

*Looking Beyond Himself:  
André Breton in the American Southwest*

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William & Mary

André Breton's "Notebook from the Trip to visit the Hopi Indians" offers readers discrete glimpses of observations from the founder of Surrealism's 1945 sojourn to the American Southwest. Reading Katharine Conley's translation of the "Notebook," one assumes a voyeuristic positionality that can feel as if you are reading over Breton's shoulder as he penned sentences that were likely written for his eyes only. The pages are relatively few in number but the reader feels compelled to travel along with the author as he makes notations about his experiences in Gallup, New Mexico, Acoma Pueblo and other stops along the way.

Much of what Breton wrote about and experienced was new to him; it was his first and only visit to the region. The primary reason for the visit was to witness aspects of culture and rituals, particularly the legendary Hopi Snake Dance. The Hopi ceremony was deemed enduring and believed to be linked to an ancient past. Breton was also newly married to Elisa Bindoff Claro; they traveled together on a journey with shared goals both experiential and practical, given Surrealists's interest in so-called primitive art.<sup>1</sup> Breton sought to collect objects of material culture, primarily Katsina dolls, made by the Indigenous artisans from the Southwest.

During the trip, Breton and his entourage interacted with Native people from a variety of communities, whose languages and cultural practices differed in significant ways. Perhaps, coming from a polyglot Europe, Breton did not find the linguistic diversity unusual. However, the members of the Native communities Breton visited, Navajo, Hopi, and Acoma Pueblo, speak languages from vastly different language families. Understanding the implications of this diverse linguistic landscape is still a subject of study among linguists and anthropologists.

Many of Breton's handwritten jottings are spare and somewhat hurried in their composition. Yet the "Notebook" is not a travelogue; it reads more like a series of ethnographic scratch notes. Before undertaking this journey, Breton

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and French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss met on a trans-Atlantic crossing to New York in 1941.<sup>2</sup> We can only imagine the conversations between them. In the four years prior to Breton's 1945 trip, Levi-Strauss and other anthropologists might well have encouraged Breton to travel widely, and later, when the trip was being planned, offered useful suggestions to Breton about what to look for and do during his journey to the Southwest. Were specific books and articles suggested as pre-trip readings to Breton? The "Notebook" indicates that Breton is familiar with specific details about the Hopi Snake Dance and references a work by Leo Crane and Julia Buttree, and Conley notes the same in her "Translator's Introduction."<sup>3</sup> This background, along with guidance and commentary offered during the trip by non-Hopis with the names of Mr. Powers and Mr. Smith, were reliable sources of information for Breton and Elisa. Moreover, it is likely that Breton was given information about the Hopi Snake Dance and what to look for, so that afterwards he is able to notice specific actions of dancers as they carry out their roles in the ceremony. He is also able to jot down specific details about what he has seen. Breton's description of the August 26th "Snake-dance at Walpi" is particularly rich with details.

Conversations with interlocutors both Native and non-Native capture the sense of immediacy of the ethnographic present in which Breton is enmeshed. He records purchases of Katsinas and Zuni paintings without including expanded provenance about the practices of manufacture or more fully situating the object's place in the pantheon of spirit beings. Rather it seems Breton's heightened visual sensibilities draw his attention to the vivid turquoise colors and sandstone shapes of the desert landscape. Along with references to the flora of the region these jump off the pages right from the beginning, as "Blue Turquoise," "Sand," "black seeds," "tattooed in red and black," "sticks of gray-blue or turquoise and of feathers like arrows from a parade." Breton seems enchanted by the setting as he tries to capture on paper sights and sounds from the dramatic arid landscape.

We can be certain that jottings in the "Notebook" do not capture all that Breton saw or likely remembered afterwards. However, since he did not travel alone, those with him would have been able to supplement and expand the memories he inscribed on paper. We imagine later conversations between André and Elisa about their shared experiences, and while holding treasured katsina dolls collected during their journey. Along with the "Notebook," such reminiscences would have allowed Breton to reimagine the trip to the Southwest. Importantly, like all scratch notes, the markings on paper serve to reengage the author's memory of time, places, colors, tastes, sounds and experiences, resulting in the reconstruction of deeper and more complex memories.

Breton carefully notes the dates of his visits to different locations in Arizona and New Mexico; however, references to significant global events of the era are surprisingly absent. At the beginning of the "Notebook" while Breton is in or

near Flagstaff, Arizona, he writes, “Navajos see Hopi as cowardly,” but he expands no further on this statement. A short time later, however, at the Hopi village of Hotevilla, Breton references the existing tensions between the Navajo and Hopi communities. From the text Breton appears to summarize a Navajo perspective about Hopi men choosing to be conscientious objectors rather than submit to military service:

Complete refusal to cooperate with the United States, particularly during wars. Thirty young men were imprisoned for their refusal to participate in military service: they are released after a few months in the hope that they will change their minds but they remain implacable, they’re imprisoned again, and that continues for four years.

