggests that this is vital to the expression of identity and necessary for recognizing the privilege to produce art. Hunt believes that “if I just talk about old myths, I am partially responsible for killing culture. New iconography is about not just Native issues but human issues; it is helping to propel the culture forward.”⁶⁷ Though Hunt’s works are not outright copies of traditional masks and reflect original thoughts, his works have been criticized for taking advantage of historic depictions. “Authentic” Native art assumes that there is only one mode of expression or representation of beliefs. When considering the authenticity of an object it is critical to consider who is defining and using the term in that context. When asked how his work challenges notions of authenticity, Hunt says:

For me I look at it very simply. I am a Heiltsuk person making art now in 2019. I can use whatever technology or medium that I choose to express myself. There are no limitations. I’m not much different in my mentality than a Heiltsuk artist 100 years ago or 500 years ago. I use what is available to me to create. I don’t concern myself with authenticity. I am who I am.⁶⁸

As Hunt says, authenticity is not of his concern meaning that he is not bound by replicating historic forms or by using historic materials. He is native and therefore he is

⁶⁷ Shawn Hunt quoted in Ian M Thom, et al, *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009): 66.

⁶⁸ Terese Lukey, personal communication with Shawn Hunt, March 1, 2019.

making native art; he does not question his identity but rather takes pride in it. His works deserve to be considered for their own merits, and not against the standards imposed by tradition and authenticity.

Indigenous identity, being one of the main focuses in his work, is a common subject explored by other contemporary artists such as Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unangan). Galanin works across multiple medias employing video, sculpture, and two-dimensional works to discuss identity politics and his own heritage as an Alaskan Native man. Like Hunt, Galanin works to change ideas of indigeneity and what the “authentic” native looks like in contemporary society. Galanin and Hunt both recognize that by allowing outside audiences to dictate what indigeneity is does not allow innovation or environmental change. The Heiltsuk community was one of the first in the area to readily adopt some colonial practices; this is why so little art historical literature focuses on these people. However, just because they adopted some colonial ideas does not mean that their own traditions stopped or were replaced. Rather, they integrated portions of colonial life into their own already established traditions. Rick Hill (Tuscarora) emphasizes when writing for *Indian Artist* magazine that:

...people change how they live their lives. Beliefs change. Perspectives change. The art of any individual will therefore change over the years. In the past, archaeologists have tried to define the arts by their similarity over the years (however)... change is actually traditional.⁶⁹

Because of the potlatch ban, art changed. As Rick Hill mentions above, change is traditional. In this case, it was exacerbated by the intervention of the Canadian government; still artists like the renowned chief Willie Seaweed (Kwakwaka'wakw)

⁶⁹ Richard Hill, “The Battle Over Tradition,” *Indian Artist* 1:1 (Spring, 1995): 90, quoted in Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 59.

continued to create – underground – and, in fact, expand what was “traditional” into a new form that many scholars and art historians have compared to the western period of Baroque art. Some versions of art history say that the traditions of the Northwest Coast ceased when Charles Edenshaw died, or when the potlatch was outlawed, and only flourished again in the 1960s as a sort of cultural “renaissance.” However, this is incorrect as those from outside the community were the ones assuming this; groups such as the Kwakwaka'wakw continued their traditions in defiance of the laws. This is one of the problems with using and referring to artworks with categories and descriptors such as modern, contemporary, traditional, historic and for Seaweed “baroque.” It makes perspectives contradictory because works that are considered contemporary now will become historic as time passes. It separates the past from the present – which for Northwest Coast communities are not separate.⁷⁰ As territories shrunk and land was lost due to a forced and rapid colonization of the area, access to materials was lost. Today, the same loss is felt by the communities that were relocated from their traditional homelands. By using contemporary media, artists like Hunt are still continuing traditions that were practiced since time immemorial but with the materials that are readily accessible to them today. This does not make these pieces “inauthentic” in any way. Rather, it makes them “authentic” for today’s standards.

