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**Behind the Art of Artistry:
Organizational Assistance of Indigenous Artists on the Pacific Northwest Coast**

Introductory Note

American and Canadian nonprofit organizations work to assist indigenous¹ artists of the Pacific Northwest Coast in many ways: culturally, economically, educationally, and logistically. These forms of assistance and the relationship between artists and these organizations are the focus of my doctoral research.

My research combines Native American Studies and Nonprofit Research in asking how nonprofit organizations and foundations support indigenous artists along the Pacific Northwest Coast. I intend to reveal the existing forms of assistance, look at how the organizations are working with and for the artists, as well as learn about the decision-making processes in the institutions. I will illustrate why the organizations offer the services (e.g. workshops, seminars) that they offer and on what basis they make these decisions. The primary objective of this paper is, in this context, to present initial results and interpretations of the field research that I carried out along the Pacific Northwest Coast in 2012.

In order to do so, I will at first outline the rationale behind the project as well as briefly introduce the research question and the conceptual framework of the project. This will be followed by an explanation of the methodology before I will illustrate in greater depth the initial field results and their implications.

Rationale & Background

The Pacific Northwest Coast spans across Southeast Alaska and the coastal regions of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. It is the home of Tlingit, Haida, Kwakiutl, and Coast Salish people, to name only a few, and a region in which their unique form of artistic expression is omnipresent: the formline design. Yet, as special as Native art may be to the Northwest, it

¹ I use the terms “native” and “indigenous” interchangeably in this paper because I believe these terms to be the most neutral and accepted by indigenous people and scholars when talking about a general subject such as non-profit support for indigenous people. Natives consider the frequently used term “American Indians” offensive because it was assigned to them by Euro-Americans and the term “Native American” inappropriate because it includes everyone born in North America, tribal affiliation or not (Mihesuah xi-xii).

Yet I am aware that umbrella terms such as “native” and “indigenous” cluster people from very different indigenous backgrounds, communities, language families, and nations together as if they were one – a fact that makes it necessary to decide for each topic anew which term is the most appropriate to use.

is most often not an interest in the arts that attracts people to travel to the Northwest Coast, it is the scenery as an interviewee told me. That makes for a distinctly different setting from, for example, the Southwestern United States where more than 175,000 people travel each year to see the arts at the Santa Fe Indian Market in New Mexico. To put it in the words of, again, another interviewee from the Pacific Northwest: “there’s a market out there, they just don’t see the Northwest as a place to go”. This is a statement that illustrates the Northwest’s current challenge: a market for the arts has yet to be established, a market that might allow the artists to actually live off their artwork. This is a challenge that clearly adds to the importance of nonprofit support for native artists in this region.

Due to the central role that nonprofits evidently play in supporting Native artists, it is crucial to gain insight and examine the current situation of the collaboration between nonprofits and native artists so that both may benefit in future.

Research Question & Conceptual Framework

In order to gain the necessary knowledge, the study is, on the one hand, led by the following research question: How (to what extent and in what ways) are third sector organizations such as nonprofits and foundations supporting indigenous artists along the Pacific Northwest Coast? On the other hand, the study is set in the concept that nonprofits take on responsibilities and tasks for society that the government does not or cannot handle, bringing the organizations’ role as service provider into focus. It is especially the in-depth look at the latter role – at the *what* is, *when* offered, to *whom* and on *which* condition – that enables this study to determine which services are provided today, and with that, to make a contribution to the field of Nonprofit Studies in the form of much needed basic research.² Directly applied to the present project, this concept allows studying the American and Canadian nonprofits along the Pacific Northwest and their contribution to society in the form of the kinds of services that these organizations make available – services that often allow native artists to not only enhance their artistic skills, but also to learn about marketing themselves or writing grants. These are skills that are very likely to contribute to establishing an artistic career and with that, to increasing financial stability.

² While at first glance, it might be more obvious to look at the quality and the effectiveness of the nonprofits’ work, it is with studying the nonprofit research literature that it becomes apparent that the nonprofit sector is still an under-researched sector. The consequence of this being the necessity to first conduct basic research that establishes knowledge about the current situation before applied research, such as an evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of provided services, can be carried out.

Methodology

The study is led by a qualitative, inductive approach to which a theory-driven element is added. The latter element feeds on ascertained assumptions and concepts of nonprofit and civil society research that are one of the constituents of this study's conceptual framework.

The field research was conducted along the Pacific Northwest over the course of six months in 2012 during which I carried out 18 interviews with representatives of foundations, non-profit and tribal organizations as well as 17 interviews with established as well as aspiring indigenous artists. They were both semi-structured expert interviews for which I used interview guides consisting of a list of questions that I had developed inductively with a peer group before going into the field to ensure that I would ask the different institutions and artists about the same issues. Simultaneously, I focused on remaining open and receptive to any new, relevant issue introduced by the interviewees. The organizations were selected for an interview by means of extensive literature and online research as to their mission statements and daily work that they are doing in the Northwest, as well as, additionally, on the recommendation of experts in the field. The artists, in contrast, were only approachable once I was in the field and in most cases solely with the help of the so-called snowball technique.