While Breton does not provide additional context for this statement, the dates of his visit coincide with the end of World War Two in the Pacific. Breton is in the Southwest between the 7th and the 28th of August 1945, yet he does not mention World War Two in his “Notebook,” nor the dropping of the atomic bomb over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima on August 6th and Nagasaki on August 9th, which brought an end to the hostilities. Breton would not have known about the top-secret work of Navajo Code-Talkers on behalf of the United States military in the Pacific Theater. Their mission was not declassified until 1968. Nevertheless, the tension between the Navajo and the Hopi regarding military service is clearly part of discussions with interlocutors and mentioned more than once in Breton’s “Notebook.”

Breton acknowledges that the “Hopi are recognized as the best cultivators of dry land in the world.” Later in the “Notebook” there is a second reference to Hopi agricultural skill, with an important mention that “the government (U.S.) is proposing to irrigate their land. We can only just imagine what a problem that would be...” Several following sentences suggest that Breton was pondering aspects of this agricultural policy: “Should there be irrigation in these circumstances?” Here again, this comment suggests that Breton conversed with members of the community, likely non-Native and Native, about a number of wide-ranging topics including the agricultural and environmental issues of the day. Breton writes, for example, that “The Snake dance is the public demonstration that closes a secret nine-day ceremony conducted in the kivas by the Antelope and Snake clans.” Breton is then likely to have either read about the Snake Dance ritual or discussed the underlying meaning of the ritual with someone possessing a deeper knowledge of it.

It is unclear how much Breton knew about the forced stock reduction measures that were imposed on the Navajo Nation by the federal government. Concerns about the dust bowl of the 1930s in Texas and Oklahoma resulted in a 1933 decision by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to cull livestock on the reservation. The BIA concluded that two-thirds of Navajo lands were negatively impacted due to overgrazing practices by flocks of Navajo-owned sheep and goats. Thus,

the impact of overgrazing and the resulting eroded soil flowing into the Colorado River and Lake Mead led Washington, D.C. to implement a forced reduction of Navajo livestock by 400,000 animals. Sheep and goats owned by individual families represented the basic subsistence structure of the Navajo economy, and the forced reduction drove many Navajo families into a state of abject poverty. The stock reduction policy is still remembered as a traumatic event by the Navajo Nation.<sup>4</sup> Breton's visit to the region took place barely a decade after this policy was undertaken and would have been a raw subject of conversation. Breton references his discussion with Peter, an Indian associated with Mr. Powers, about the American government's livestock reduction. Breton is told that families are given specific allowances, based upon government formulas or "equivalences," for the number of livestock they may raise. The next sentence indicates that eighteen Indians in the village of Shungopovi "receive government aid because they are indigent." Yet he remarks on the community ethos of helping another with planting crops and sharing food. The distinctions between Hopi and Navajo economies and subsistence practices are not always clear in the "Notebook" nor indeed to Breton. The distinctions between the two communities in 1945 may have been somewhat difficult to see.

David Brugge argues that earlier decisions by the federal government put into motion a century-long land dispute between the Navajo and Hopi people.<sup>5</sup> Breton's visit would have taken place during a time when relations between the tribal governments of these two communities were fraught with distrust and animosity. Within a decade after Breton's visit, the region's rich sources of coal, uranium and oil would usher in new tensions and challenges to tribal sovereignty among all the tribes Breton visited.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, given the complexity and secrecy of Hopi cosmology, there was much that Breton, an outsider, would not have seen, known, nor fully understood. In the decades before Breton's visits, rumors and stories about Hopi ceremonialism in general and the Snake Dance ritual in particular seemed to cast a magical spell over intellectuals, anthropologists, missionaries and government functionaries alike, drawing them to the remote village plazas of Walpi, Moenkopi, Orabi, Mishongnovi, Shengopavi, and Hotevilla on the Hopi mesas, where they hoped to attend this singular ritual. Held in August, crowds of spectators, both insiders—indigenous community members—and outsiders, including tourists, journeyed to Arizona in hopes of squeezing onto a ledge in one of the Hopi villages to view the Snake Dance in close proximity. Visitors would have jockeyed for the choice seating spaces to observe the extraordinary scene of spectacularly dressed and masked dancers arrayed before them, handling live venomous snakes. Unfortunately, a carnival-like and disrespectful attitude characterized the behavior of many non-Native spectators attending the public portion of the Snake Dance. Such behavior was a source of great concern to the Hopi and made them both wary of non-Hopi visitors and

vigilant about prohibiting any notetaking, sketching, or photographing of the ceremony.

