

## *Going to Hopi*

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### I AM TELLING A STORY.

The dancers wore masks, painted turquoise, white, black, and red, that covered their heads. They had snouts, and arrays of iridescent feathers above their foreheads, evergreen sprigs tied to their legs and arms, and evergreen wreaths around their necks. They wore white skirts, boots, red sashes across their painted chests, and bells around their ankles. In their hands were gourd rattles. And this is where the description runs out. I was witnessing a kachina dance, and it was beautiful, and otherworldly, and evanescent. Now I am unable to recover the experience in my memory; it refuses to take form and emerge in words. I may have discovered a place out of time, but it is more likely that I was a ghost there, silent and drifting lifeless among the living. Now, like a spider spinning filaments around an irreparable tear in its web, I can only tell a story with emptiness at its core.

It was the summer of 2000, and I had just finished my first year of graduate school in Chicago, where I was studying cultural anthropology. Interested in cultural representation, I had an internship at the Anasazi Heritage Center, an archaeological museum run by the Bureau of Land Management in southwest Colorado, twenty minutes from Mesa Verde National Park. Poised at the northeastern corner of the Southwest, I ventured out each weekend to explore a geography of ruin. The remains of Ancestral Puebloan settlements are scattered all over the Colorado Plateau, in canyons and beneath cliffs and on mesa tops. I gained an appreciation for ancient masonry, and, like an impressionist, quickly realized that sometimes the only difference between ugliness and beauty,

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between the mundane and the sublime, is light. Late afternoon sunlight transformed ruins and high desert landscapes. In that light the world was ethereal and perfect. This was the Fourth World into which the Hopi emerged, just right, the world where they learned to be true humans. Some weekends I skipped the archaeology to hike and camp in national parks and monuments, but even then the human past was petrified everywhere. I also made excursions to experience living cultural traditions. My visit to the Hopi Reservation in Arizona was such a trip.

Kachina dances, which follow an annual cycle and mark the coming of the kachina spirits among the Pueblos, had assumed the status of anthropological fable in my imagination. But I was well aware that white tourists and anthropologists had been invading the Pueblos, disregarding people's privacy and misrepresenting their lives, for more than a century. So I was terribly self-conscious about visiting the reservation, let alone attending a dance. My boss, Suzan, who had some experience in the art of visiting Hopi, gave me some information and helped orient me. Wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt, she said, don't talk to anyone unless they talk to you first, never take any photographs or make any sketches. Desperate to be a respectful guest, I followed all of Suzan's guidelines and read and reread all the etiquette advisories. Once I arrived at Second Mesa, I did not know what to do, where to go, or what was happening. When I finally figured out where the dance must be taking place, I parked my car and awkwardly followed a family up the steep hill to the village. It was midmorning in late July and I was hot and nervous in all my clothes.



Each day after work I walk back to the house the museum bought for its summer interns. There are four of us living together, strangers. The museum sits outside the town of Dolores on Highway 184, but we drive twenty minutes to Cortez to do laundry or buy groceries at Walmart. We don't know anyone who lives around us and rarely even see them.

I sit out on the concrete porch in the late afternoon and watch the cars go by on the highway. I am reading *The Grapes of Wrath* and appreciate this time when the world is still. The mesa in the distance takes on a dusky hue as the lights in Cortez below come on. Sometimes deer come up and eat crab apples that have fallen in the old weed-choked garden. The front yard is an overlooked place where no one ever goes. I walk down the gravel driveway and inspect the tough, dry grass. I like

wandering around here, through the junipers and piñon, through open space and laid-back summer. The wind whips clothes on the line dry in a few hours.

One evening I go out behind the house to watch the sun set and discover an old tree house in a juniper by the barbed-wire fence. I climb up on the weathered boards, held together by rusty nails, and through the flaky branches of the tree watch the sun sink beneath the horizon across the road. It occurs to me that the highway itself is a lonesome place, lying across the land like a river with no beginning or end. People drive down the highway but never stop to think about it. Safe in the enclosures of their cars, they are traveling too fast to notice it, to allow the quiet and emptiness to well up. The only time the highway is somewhere itself is when people live on it, as we do here. Now the cars that whiz by only accentuate how isolated we are, on the side of some stretch of asphalt. I am reminded of the loneliness I felt three summers earlier listening to the radio out in Montana, the voices coming from so far away, the airwaves traveling across vast distances, through cold night air and darkness, above the plains and mountains. The human companionship—so thin and tenuous—only deepened the sadness. Highways and airwaves are not enough to connect us in this expansive land.

