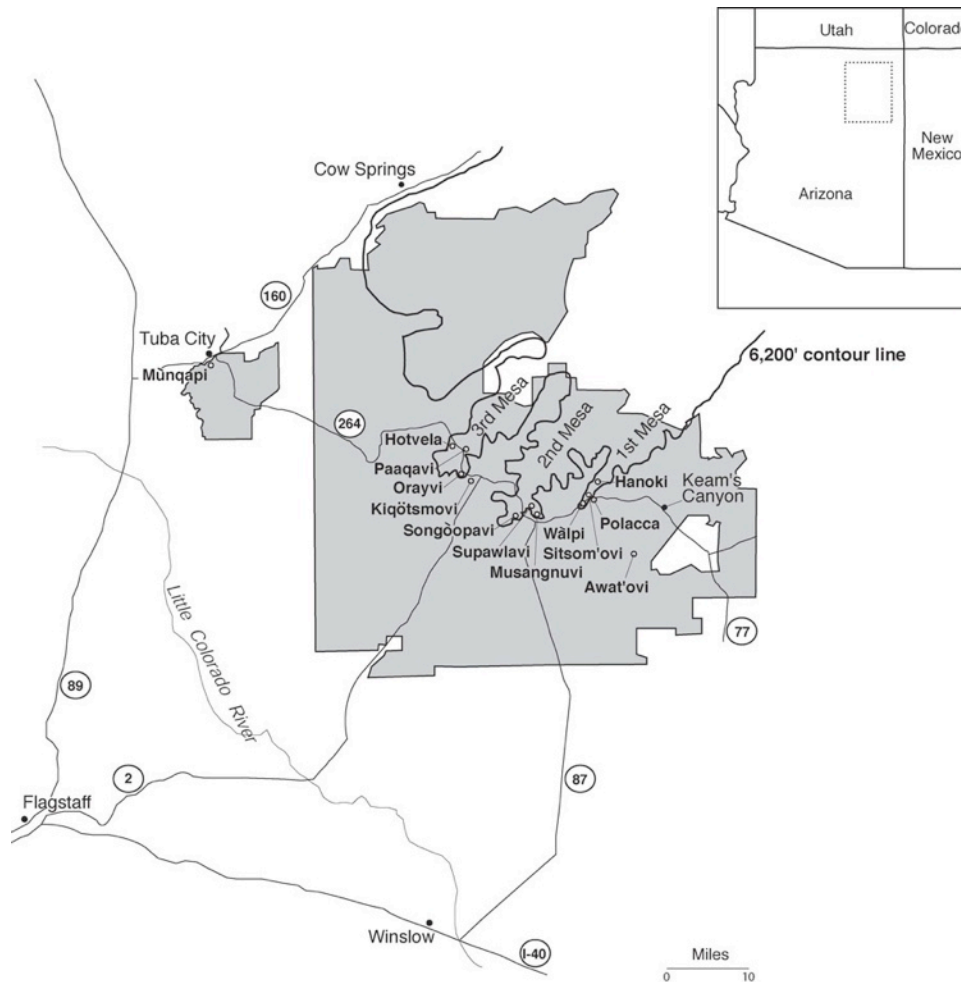


Hopi Concepts of Landscape and Person as Indices of Biocultural Loss. Peter Whiteley  
 Presented at Symposium “Sustaining Cultural and Biological Diversity in a Rapidly Changing World: Lessons for Global Policy,” April 2-5, 2008. Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, American Museum of Natural History.

The language and culture of the Hopi Indians of Arizona are at a turning point: the next two generations will see the near-total loss of their language, or its persistence, but under altered social and linguistic conditions.



**The Hopi Reservation**

[Template by Bridget Thomas, American Museum of Natural History.]

The potential loss is particularly resonant in the global decline of linguistic diversity, in addition to its obvious intrinsic salience to the Hopi people: up to now the Hopi are still generally

regarded as the most “traditional” of all North American Indians, retaining proportionally more of their pre-European practices and ideas than most.