Some of the notable predecessors to Breton's trip to the Southwest and the Hopi mesas were Frank Hamilton Cushing, Jesse Fewkes, Aby Warburg and President Theodore Roosevelt. Leah Dilworth suggests that the Snake Dance ritual gained wide notoriety courtesy of an 1884 publication by John Bourke.<sup>7</sup> On leave from the U.S. Army, Bourke saw the Snake Dance at Walpi in 1881 and wrote about the event in disparaging terms, calling it a "revolting religious rite."<sup>8</sup> James Clifford argues that the early ethnographic work on the Snake Dance and the publication of "bits of data" about the ceremony both preserved and harmed Hopi culture.<sup>9</sup> By the time of President Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Hopi in 1913, many people had read stories about the Snake Dance and the publicity drew tourists to Arizona in hopes of seeing the Snake Dance in person. Many non-Hopi tourists became rowdy and were disrespectful of the Hopi dancers. They focused not on the underlying meaning of the ceremony but on the exotic dance steps by the Hopi dancers holding venomous snakes in their hands and mouths. Breton records a disparaging statement by a Hopi about the behavior of tourists at the solemn ceremony:

Yes, this feast is beautiful and moving...for those who can appreciate the depth (background). Nonetheless, he deplors how the presence of Whites has detracted from the solemnity and the priests who do not conduct themselves the way they used to do. In the time of my grandfather, he says, I remember, it was something else. But how can it be otherwise if, during the ceremony, people are moving around any which way on the rooftops while drinking Coca-Colas?

The Snake Dance was only one of several rituals inextricably linked to the Hopi ceremonial calendar, which is marked by the summer and winter solstices and seasonal changes.<sup>10</sup> The specifically timed ceremonies and their associated responsibilities are undertaken by men and women initiated into specific ritual responsibilities, all in support of the Hopi ceremonial cycle. As with other members of the various kiva societies, those who perform the Snake Dance undergo strict initiation into the society and all are made to understand the rules of secrecy associated with the respective kiva's ritual ceremonies. Moreover, ritual knowledge of the various kiva societies is not shared across Hopi society but is held tightly by those individuals initiated into the specific kiva societies. The guarded and highly secretive kiva societies administered severe sanctions and punishment for those who shared any aspect of traditional practices or sacred knowledge with outsiders, or even members of other Hopi kiva societies.

The public performance of the Hopi Snake Dance was negatively impacted by its exotic reputation as a spectacle, and by outsiders who were ignorant and dismissive of its true meaning. Intended as a prayer for rain on behalf the Hopi and all humanity, the public part of the ritual was closed to all non-Hopi in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Closing down the ceremony to outsiders, whether rowdy, disrespectful or

wishing to be respectful, is now *de rigueur*. Restricting the attendance at the Snake Dance to Hopi tribal members only further exoticized the Snake Dance and limited conversations about the significance of the Hopi ritual cycle and its purpose to benefit all of humanity. The strict prohibitions on sharing Hopi cosmological beliefs and practices with non-Hopi resulted in the outside world's reliance on first-hand observations of scholars, anthropologists, or even those whose interactions at the Hopi mesas were brief, such as André Breton's 1945 visit. A new direction in the voices of inclusion is the recent co-edited volume by Hopi and non-Hopi scholars, *Becoming Hopi: A History*.<sup>12</sup> Even so, this collaborative work carefully sidesteps any references or discussions of Hopi sacred and secret ritual practices.

It is unclear if André Breton ever asked questions about secret or sacred knowledge. But it is clear that he takes great care to avoid any inappropriate behavior such that he is asked to leave the dance. While at Mishongnovi on August 21st, Breton's notebook is taken from him and a page is torn out on which he has noted details about the cultural clothing of the dancers. The stress of the event is retained in Breton's reflection about the incident when he mentions that he could be "chased out of the village," as happened to an American painter the previous day.