Seaweed’s exaggerated masks have become examples of change that was accepted within the community. They were a response to outside influences and have been deemed today some of the best/most well-crafted examples of ceremonial regalia in

⁷⁰ For more information on this, see Deborah Doxtater’s chapter in *Revisions*, titled “Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History.”

museums. Contemporary artists use people like Seaweed as inspiration for further expansion of traditional methods of making, traditional thought processes, and traditional arts. In this way, traditional becomes contemporary. Shawn Hunt is one such artist who expands upon his Heiltsuk ancestry and the artworks that are found among museums and galleries in proximity to where he resides to create new media that incorporate his own “traditional” life. Colonization effectively changed the cultures of the area. Like that change, technological changes have affected the same area today. His work pushes the definition of what traditional native art is; it is intimate and reflective of his own personal experiences as a young person. He says of his art that “you always have to push the envelope as far as you can.”⁷¹

The problem with using words like “traditional,” “modern,” and “contemporary” is that they have their origins in European art history. Native art is too often relegated to being either ethnic, historical, or folk art and is never given the same consideration and status of Western art. Stretching the use of predictable art-historical categories, such as sculpture or painting, to embrace all manner of Native materials does not reveal anything about the actual objects and normalizes the use of art to describe them. Euro-American ideas of Native Americans are dwindled down into a consumable version of their true identity that is not dependent on the truth or the actual person for context, authenticity, or meaning. Often in the market, in the museum and in educational settings, native people are only okay if they are authentic to the narrative the outside world has created about being “traditional.” This word, traditional, limits those that fall into that category and

⁷¹ Heath Conn, “Carving a Legacy: Bradley Hunt passes on Northwest Coast native art traditions to sons Shawn and Dean,” *Sunshine Coast Life* Premier Issue (Spring 2007): 10.

does not allow for innovation, while those that use more contemporary mediums to express their ideas are not considered “native enough.” A lackadaisical attitude is how some artists respond to the current identity crisis in Indian Country; because they are faced with an outside world of misunderstanding and imposition of inaccurate beliefs, some are faced with accepting that their works’ perceptions are out of their control. When Hunt was asked how his work explores authenticity and indigenous identity he was largely indifferent saying, “I imagine that will be for others to decide. How my work is received is largely out of my control...I think and hope what people will take from it is the fact that although our history is ancient, our people are not.”⁷²

Objects favored by outsiders are those that are culturally pure and that reflect aesthetics and practices from a pre-contact lens – this is where the set of criteria that many use (even today) to determine if objects are “authentically” native comes from. I imagine for this reason, Hunt’s works are largely perceived as innovative but not “authentically” Heiltsuk based on the collecting traditions already established by museums across the globe. This is connected to ideas surrounding the use of technology. In short, too much technology – as defined by Euro-Americans – was read as a sign of “inauthenticity” and becomes a way to deny that Heiltsuk people always had technologies of their own. Hence, Hunt’s “cyborg” Raven is actually quite in keeping with how technology has been integral to Heiltsuk identity and culture. However, it is still not uncommon to encounter a gallery or a private collector who believes that anything produced before colonization is “authentic” while anything produced afterwards is “inauthentic.” Assuming this mindset that pre-contact objects are historic artifacts and are

⁷² Terese Lukey, personal communication with Shawn Hunt, March 1, 2019.

“culturally pure” does not recognize the years of cultural change that happened before colonization and after. It is an arbitrary selection of a single stage of development in the artistic styles of one group. Many designs and ideas were directly taken from neighboring communities and co-opted to suit the needs of the Heiltsuk. Once they were adopted into the Heiltsuk canon, they became Heiltsuk. Most famous is the adoption of the Hamatsa in communities spanning all the way into Alaska; this ceremony is of Heiltsuk origin and was co-opted to suit the needs of the other communities. It is false to assume that communities were completely isolated from one another and kept ideas to themselves. Interchange and trade were happening long before colonization and was vital to survival. It allowed crossing of artistic styles and practices making for easy innovation and change. This is why traditional and contemporary categories are very limiting and damaging to creativity and identity.