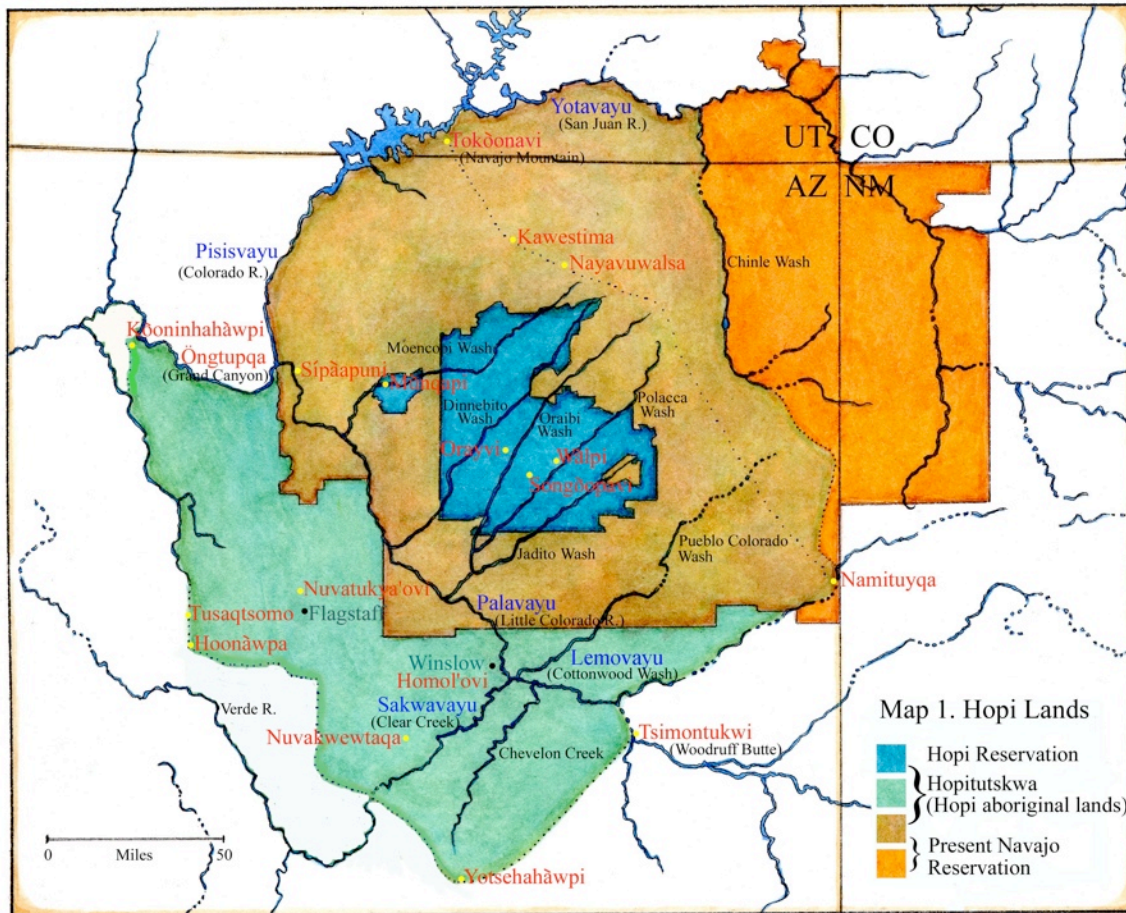


[Niman, The Home Dance. Painting by Fred Kabotie. Source Kabotie 1977]

Even surrounded by the forces of global production, many indigenous societies in North America retain extensive aspects of aboriginal subsistence practices - gathering, hunting, fishing, and non-intensive horticulture - where products circulate within local reciprocity networks structured by norms of generalized exchange.