In the gloaming, the pavement is cast in a more human, local light. I commit myself to claiming the highway as a place, to studying its physicality, the dirt and rocks on the shoulder, the grass and the weeds. As a kid I knew pavement: school blacktop, cracked driveway. I remember summer days in Georgia when Brad and I would play on the forgotten, sun-baked tennis court behind the pool during Adult Swim (and I remember the pungent smell of kudzu). We lay on our stomachs on the pavement, soaking up the heat into our bodies until it burned, skin bare except for bathing suits. Then we ran along the painted lines because they were cooler.

I climb down from the juniper tree house and spy a small wooden shack a ways back from the house that I've never noticed before. It is surrounded by weeds, and as I lift the wooden latch, I have a sudden fear that I will find someone, alive or dead, inside. It is just an old outhouse with a tin roof, but I suspect that nonetheless it may be filled with ghosts from a time gone by, sentenced to wander around their old highway home. Out back behind the house: dry grass, juniper, weathered wood, dusk. It is an unsettled place from which I embark for Hopi.



The drive from Dolores took me through vastly different landscapes, which I had come to expect of the Southwest. Not far out of the foothills of the San Juans, the terrain flattened out. To the east, red mesas and buttes rose in the early light; to the west was nothing but stubbly grass. Then the highway climbed into the Chuska Mountains, and scrub brush bled into pygmy forest which rose into stands of cottonwoods alongside streams. Fir and spruce covered the slopes. I approached the Hopi Reservation on Highway 264, through the Navajo Nation. The land was flat and barren, the fierce sun threatening, especially since shade was nowhere to be found. I was surprised to see no sign marking the border between the Navajo and Hopi Reservations. So I am not even sure when it was that I arrived. No succinct event marked my entry and initiation, only arriving indistinguishable from traveling.



A long time ago in the village of Shongopavi there lived a young man who would sit for hours looking at the village graveyard and wondering what became of the dead. So curious was he that he persuaded his father and Badger Old Man to help him journey to the place where the dead live. They prepared him as one prepares a corpse, and Badger Old Man used his medicine to send him on his way. Along the winding road to the skeleton house, the young man met several people who told him about the life of the dead. When he finally reached the skeleton house, he was unable to climb the ladder, made of sunflower stems, into the house of his ancestors, so he sat outside and requested some food. The skeletons brought him some melon and laughed as he ate it, because they ate only the odor or soul of food and were lighter than air. (This is why the clouds, into which the dead are transformed, float in the sky.) The skeletons answered the young man's questions and told him that if his people performed ceremonies for them, they would send rain and crops. This was not a nice place to be, though, so after the young man had satisfied his curiosity, he set off for his own village. He reentered his body, which his father and mother had begun to mourn, and Badger Old Man removed the spell. Recounting his experiences, he brought wisdom to the people. And from that day on the living and the dead began to work for one another.



The first part of the drive was familiar since I had made it two weeks before. Car trouble thwarted my original attempt to get to Hopi. My car broke down twice that day, and when I finally made it home, I wrote eight full pages in my journal about the experience, sparing no detail. It was an “epic misadventure.” The first breakdown was in Fort Defiance, Arizona, where I waited two hours for a tow truck to arrive. “Even though I felt stupid standing in the dust and sun by the side of the road and the ‘Reelect \_\_\_\_\_ for Commissioner’ and ‘Steak luncheon \$5’ banners, I couldn’t get over how friendly everyone was. I sat on a rock by the gas station for a while and one man pulled up in his pickup truck and asked ‘Are you okay kid? Need a ride?’ ”

