

Copyright  
by  
Nathaniel Hooper Zingg  
2012

**The Report Committee for Nathaniel Hooper Zingg  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**André Breton in Mexico:  
Surrealist Visions of an “Independent Revolutionary” Landscape**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jean-Pierre Cauvin

**Co-supervisor:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
César A. Salgado

**André Breton in Mexico:  
Surrealist Visions of an “Independent Revolutionary” Landscape**

**by**

**Nathaniel Hooper Zingg, BA**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2012**

## **Abstract**

### **André Breton in Mexico: Surrealist Visions of an “Independent Revolutionary” Landscape**

Nathaniel Hooper Zingg, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisors: Jean-Pierre Cauvin, César A. Salgado

This report analyzes André Breton’s particular brand of travel-writing that emerges from his four-month-long trip to Mexico in 1938 (“Memory of Mexico” from the *Minotaure* journal, a “Portrait of Frida Kahlo,” and the speech “Visit with Leon Trotsky”). I show how these writings, to a great extent, poeticize the Mexican landscape, rendering it as a “primitive,” innate expression of the surrealist spirit. I also question how surrealist ethnographic practices, as defined in James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture*, might feed into Breton’s poetic elaboration of his travels. In the last section, I examine Breton’s collaboration with Leon Trotsky, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.” Breton and Trotsky declare art to be entirely free from all social constraints imposed from above—it is an aggressive anti-Stalinist document. I discuss how Breton’s more poetic writings of the period—these travelogues I have mentioned—also constitute an attempt to put into practice this manifesto’s creed. As depicted in Breton’s writings, the Mexican landscape itself realizes a type of alternative Marxism—one not beholden to strict historical-materialist doctrine.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2 Mexico's Surrealism in Theory .....	5
Chapter 3 A Self-Critical "Primitivism" .....	15
Chapter 4 The Surrealist Ethnographic Method .....	24
Chapter 5 An Alternative Marxism.....	33
Works Cited .....	41

## Chapter 1: Introduction

André Breton's travels to Mexico represent a significant moment in the history of the surrealist movement. In 1938, when Breton leaves on his voyage across the Atlantic, surrealism faces increasing isolation within the European intellectual community as the political landscape has become polarized: the rise of fascism provokes a heavy anti-fascist response as poets and writers join the ranks of Republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War. When the French government (the *front populaire*) stands back and does not supply material assistance to the Republican forces in Spain (the *frente popular*) at the war's outset in 1936, the surrealists indeed are at the political vanguard of speaking out, urging for concrete action: "Down with gestures; up with volunteers and material aid!" (quoted in Greeley, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War 2*).

The artistic practice of surrealism, however, is at a crossroads as anti-fascism becomes the dominant expression in the art world. Despite adjusting their political rhetoric—as in the quotation above—to comport with the political moment (becoming increasingly pragmatic, and following the anti-fascist "party line," as Robin Adèle Greeley puts it in her book *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War*), Breton's official surrealist group refuses to make significant changes to their artistic style centering on "psychic automatism" (Greeley, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War 2*). Breton's surrealists continue to maintain that art should be autonomous and free—despite (or because of) the threat of fascism. Remaining vigilant against fascism's threat provides a rationale for a more stripped-down, politically engaged mode of artistic creation. Indeed, Stalin's socialist realism mandate codifies the style: acceptable art presents the proletariat (ie. Soviet men) in a positive light. Stalin's policy reverberates among European artists,

and creates a clear schism in the surrealist movement: those willing to follow Breton in his continued pursuit of the “unconscious” through art; and those adjusting their aesthetics to fit the prevailing mood of politically “committed” art. Even Breton’s most intimate collaborators defect: Louis Aragon speaks out against surrealism at the 1936 communist “congress of writers,” and Paul Éluard will become more dogmatically “engagé” at the end of his career. While Breton was never a part of the dominant strain of artistic creation in Europe, at the moment of his departure to Mexico, even his closest (avant-gardist) allies have left him.

Mexico, for Breton, seems to present an alternative to the artistic situation in Europe. Officially, he is in Mexico at the behest of the French government, scheduled to give lectures on modern art at the Universidad Nacional. However, Breton’s intentions are not just to fulfill these formal duties as lecturer—and as it turns out, he only manages to give one lecture before his lecture series is canceled due to the political turmoil surrounding an “attempted coup against President [Lázaro] Cárdenas” (Polizzotti 457). What really constitutes Breton’s mission: Breton arrives on the scene in Mexico with the express intention of meeting Leon Trotsky, who, having been granted asylum by Cárdenas, is staying at the country-house of Diego Rivera. Reacting to Stalin’s stiffening restrictions on the production of art in the Soviet Union and to the waves of support by artists in Europe and Latin America, Breton and Trotsky write the document “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art”—although it is finally (for reasons of political expediency) signed by Breton and Rivera (Polizzotti 464). This document represents the clearest articulation of how surrealism attempts to engage in politics—ironically, it is via a gesture towards aesthetic autonomy that Trotsky, Breton and Rivera reclaim the revolutionary potential of art.