The "Notebook" ends abruptly, seven days later, with the final entry made while Breton is back in Gallup. Focusing on eight Zuni drawings, Breton considers shared design elements in cultural "costumes" among tribes in the region. Breton draws no conclusions about what he experienced. At this point in the "Notebook" we are left wondering about the extent to which this trip would impact his thinking about Surrealism. Conversely, the Hopi would not have known that an important French intellectual had been in their midst in 1945. Their attention would have been on efforts to retain ritual knowledge within their communities and maintain a necessary barrier between themselves and all outsiders. Yet Breton's experience in the Southwest, along with inscribed text in the "Notebook," suggest areas of linkage between Breton's 1945 lived experience and the changes unfolding at that time in the Southwest and in the wider world. Decades later, another Hopi ceremony would take place that brought secrets from the kivas of Hotevilla to a global public audience. This time notes and photographs as well as video recordings would be permitted.

This remarkable event occurred in December of 1992, in New York City. During it, two worlds, metaphorically represented by Breton's visit to Hopi and to the keepers of traditional Hopi knowledge, stepped toward each other in a formal, ceremonial manner, without masks but with dramatic cosmic and climatic signs for all to see. On the Hopi mesas in Arizona, a decision was made to share sacred Hopi prophecy at the United Nations in New York, and thus with the entire population of the world. The ancient prophecy, given to them by Masau'u, their creator, said that one day world leaders would gather in a Great House of Mica to make rules for stopping war. In 1948 four men were chosen to keep the message. Only one of those four men was still alive in 1992, and he knew it was time to share the prophecy. What



Fig. 1. From the New York City Weather Archive, <https://thestarryeye.typepad.com/weather/2012/12/today-in-new-york-weather-history-december-11.html>

happened that day and two days prior is still clear in my memory and, with apologies to André Breton, struck me as surreal.

For the vast majority of New Yorkers the arrival of a powerful nor'easter on December 11, 1992, was simply a miserable weather event that wreaked havoc on New York City. Labeled one of the worst rainstorms in years, the city was pounded by 75 mph wind gusts, trees were toppled and enough rain fell from the sky to flood areas of lower Manhattan, inundating subway stations, closing FDR Drive and causing power outages in apartment buildings and office towers.<sup>13</sup>

Two days before the arrival of the storm an astronomical event took place. On December 9, 1992, a total lunar eclipse occurred that was visible even in New York City's light-washed sky. Almost nobody in Gotham City linked the lunar eclipse with the deluge of rain that crippled New York a few days later. However, there were visitors in town who immediately saw a connection between the eclipse and the nor'easter. A core group of Indigenous leaders from nineteen different communities had gathered at the United Nations during that brief window of time; they

understood the events to be auspicious, interrelated and a signal that human beings, not just those in the New York metropolitan area but around the world, should take note that something of significance was taking place.

Native leaders came to New York at the invitation of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in order to discuss preparations for the U.N.'s launch of the International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993. As stewards of Indigenous knowledge and keepers of tradition, the Native speakers expressed a determination to speak boldly from the unique platform accorded them at the U.N.

Those assembled represented an august group of Native leaders. Well-known Indigenous activists such as Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala, Davi Yanomami from Brazil, William Means (Lakota), Lars Johansen (Greenland), Oren Lyons (Haudenosaunee), and Anderson Muutang Urud (Sarawak Indigenous People's Alliance) were among those who traveled great distances to attend the meeting. As a graduate student I had met Rigoberta Menchu and I decided to take a seat in the audience to listen to her remarks and later summarize them with my former graduate student cohorts at the University of Oklahoma. I wanted to learn more about the forthcoming Year of the World's Indigenous People and what global preparations were underway to mark the occasion. I was however stunned to learn that Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya (1909-1999), from Hotevilla and keeper of the traditional Hopi spiritual traditions, was among the Indigenous participants. Moreover, as word spread that Banyacya planned to publicly reveal a Hopi prophecy during his remarks, there was a growing sense of anticipation and gravitas in the auditorium. Hopi prophecy, like kiva ritual knowledge, was held closely within the community and not shared.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly changes had taken place among the Hopi community to sanction that a Hopi message be spoken publicly, in the English language, in New York City, a place so unlike the arid Arizona mesas where the Hopi resided. Known for their strict adherence to Hopi cultural norms, Banyacya's bold action could only have been gone forward with the consensus and full agreement of Hopi leaders. Thus, Banyacya's presence in New York represented a reversal of Hopi cultural norms and the sharing of sacred prophecy could be seen as nothing short of earth-shattering; indeed, the weather conditions and the cosmos seemed to agree. Banyacya and the Hopi people who accompanied him to New York noted that their presence and message was connected to the eclipse and the torrential rainstorm in New York. The eclipse and the nor'easter were not only interrelated events, but more importantly, they represented powerful signs of confirmation and validation of the decision by Hopi to bring words of prophecy to the citizens of the world. The spirit world announced its presence through celestial and weather events. Importantly such a show of nature's power demanded the attention of those in the audience, who were to listen and receive the prophecy.