With regards to the interview analysis for which I am using thematic coding as outlined by Boyatzis (1998), it has to be said that to some extent the above-mentioned assumptions and concepts inevitably informed my code development in an otherwise inductive analysis process.

Findings

This section outlines the initial findings of the field research grouped into four categories. These categories represent the major aspects that were covered in the interviews – aspects that I consider essential to answer the above-mentioned research question. One category is the range of services that non-profit organizations offer in the Northwest today. Another category addresses the organizations' principles and approaches to assisting indigenous artists in the region, while a third category discusses the decision-making processes in the organizations. The fourth and last category will be the organizations' asking for and dealing with feedback.

Provided Services

That said, I like to begin with presenting the currently provided services that again can be grouped into 4 categories: artistic skills, arts-related skills or knowledge, financial support, and a last group of services that due to its variety is merely labeled “other” services at this stage.

Many non-profit organizations offer training in artistic skills such as one to several-day workshops in which established as well as master artists teach weaving, carving, formline design, silver-smithing, beading and skin sewing, or basketry. Training is also offered in open studios where aspiring artists may go to watch and work alongside accomplished artists. A longer lasting form of teaching artistic skills are apprenticeship programs with master artists, for example, that are often intended to run one or two years.

The second category of services, arts-related skills, includes one to several-day workshops on marketing, instructions on work-safety procedures, or classes in curating art. Another arts-related program is the training of artists to become art teachers to increase the number of art teachers available in the region who could teach native art in smaller communities. If the artists complete a so-called *teaching artist academy* in addition to the mentioned training at the organization, the region’s schools could also hire them. It is hence a training that provides an artist not only with additional skills, but also with an employment opportunity. A third kind of service in the arts-related context are educational trips to cultural institutions such as the Burke Museum in Seattle, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., or even to museums in Germany or Russia which the organizations offer established artists or community scholars. The purpose of these trips is not only the transfer of knowledge between artists, artifacts, and scholars, but also to provide an environment in which artists and scholars can become acquainted with each other and learn from one another. A last project that – while having been envisaged already – has yet to be successfully established in the region is an artist-in-residence program.

Direct and indirect financial support, the third category, is made available, for example, through employment by organizations that hire artists to do guided tours in museums and cultural centers. Another form of financial support is the reimbursement of an artist’s transportation costs to a workshop, or of the workshop fees. Organizations often also either pay for materials and supplies, or make them available to the artists for free. A third form of indirect financial support is that organizations offer gallery or retail space where the artists can exhibit and sell their artwork. And a similar service, though not yet as widespread, is featuring an artist’s work in an institution’s online shop.

The fourth and last of the service categories is the one labeled “other” services. These services share being somewhat arts-related, and focused on enhancing the artists’ professional careers in a more indirect way: by providing networking opportunities for the artists during festivals, for example, or by organizing juried art shows that expose the artists and their work to the public. A last service that is, in this context, offered in the region is counseling – astonishingly to me, it was only mentioned once. It left me wondering whether it is so self-evident a service that no one would mention it specifically, or whether it is that due to planning and providing workshops and seminars, and competing for grants, the non-profit staff does not have the time for one on one counseling?

What was striking in this context were the interviewees’ differing opinions about the availability of services. Younger, aspiring artists expressed their discontent with the fact that hardly any workshops or other services are available to them. Older, more established artists, on the contrary, argued that today’s situation seemed much easier to them, due to media and social media access, and various supporting grants for artists. In addition to that, an organization’s representative stated that enough programs and workshops were available and that who stated the opposite, might not know where to find or where to look for information.

The crucial point that these statements illustrate is the uneven perception of the current situation in the field – a fact that indicates a first area of improvement: communication. It is essential that non-profit organizations communicate and promote the services that they offer in such a way, in which people can hear about them.