Escaping the use of these words, however, is impossible. Traditional is used often to refer to historic works by even those within communities, so in the interest of understanding and easier communication of my thoughts on the works spoken about in my thesis, I will continue to use it. Its use will be employed solely to distinguish between those masks made historically and those made in the twenty-first century. I do not like using these words and want to depart from using them. Nonetheless, I have yet to develop a more informed and better way to describe the art and culture. For words such as “authenticity/authentic,” rather than trying to come up with a suitable alternative, I am calling for its discontinued use. I want to make the word “authentic” in relation to all things native, unsayable; I want scholars, amateurs, and natives alike to remove it from their vocabulary in an effort to find more appropriate terms to describe the work. If to be

continued, scholars need to move away from outdated versions of the word and move towards a more inclusive and culturally relevant self-designation of authenticity.

Authenticity was an idea imposed by an outside audience and the market onto the culture in question, in this case, all North American native cultures. That being said, authenticity should not include the notion that outside influences are bad for the culture and art; if this was assumed, then the contemporary melting pot that is the United States would not be what it is today, nor would native culture. *Transformation Mask* by Shawn Hunt is an artwork that is poised to bring the ideas discussed above into the realm of museums, galleries, and the art world in general. It brings terms such as traditional, contemporary, historic, modern, native, authentic, and inauthentic into the discussions of native discourse and art. Its display, meaning, and use reflect today's understandings of indigeneity inside and outside native communities. It is an important part of moving forward into a well-informed and altered generation of artists, makers, scholars, and educators.

CONCLUSION

Heiltsuk masks, in both their form and their function, have changed immensely throughout the last one hundred years. The effects of colonization, tourism, anthropologists, and the art market are ever more apparent to those studying the Northwest Coast. Objects such as masks became commodities throughout the world and were taken from their communities to be displayed in museums and galleries. Without the context of their people and their specific ceremonies, these works became mere sculpture to those outside the culture. Traditional masks displaying culture heroes, such as Raven, lost their meaning by being displayed in such a sterile manner. Heiltsuk masks were meant to be danced, they were meant to be worn; they are ceremonial in their own right and should not be separated from that context.

Raven, one of the most well-known culture heroes of the area to outsiders, was the subject of many masks throughout the Northwest Coast. With the colonization and the outlawing of the potlatch, Raven went underground. Being a part of winter ceremonials, the Cannibal raven was no longer being depicted. Most of the masks that were left were taken from communities and scattered to museums, anthropologists, and even destroyed. Traditional works of art either ceased to be created or were hidden from sight in order to avoid persecution of their owners and makers. After the potlatch ban was lifted, new revivals of the traditions began.⁷³ Along with this, many masks were also repatriated to their home communities in an effort to allow Northwest Coast native people to regain their cultural history. Expansions on traditional ideas and practices became the focus of

⁷³ For information about the revival of traditions on the Northwest Coast, see *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art* edited by Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault.

modern Heiltsuk artists during this time and beyond. These traditions are still being maintained by carvers and artists throughout the Northwest Coast.

Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk) is one of many contemporary artists who use these historic traditions to their advantage. Hunt expands his cultural traditions in ways that both create new narratives and maintain a sense of the sacred through clan imagery. In *Transformation Mask*, he is able to situate his cultural history in the present. He explores issues throughout all of his artworks such as land, identity, politics of representation, and experimental media. He links contemporary and historical mask-making traditions into a new form of art that suits the needs of contemporary Heiltsuk and outsider audiences.

In *Transformation Mask*, Hunt has drawn on his roots as a carver and a painter to create a mask with the materials of the digital age such as circuit boards, lights, and plastics. He removes the traditionally hand-carved surface, replacing it with contemporary materials, while maintaining a transformation mask form. Raven opens to reveal the face of a human surrounded by dazzling lights and whirring sounds. This work makes the viewer think about aspects of metamorphosis and transformation – which were traditionally very important to the medium – in a more modern sense. In this work, rather than being just an aspect of the overall composition, like in Hunt's piece *Artifact* (Figure Seven), Raven is the prominent figure of the piece. Rather than referencing a specific Raven story, Hunt says of the work that he is more concerned with creating a new story in the hope that one day it will become a part of history.⁷⁴ The Raven narrative associated with this mask grounds the viewer and connects them with the subject in this work, as

⁷⁴ Terese Lukey, personal communication with Shawn Hunt, March 1, 2019.

well as many of his other pieces, but it is the deeper underlying epistemological practices and beliefs that are what truly enhance the exploration of a piece.