Banyacya's message in December included a stern warning that humankind would face "floods, damaging hurricanes, hailstorms, climate changes, and earthquakes" if they did not seek balance in the world and turn away from materialism. He reminded those present that three previous worlds existed and were destroyed due to human failings. He emphasized that now we are all living in the fourth and final world on earth, and this world would end if nations failed to stop their destructive behaviors and do not follow a path of peace and harmony.<sup>15</sup> The Hopi prophecy calls upon all humans to make changes in their daily lives and move away from materialism, but also to gain a renewed understanding of humanity's connection to the natural world. The connection between humans and the natural world is the essence of the Snake Dance ritual. In 1945 André Breton saw and understood the Hopi perspective on the interconnectedness of life. Summarizing the underlying reason for the Hopi Snake Dance, Breton wrote that the "dance is a prayer for rain. The snakes are emissaries of the powers of the rain."

It is likely that Thomas Banyacya and Breton did not meet during Breton's visit to Hotevilla. Breton wrote in the "Notebook" that several Hopi conscientious objectors were present at the time of his visit.<sup>16</sup> Banyacya was sent to prison multiple times during World War Two for refusing military service; he was probably incarcerated with along with fellow Hopis in 1945 when Breton visited the area. Nevertheless, the two men, Breton and Banyacya, from different parts of the globe, were observers and philosophers, seeking a deeper understanding about human thoughts and actions and the connections between human beings and the world around them. Breton, from France, traveled to the Hopi mesas seeking to untangle the meaning encoded in a ceremonial dance. Banyacya, from Hopi, traveled to New York to deliver a message heavy with sacred meaning and stressing the need for action on the part of nations and their citizens. In 1992 snakes were not emissaries to power; rather Banyacya was the messenger to power. Their paths did not cross during their lifetimes, but they could have.

A sheet of paper inserted into the "Notebook" reveals the insight Breton gained from his "trip to visit the Hopi Indians." In a profound way Breton's poetic language summarizes Banyacya's prophetic message:

Great purity very sad glides and plunges  
great pure sadness  
mountain almost not terrestrial, already belonging to the sky  
aspires toward space  
element of air  
they do not smile, are detached from everything  
The Indian looks beyond himself  
stellar continent

- 1 Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 2013).
- 2 Lieve Spaas, "Mapping the Other: Anthropology and Literature Limits," *Paragraph* 18.2 (July 1992): 163-173.
- 3 Leo Crane, *Indians of the Enchanted Desert* (Boston: Little Brown, 1929) and Julia Buttree, *The Rhythm of the Red Man* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1930). And see also Conley, in this issue of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*.
- 4 See George A. Boyce, *When the Navajos Had Too Many Sheep: The 1940s* (San Francisco: The Indian Historical Press, 1974) and Garrick Alan Bailey, *The History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years* (Santa Fe, NM: The School of American Research Press, 1986).
- 5 David M. Brugge, *The Navajo and Hopi Land Dispute: An American Tragedy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 93-133.
- 6 Dana E. Powell, *Landscapes of Power: Politics of Energy in the Navajo Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 36-63.
- 7 Leah Dilworth, "Representing the Hopi Snake Dance," *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 453-496.
- 8 J.G. Bourke, *The Snake-Dance of the Moquis of Arizona: Being a Narrative of a Journal from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to the Villages of the Moqui Indian of Arizona* (1884). Reprint, with a foreword by Emory Sekaquaptewa, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984).
- 9 James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics of Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 98-121.
- 10 Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 189-230.
- 11 Sharyn R. Udall, "The Irresistible Other: Hopi ritual Drama and Euro-American Audiences," *The Dance Review* 36.2 (Summer 1992): 22-43.
- 12 Wes Bernardini, Stewart B. Stewart, B. Koyiyumptewa, Gregson Schachner, and Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, eds., *Becoming Hopi: A History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021).
- 13 New York City Weather Archive, <https://thestarryeye.typepad.com/weather/2012/12/today-in-new-york-weather-history-december-11.html>, accessed January 5, 2023.
- 14 Harold Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis: The Epic Story of the Hopi Indians as Preserved in their Legends and Traditions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 201-230.
- 15 Alexander Ewen, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples: With the United Nations Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1994), 112-118.
- 16 Robert Mcg. Thomas, "Thomas Banyacya, 89, Teller of Hopi Prophecy to the World," *The New York Times* (Obituary, February 15, 1999).