Native peoples of North America have been losing their political and economic autonomy, the biodiversity and/or very existence of their environments, and along with these key cultural forms, including languages, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. So let me frame begin with a cautionary tale. Here in New York City, we stand on Munsee Delaware land. There are now no Munsee Delawares present. The only Algonkian community with a tiny land base is the Shinnecock Nation, confined to a neck of land on the south shore of Long Island, surrounded in their poverty by the superwealthy enclaves of the Hamptons. No Shinnecock or any other Algonkian language has been spoken in New York since about 1850. So here we are in Manhattan, the meaning of which no-one really knows. It might be “island of many hills,” “place where timber is procured for bows and arrows”, simply “island”, or it may refer to a person. The practical reality of indigenous culture, language, and indeed pre-Columbian—or pre-Hudsonian

—biodiversity is radically diminished, if not totally eradicated, here in one of the most developed places on earth. Thus my caution. Without political and territorial rights, the desire to maintain indigenous cultures and languages, or associated biodiversity is a losing game. Whether through law or diplomatic means, indigenous peoples must first be permitted to retain control of land bases before any questions of culture and language can be meaningfully addressed.



[Based on template by Patricia Wynne. American Museum of Natural History.]

The Hopi still do retain some autonomy although it is increasingly compromised by national and global political-economic processes. The Hopi Reservation represents a small fraction of Hopitutskwa, Hopi aboriginal land, which remains the focus of subsistence and religious usages into the present, and conflicts frequently ensue - for example, over gathering of eagles on the Navajo Reservation, or over religious and gathering pilgrimages to Nuvatukya'ovi ('snow butte on top place'), the San Francisco Peaks - when other users, more recent arrivals, do not acknowledge these Hopi aboriginal rights. Hopi place names designate residences, resource use areas and sacred sites throughout Hopitutskwa. Village names are typically referential: like, Sitsom'ovi ('flower mound on top place'), Songòopavi ('sand-grass spring place'), Hotvela 'juniper slope'), and Paaqavi ('reed springs place'). Boundary shrines include Tokònavi (archaic for 'dark mountain,' Navajo Mountain in English), Pisisvayu ('river of echoing sounds [between canyon walls,] the Colorado River), and Sipàapuni, the emergence place, and so on. Like village names, these illustrate a variety of denotative and connotative associations, some pertaining to appearance, others to diagnostic resources, and others to social or historical significance. Hopitutskwa, is markedly a sacred landscape, sung of and to in Hopi ceremonial

songs, traversed frequently in religious pilgrimages, farmed, foraged, grazed, and re-charged in every season of the calendrical cycle of Hopi ceremonies.



[Lower Muncapi village. Photo by Jerry Jacka. Source: Jacka 1978]

The Hopi still have some limited territorial and subsistence-economic autonomy, having never yet been driven from the heart of their homeland. Other economic opportunities on the reservation are few and far between. Standard unemployment figures vary from more than 30 percent to 60 percent.



[Leslie Koyawena harvesting melons. Photo by Jerry Jacka. Source: *Arizona Highways* 1980]

The subsistence economy is bound up with the annual cycle of ritual works, which is explicitly concerned - in its songs, prayers, and dances - with ensuring beneficial agricultural and foraging outcomes, and is thus inseparable from religious beliefs and practices in Hopi thought.



[Angaktsinam, “Long-hair Rainmakers.” Painting by Coochsiwukioma (Delbridge Honanie). Source: Jacka 1978]

When in Katsina songs and dances, Hopis summon the spirits of the dead to return as clouds and pour life-giving rain onto the parched earth so that all life-forms – plant, animal, and insect – may prosper, they do not imagine that this operates in a separate “spiritual” or “religious” sphere from hoeing weeds around corn plants, or harvesting and distributing ripe produce: rather, the performative and practical aspects are mutually integral to productive processes.

Like place-names, Hopi personal names are grounded in the landscape and a social order that is organized in terms of the meanings drawn from and attributed to that landscape. The scheme of natural classification and the very particular ecosystem in which it operates govern clan identities, seasonal temporalities, the ritual order, and quotidian subsistence-economic engagements. Practically all names embody dense meanings in poetic form, like haiku. Where initial morphemes are nouns, they usually refer to natural species or elements: e.g., *hon-* (bear), *honan-* (badger), *humi-* (shell corn), *kyar-* (scarlet macaw), *tsu’-* (rattlesnake), *tuwa-* (sand).

These are depicted in various states of action or motion. For example, Yoywayma, rain walking, refers to the appearance of a rainshower moving across the valley as seen from the mesa-top.

Some names are generic clan references - like Tahòoya, little whipsnake (Snake clan), Honani, badger (Badger clan), or Kwayowuuti, hawk woman (Eagle clan), etc. But most are tiny poems individually composed from the repertoire of a clan's proprietary interests.