After a temporary fix in Window Rock, I was headed back home when breakdown number two occurred. This time I was really out in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, and for the first time I was afraid. “Walking in the grass, off the shoulder of the road, I caused thousands of beige-colored grasshoppers to jump out of my way. I was pushing them out of the way, and felt so out of place myself, walking down the highway not designed for walking, forgotten, like in outer space or on the moon.” I hitched a ride in the back of a pickup, waited for another tow truck, then rode on down to the metropolis of Gallup where they told me they could fix my car. I sat in a crowded waiting room for hours amid a parade of unlucky humanity. There was the middle-aged woman in the tie-dyed shirt talking about her church organist. “The 7’ tall man in a black cowboy hat with size 16 shoes. The woman who used to fit tuxedos and struck up a conversation with him.” The Swiss family with a broken-down rental car, the Marine with his wife and baby who was due in California the next morning. “Finally, at 8:30, my car was fixed. New alternator, \$250. Salvation. They turned off the lights after I paid. I got gas, and headed home, tentative, wondering, hopeful, relieved, but mostly just exhausted. The drive out of Gallup was spectacular, with one of the most amazing sunsets I’ve ever seen. It colored the entire sky, silhouetting mesas and buttes—black against fiery red. I took it as a sign from God, like the rainbow.”

In contrast to eight pages of thick description about how I didn’t get to Hopi, I was only able to write a seven-line telegraphic report about my experience once I did arrive: “kachina dance (Niman—homecoming) at 2nd mesa (Sipaulovi)—otherworldly, sitting on rooftops surrounding plaza, high on mesa’s edge; walking tour of Walpi (1st mesa)—interesting;

camping at Keam's Canyon—the pits! never again.” After this, I managed an equally brief description of my visit the following day to Canyon de Chelly National Monument, concluding: “Both Hopi and CdC memorable. Kachina dance esp. moving.”

It was impossible to capture my experience in description, it was sensorially overwhelming. So unreal was Hopi, so unexpected and foreign, that I was unable even to locate myself there. Hopi is the most private of all the Pueblos, and I wished to respect that privacy at all costs. I didn't speak to anyone, take any photographs, or make any notes. I brought home no artifact to tell of my visit. Back at the museum, I looked through all the books on kachinas, but none of the illustrations matched the picture in my mind. I can't tell you the name of the kachinas I saw or what they represented—the dance was sealed off from interpretation.

Anthropologists have produced stacks of ethnographic descriptions of the Pueblos, detailing the most intimate aspects of religious life. The significance of the Pueblos is unsurpassed in the early history of American anthropology, when faith in science and the urgency of salvaging a vanishing race inspired an outpouring of description. American Indians represented a people of the past, timeless and outside of history. Now they were fading out of existence, doomed for extinction. Pueblo peoples, particularly the Hopi, were supposedly among the “most conservative” and traditional of all, which made them especially attractive. Anthropologists hurried to preserve these ghosts, these worlds of ruin and decay, in their texts. They felt compelled to be prolific and produce bodies of literature.

But even in 1936, when she published *Taos Pueblo*, Elsie Clews Parsons was sufficiently aware of the delicacy of revealing Pueblo secrets that she took measures to ensure the book would not circulate in New Mexico, having a note slipped into each volume: “We would greatly appreciate an effort on your part to keep this paper from getting into the hands of people in and around Taos. It may cause conflict in the pueblo and create difficulties for future ethnographic investigation there.” Unsurprisingly, the monograph did quickly reach Taos, implicating the ethnographer's friends and consultants, jeopardizing her reputation as an ethical fieldworker, and significantly impacting the future of anthropology in the Southwest. When I read this story I was heading home from Colorado, camping at Ghost Ranch, not far from Taos.

Today anthropologists celebrate vibrant, adaptive, and ever-changing American Indian communities. We wring our hands over the “poetics and politics” of ethnography and all the ways that we are implicated in

our own text productions. Here's an article on "analogical and dialogical approaches in ethnography" and an anecdote that's supposed to be funny and "give us pause": Frank Hamilton Cushing was an anthropologist who worked at Zuni Pueblo in the late nineteenth century. Years after his death, a Zuni man recounted this story about him: "Once they made a white man into a Priest of the Bow; he was out there with the other Bow Priests—he had black stripes on his white body. The others said their prayers from their hearts, but he read his from a piece of paper." The joke is that Cushing's striped body made him resemble both a page of text and a kachina clown. The author of the article gives a long exegesis of this story, which is supposed to make us think about the role of anthropologists in the field, textuality, and the deferral of meaning in ethnographic writing. Now there I was, a tourist at a kachina dance, silenced by the disciplinary anxiety I carried with me. Being an anthropologist makes being a tourist more complicated.