His works along with many others by Northwest Coast artists have transformed over time from being called historic to modern to contemporary. Even the use of the word “art” to describe works such as masks has evolved. “Speakers of the many coastal languages assert that there is no word in their nomenclature for art and that, by implication, the concept is an alien one.”⁷⁵ These categorical terms are often an incorrect imposition of beliefs by outsiders on the works of native people. Instead of assuming a western view of an object by using these terms, perhaps the use of indigenous terms to describe indigenous objects would fulfill the need to categorize and describe objects with aesthetic value. For many native artists, art is a self-defining political act that means more than just its outward aesthetics. It brings to mind a larger question that will have to be answered in another instance: how and why do objects endure?

⁷⁵ Peter MacNair et al, *Down from the Shimmering Sky*, 47.

APPENDIX A:
Interview with Shawn Hunt

Interview edited for clarity

Lukey: Where did the idea for the mask originate and what was your inspiration for creating it?

Hunt: In 2017, I was asked by Microsoft Vancouver to create an art piece utilizing their maker lab space called the Microsoft Garage. The idea for Transformation Mask came out of my first meeting at Microsoft. I toured the garage facility and was given a demo of the technology. From that meeting I decided that the three areas of technology that I was interested in using were 3D printing, simple robotics, and Microsoft HoloLens. I wanted to use all three technologies to create one piece of art. The Transformation Mask made sense to me because I deal a lot with transformation and shape shifting in my practice. It also made sense because the original transformation masks were mechanical devices. I wanted to use the HoloLens because as far as I know it had not at that point been used as a part of a sculpture. I was interested in how a mask and the HoloLens together could be used to tell a story.

Lukey: Why a Raven transformation mask? and Are there specific masks or stories/tales you used as reference?

Hunt: The Raven is one of my crest figures, and an important creature in Heiltsuk mythology. He is known as a transformer/shapeshifter. I have used Raven many times in my work as the central figure. There is no specific story or tale that I referenced, I'm concerned with creating new stories in the hope that one day they will become part of our mythology/history.

Lukey: How does this work explore indigenous identity/indigeneity?

Hunt: I'm not sure. I imagine that will be for others to decide. How my work is received is largely out of my control. All of my work is for me an exploration of my identity as an indigenous person. What it means to be a Heiltsuk person living in present day British Columbia. I think and hope what people will take from it is the fact that although our history is ancient, our people are not.

Lukey: How does this work challenge notions of authenticity in relation to contemporary (native) art?

Hunt: I'm not sure if it does, that will be for the viewer to decide. I suppose that it is based on what the viewers notions of authenticity are. For me I look at it very simply. I am a Heiltsuk person making art in now 2019. I can use whatever technology or medium

that I chose to express myself. There are no limitations. I'm not much different in my mentality than a Heiltsuk artist 100 years ago or 500 years ago. I use what is available to me to create. I don't concern myself with authenticity. I am who I am.

Lukey: How does this work fit into your larger body of work? Are there any works of yours that at all relate to this or the topics explored above?

Hunt: Yes as I mentioned, the work is about story telling, myth making, transformation, shape shifting which are all ideas and concepts that I explore in my sculptures, paintings and jewelry. The only difference is that in this case I'm using some cutting edge technologies to convey my ideas instead of the more traditional mediums.

Lukey: I also have a few logistical questions: I need help pronouncing a couple words correctly, could you spell them out phonetically for me?⁷⁶

1. Heiltsuk
2. Nuyem
3. Waglisla
4. Gwágwakhwalanoóksiwey

I was also wondering if there is a Heiltsuk word for:

5. Art
6. Raven (not cannibal raven)
7. Mask
8. Ceremony
9. your indigenous beliefs/oral histories/related epistemology of Heiltsuk people

Hunt: I'm going to send you a link for an online Heiltsuk dictionary. It should help you with these questions as well as any more that you may have about language and words.
<https://mothertongues.org/heiltsuk/#/search>

Lukey: Will *Transformation Mask* be exhibited anywhere in the next year?

Hunt: I'm not sure. I hope so. It was supposed to be on display at the Heard Museum in Phoenix Arizona for several months starting February 28th but that exhibition has been postponed.

⁷⁶ Aside from the given link to the online dictionary, Hunt did not provide me with any information regarding the language.

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