[Hopi cornfield in the Oraibi Valley. Source: Jacka 1978]

Sakwngaysi, a woman's name, literally "verdant green swaying [woman]," is a name given by a member of the Young Corn clan, referring to the glorious appearance of corn plants in full flower whose leaves sway in the breeze.

Lomayayva, literally "beautifully ascended," was conferred by a Badger clan member. 'Beautifully ascended' refers to a special group of many katsinas (in this instance, that term refers to masked representations of ancestral spirits), as they ascend into the village.



[Ahöla katsina. Painting by Fred Kabotie. Source: Kabotie 1977]





[Sa'lako katsinas with Hahay'iwuuti, mother of the katsinas, and Ewtoto, chief of the katsinas. Painting by Fred Kabotie. Source: Kabotie 1977]

Each katsina is an embodiment of multiple aspects of the natural landscape and cosmos, each plant, animal, or mineral species through which the katsina is identified encapsulates aspects of Hopi ethnoscience, philosophy, and aesthetics: like, Hooqa'ö, 'pinyon pine conelet' which intrinsically draws a metaphorical association to a dried maize ear. Or Hamana, literally 'bashful,' referring to a badger's habitual behavior. Paatala, 'water light,' a Water clan name that points up the beauty of light reflecting off new pools formed by rainwater, Kuwanyesnöm, 'colorfully alighting,' a woman's name conferred by a member of the Butterfly clan, Kyarngöynöm, 'chasing a macaw woman.'

Name-givers today, however, are losing the practical experiential basis and the cultural contexts of the imagery, or sufficient control of the language to deploy it competently in this genre. Losing the names entails a weakening of the ties that bind and many of the ideas that animate Hopi thought, suggesting the imbrication of "cultural loss" with linguistic loss. And disembedded from established cultural practice and social contexts, the language itself becomes semantically depleted.

Hopi place-names are getting lost too, both literally, as these cease to be known and transacted by younger generations, especially non-speakers of the language, and also in the sense of appropriation, as places under non-Hopi authority. Tsimontukwi, Woodruff Butte, is a sacred site, with multiple clan and ritual sodality shrines. This site, in private hands, has been turned into a quarry and has recently had its top (including all the shrines) blasted off. Sipàapuni, the geological formation in Little Colorado Canyon that marks the emergence of many Hopi clans from the world below, is currently under severe erosion threat, because of the damming of the Colorado River for recreational purposes at Lake Powell.



[Nuvatukya'ovi, the San Francisco Peaks. Source: Google images.]

Recent plans to expand the ski-resort on Nuvatukya'ovi, the San Francisco Peaks, would manufacture artificial snow from effluent (it appears this measure has been at least temporarily defeated, as a result of efforts by the Hopi Tribe and Navajo Nation). The Peaks are a major spiritual home for the katsinas, and their snow is a particular symbol of pure life-giving essence, that through song and ritual is drawn toward the Hopi villages and fields to replenish life (effluent does not quite work in this regard). Losing 'control' of these places directly impacts aspects of Hopi cultural identity, since Hopi religion is tied into the specific landscape from which it draws its powers and to which Hopis remain ritually responsible

Name-loss is thus emblematic of culturally grounded linguistic loss and environmental more broadly. But there is no separation among these in Hopi thought. Hopi metaphysics predicates the agency of ritual and daily practices in the maintenance of the natural environment. If they stop conducting ceremonies, the springs will dry up, animals and insects will die, and there will be no *tutskwa'yqatsi*, land and life, left. Sustaining biodiversity is inseparable from Hopi cultural engagement with the natural world – indeed that separation is only imaginable under the Cartesian conceit of Western rationalism.

#### References Cited:

- Arizona Highways*, 1980, The Hopi Tricentennial. 56:9.  
Jacka, Jerry, 1978, The Miracle of Hopi Corn. *Arizona Highways* 54:1.  
Kabotie, Fred, 1977, *Fred Kabotie: Hopi Indian Artist—Autobiography told with Bill Belknap*. Flagstaff: Northland Press.