Approaches to Assisting Native Artists

The purpose of studying the organizations’ approaches to assisting Native artists is to examine if and how these approaches influence the availability of services. While the presented list of currently available services is at a first glance rather extensive, it is also a fact that the availability of the individual services is limited due to the region’s great distances. Another possibly limiting aspect in that context are the differing beliefs of the organizations as to which services are helpful for the artists – beliefs that provide the basis for the organizations’ different approaches to supporting the artists. Where one organization might believe in providing financial help but not the actual workshop, another institution might have its focus on the preservation of knowledge, and the passing on of artistic skills to the next generation. And yet another type of nonprofit might believe in first and foremost providing marketing and business training because they consider it to be essential for the artists to be prepared for the requirements of the western world. If we consider that these organizations

are likely hundreds, if not a thousand kilometers apart, it is evident that – aside from the vast terrain – the actual availability and variety of services is determined by the distinct beliefs of the organizations as to what they consider helpful and needed. The overall list of services might therefore seem comprehensive, yet it does not allow for a conclusion to be drawn about the actual availability of these services in every part of the Pacific Northwest. An additional aspect is the fact that the organizations rely heavily on and compete for funding to be able to offer their services. The fact that not every organization, and with that, not every belief in what is helpful, will receive funding also contributes to a limited availability of support services for native artists in the Pacific Northwest.

Decision-making Processes

The next category to consider are the organizations' differing decision-making processes. Some organizations rely on committees to guide their programming: these can be native artist committees composed of master artists who observe and comment on current issues that need to be addressed, or committees made up of staff members from the education, marketing, and/or arts departments who discuss what they want to offer and decide who should be approached to lead the workshops. Another committee that frequently runs the decision-making process is an institution's board of directors, occasionally supported by program policy or cultural advisory subcommittees. While these committees provide a more structured decision-making process that often has the people involved accept a compromise, some rather unconventional decision-making processes exist as well. These unconventional processes or decisions are merely driven by staff members' or teaching artist's interests in hosting a specific workshop – processes in which decisions for the one or the other workshop are often made "on a whim", as an interviewee told me.

That said, other organizations' experiences with a certain teacher or type of workshop also influence an organization's decision for or against providing a specific workshop or type of service. For many organizations, it is also the availability of funding that decides what they can offer – a situation that often stands in the way of long-term planning, but makes it necessary to organize a workshop the moment funding is granted.

The last two aspects that can also guide an organization's decision-making process are artist-related: one is the popularity of an artist's classes that encourages an organization to book the artist time and again, and the other is a specific interest a museum or an organization might have in an artist's work, so that they approach the artist directly about working with them.

Feedback

The last subject area concerns the organizations' asking for and dealing with feedback. When I entered the field in 2012, I wondered whether the organizations sought feedback about their services, and if they did, what was their procedure to do so. Unsurprisingly, some organizations use mailed and handed out surveys to obtain feedback about their workshops and programming. That said, some of these organizations have independent evaluators who periodically review the survey data and provide a written evaluation of the organization's work. Yet, more institutions than not are still only developing a survey system and some had not even considered setting up a survey to get feedback. A second source of feedback are the already mentioned cultural advisory committees as well as the culture bearers of a community who closely observe the work done by the non-profit organizations. Other organizations again, rely on direct feedback. Their staff members talk to the workshop participants at the end of a seminar to receive direct feedback. Other forms of feedback are the comments that participants leave on the organizations' social media websites, or the emails that participants send informing the institution about their workshop experience or express wishes for future programming.

What needs to be noticed in this context, however, is that although these methods of gathering feedback seem adequate, the main body of non-profit organizations in the Pacific Northwest rarely asks for feedback at all. This observation is endorsed by the fact that hardly any of the interviewed artists could recall ever having been asked for their opinion on any of the workshops that they participated in. Apart from not soliciting feedback in general, I consider it also problematic to seek feedback first-hand, for example at the end of a workshop, since not everyone is likely to speak candidly, if, for instance, the instructor is still present. An option here would be to use surveys because they provide a way of receiving critical feedback anonymously.

Implications

The outlined, initial findings comprise significant first implications for the working relationship between non-profit organizations and native artists. To me, it is obvious that the extensive selection of provided services is a valuable asset to the native artists in the Pacific Northwest. Yet these services are not regularly available to the artists for funding reasons, or for the fact that a local organization might not believe in advancing artistic skills, but only marketing knowledge, or vice versa. A suggestion to the non-profit organizations in the region would be to increase their networking activities: if the organizations coordinated themselves further, they could ease their workload due to growing synergy effects caused by

the collaboration with other organizations, and, as a consequence, ideally provide a more even distribution of services in the region. The same holds true for the approach to supporting artists – it is surely beneficial for the artists if the organizations believe in different ways of assisting them, yet if the organizations exchanged their experiences and thoughts on programming, it might make a more extensive selection of services available to the people everywhere in the Northwest.

A stronger collaboration between the individual non-profit organizations would also ease the effort to market Native Northwest Coast art, and to establish the Pacific Northwest as a place to go for the arts, aside from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

When we lastly look at the existing means of asking for feedback, it is crucial to recognize the importance for organizations to evaluate their programs in order to determine whether their services actually make a difference, or in what ways they could be improved. Hence I would like to ask the non-profit organizations in the Pacific Northwest to work on, or better still, to provide survey evaluations to their – what I consider them to be – customers.

Works Cited

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