Two years later I began dissertation fieldwork in northern New Mexico, where I have worked ever since. But the uneasiness I felt as a tourist at Hopi has haunted me as an anthropologist. I have never been able to overcome fears of invading people's privacy, fears of being somewhere I shouldn't be. Even though my research focuses on public efforts to preserve Hispanic and Native American heritage, I have never felt entirely comfortable as an anthropologist. Maybe that's how it should be, but feeling uncomfortable isn't easy.



I was the most dressed-up person there. Everyone was talking to everyone else, kids were running around, people were eating and going back and forth between houses. It was chaotic, a time for socializing, and I, introverted and self-conscious, had no one with whom to socialize. All the other white people there seemed to know what was going on and to be friendly with locals. Whether this is because they were old hands or were just more confident than I, I don't know. I didn't talk to any of them. People were sitting on the flat roofs of houses surrounding the village plaza, where the dancing took place, and I finally got up the nerve to climb a ladder and join them. The scene was unbelievable. Fifty dancers below, all dressed the same, dancing rhythmically to the beat of a drum played by someone wearing what looked like a brown bear mask. All around the plaza were old and young people. I saw a girl with a squash blossom hairdo peering from a window.

The picture was like so many old black-and-white photographs I had seen of Hopi. Two taken by Edward Curtis in 1906 are my favorites. Both feature four Hopi girls with dark skin and long, shiny black hair done up in those fantastic butterfly arrangements. In the first picture they are on their hands and knees, side by side, grinding corn in metates, pushing, pulling the stone grinders with both hands. I practiced this at the museum: The corn is grainy, the trough cool and rough, solid. The corn is ground between stone on stone. All the girls are focused on their work except one, who demurely looks up at the camera. The other photograph is set outside. Four girls are wrapped in blankets, perched on the roof of a house with their backs to the camera. Half of the picture is wall and steps, the other half sky. In the middle is the intimate cluster of spectators, each body snugly wrapped in white and black, each head at a different level, silhouetted by sky. With their extraordinary hairstyles they look at home in the extraterrestrial scene. Yet somehow I feel drawn in to it, to their backs, to that corner of wall and steps beneath them. The stone and adobe are relieving, prevent us from being swallowed by the gray sky. Looking up at them from below, I appreciate being grounded in the photograph, titled “Watching the Dancers.”

I will admit that it was a romantic sensibility that first drew me to anthropology as a teenager, and the romantic allure of Hopi is strong. In the museum, I watch old motion picture footage of men haltingly performing a snake dance—now too fast, now in slow motion, now skipping frames. (The snake dance, I learn, should not have been filmed.) Yet by the time I traveled to Hopi I was well versed in the critique of exoticism and primitivism. I knew that Native Americans were not timeless or isolated or vanishing. I knew that Curtis posed his subjects and dressed them in costumes to suit his own image of Indians, the *American* image of Indians. His subjects are noble, stoic, silent, doomed. The images are beautiful, but they have also had complicated political effects. Indian artists have productively engaged with this artistic legacy. A series of photographs staged by Marcus Amerman in 2001 humorously and subversively updates Curtis’s images and draws attention to their romanticism. “Grinding Meal” becomes “A Day at the Beach,” with four girls in bathing suits (but still with squash blossom hairdos) tending to Burger King meals instead of corn. Amerman relocates the four figures in “Watching the Dancers” to the side of a pickup truck in “Watching the Sunset.” His observers are clearly outside the elegiac discourse of the Indian going down with the sun.



Had I seen Amerman's photographs before I went to Hopi, they might have provided a frame of reference. The most confusing part of the dance was the way in which the sacred and the profane, past and present, familiar and unfamiliar were mixed up. On guard against any romanticism, I was overwhelmed by how picturesque, otherworldly, and incomprehensible the scene was. It was breathtaking. At the same time, I was taken aback by how ordinary and casual the event seemed (there were plastic lawn chairs!). This should have come as no surprise. How many times had I spoken or written about Native Americans living in the present while at the same time maintaining distinctive cultural identities? On top of the mesa, though, the stark contrasts were disorienting.

Artists and writers, anthropologists, and even policy makers have found their muse in the Pueblos. Yet amid this proliferation of images and evocations I find myself at a loss of words. Perhaps it's for the best. Perhaps I need not recapture the experience.



Just beyond the houses surrounding the plaza, the land drops off. We are at the top of the world, in the middle of nowhere, and the barren desert extends forever in all directions. The dancing goes on, and the sound of the drum and bells and rattles. And the dancers wear evergreen sprigs, and masks of red and turquoise and black and white. But there are long breaks between the dances, and I am never sure what will happen next. I spend most of the day waiting, wondering, silent. Sometimes after not talking for a long time, especially when everyone else around me is talking, I wonder if I can still speak, if I remember how to. Where in my inarticulateness can I locate my humanity? Or, in my silence, do I evaporate like a phantom?

Suzan tells me that traditionally visitors will be invited into homes to share in a meal, so I am prepared for someone to approach me at any minute, pale spectator, to usher me into their inner world. Even if they don't reveal secrets, they will explain to me what's going on, and I will say who I am. Instead I wander around, trying not to look confused, or impatient, or alone. I wander between houses, comparing vantage points of the plaza while there is nothing to see, passing the time walking in circles around the tiny village while people eat and visit and otherwise occupy themselves. Finally I buy a soda from some girls selling refreshments from the back of a truck. Surely I must have spoken at least a few words to them. It was the only time I reached out to the living

while I was at the dance. No one could verify that I was there that day, and I have no proof. If only I could have summoned as much presence in being there, amid the people, as in not being there, if only I could have spoken myself.



That summer I was a student of the dead, uncovering the story of a people whose only physical remains were bones and pots and crumbling stone ruins. At the museum, we kept retelling the story to convince ourselves it was true. Now I had gone to visit the descendants of those people for one day, to live among the living and listen to their stories. But when I arrived after my long journey, guided along the way by spirit helpers, I found that I myself had become a ghost. They did not see me; I did not speak.

This is a supplication, to be forgiven for failure and brokenness and inhumanity, for allowing my anxieties about the study of human beings to stand between me and other people. I am unable to tell the experience, and regardless of how much perceptual acuity I conjure up, I cannot pull myself back into that scene to locate a young man there whole and real. Contradictory fears wore me away until I was a specter, drifting. Even as I completed my pilgrimage to a site of disciplinary emergence, I was repelled. To the extent I was present there, I was certain my presence was inappropriate, and I withdrew.

It is time to reconstitute myself by fitting all the stories together: the images of Hopi, the ruins, the highway, the loneliness of being alone and of being among strangers. Through telling this story, I may be able to spin a web around my inner poverty, to weave gauzy threads that are long and stretched out and hold me. It is time to emerge into this world and learn to be a true human.



Sitting on the rooftop overlooking the plaza, I began to worry about the sinking sun. I wasn't sure where I was going to camp that night, but I kept waiting for something more to happen. Instead it was the same dance each time. The late afternoon was waning and that time of stillness came over the world. Finally I decided to go, unsure of whether there would be anything else to see. The desert that had been so threatening earlier in the day was now radiant. The scrub brush cast long shadows in the low light, and I drove down the lonesome highway, away from those now ethereal mesas.

But I was afraid to drive too far in the night, so I stopped at a fork in the road near the edge of Hopiland. The campground was intended for trailers, but I pitched my tent on top of pebbles and clumps of stiff grass. I talked to the campground attendant, who said he had been selling melons out of his truck that day at the dances. He said he had done well and charged me ten dollars for the site. I slept in the fluorescent light of the gas station across the road, with dogs barking all night long. The wind blew furiously, I remember. ✚

## NOTES

I gratefully acknowledge the help of Lisa Ruddick and Risa Applegarth in improving this essay.

The story about the young man from Shongopavi is a synopsis of a Hopi myth collected by Henry Voth in 1905: "A Journey to the Skeleton House," *American Indian Myths and Legends*, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pages 442–445. The story about Parsons comes from *Wealth and Rebellion: Elsie Clews Parsons, Anthropologist and Folklorist* by Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pages 247–248. The Cushing anecdote is found in "The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology" by Dennis Tedlock (*Journal of Anthropological Research* 35.4 [1979]: 387–400), pages 392–394. Leslie Marmon Silko explores storytelling as a form of healing in her novel *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

I submitted this essay in May 2011 to the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office, which has a process for reviewing projects involving Hopi cultural heritage. Their attorney, who consulted with the director, told me that they do not review personal essays. He did suggest that I remove an epigraph that recounted a Hopi creation myth, which I have done.