A review of the critical literature on Breton's four-month stay Mexico reveals two major strands of reflection. Firstly, critics often have often read Breton's reminiscences—chiefly, “Memory of Mexico” from the current incarnation of the “official” surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1939, and “Frida Kahlo de Rivera” from a 1938 exhibition of her work in New York City—as overly sentimentalizing of the Mexican people, and as fitting into the modernist rubric of “primitivism.” Secondly, critics have analyzed the political writings of Breton, Trotsky and Rivera, much in the way that I just quickly sketched above. Often these two registers of Breton's writings on Mexico—the poetic (“primitivizing”) and the political—remain on separate levels of discussion.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to view the two sides of Breton's Mexican production—the poetic travel-writings and the 1938 Trotsky-Breton manifesto—as linked. Indeed, Daniel Garza Usabiaga, in a 2011 article “André Breton, Surrealism and Mexico, 1938-1970: A Critical Overview,” shows how even the most “poetic” production of the period, “Memory of Mexico,” alludes directly to a political agenda that is “anarchic” and “libertarian” in nature. Robin Adèle Greeley, in her article “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico,” discusses how “Memory of Mexico” can be read as an exemplar of the “independent, revolutionary” art that he advocates in the concurrently published manifesto. Risking here the possibility of overstating the connection between these two realms of production: it is as if the utopian spirit of Mexico itself—its revolutionary landscape, at least as perceived by Breton in this

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Luis Mario Schneider's chronicle of Breton's stay in Mexico. After having discussed his participation with Trotsky, Schneider separates Breton's later article “Memory of Mexico,” putting it in another category: “La estadía política de Breton termina aquí. Va provisto además de recuerdos, de vivencias de objetos folklóricos, de amistades. Sus reminiscencias aparecen en un largo artículo, en donde apenas menciona a Trotsky, y que se intitule ‘Souvenir du Mexique’” (161).

moment—inspires him and models the vision of a utopian, autonomous art that forms the basis of Breton and Trotsky’s “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.”

In Breton’s writings, the Mexican landscape often appears as an idealized utopia: his descriptions of the poetic beauty of Mexico’s landscape and the people present Mexico as a place that is “revolutionary” or “surrealist” by nature. At the same time, Mexico’s “poetry,” in the Bretonian worldview is never completely extracted from its immediate historical circumstances (despite even his most dogged efforts to render the Mexican country as a land of pure beauty). At length, Breton discusses Mexico’s recent revolution of 1910, from which, it seems, the country’s exceptional “surrealist” character has most recently emerged; he also makes reference to the recent nationalization of the oil industry. When Breton describes Mexico (in an interview during his time there) as “the surrealist place *par excellence*” (quoted in Gilbert 32), we might consider this statement to be another case of sheer “exoticism” or “primitivism,” and surely it is (as I will show). The modernists are often implicated in appropriating (and essentializing) non-Western forms to enrich their own aesthetic styles (ranging from post-impressionism to cubism). Nevertheless, Breton is also in a direct dialogue with the country’s contemporaneous political mood. Breton’s “poetic” reflections on Mexico praise the country precisely for what he perceives as a political “anarchism” resultant from Mexico’s post-revolutionary moment. His reflections on his stay in Mexico and the document he develops with Trotsky become a propulsive force in the aesthetic theory used to combat the era’s dominant strain of socialist realism.

## Chapter 2: Mexico's Surrealism in Theory

When André Breton states in an interview that Mexico is the “surrealist place *par excellence*,” he means it quite literally—Mexico, for Breton, fulfills all of the requirements as to what constitutes surrealism (in the way it is set forth in the official surrealist manifestos). In his first 1924 manifesto, Breton defines “surrealism” as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express [...] the actual functioning of thought” (26). The “automatic writer” is a mere “recording vessel” logging whatever might emerge (by chance) from an unimpeded flow of (unconscious) images (27-8). But even in the first manifesto, not everything that results from this mere “recording” exercise is equally potent: the most “surreal” moments are disruptive, jarring juxtapositions of two very different images. A surrealist “metaphor” is an uncanny clash, a logically irreconcilable combination of seemingly random ephemera.

The trademark of a surrealist metaphor is an infringement on the level of “quality:” surrealism’s metaphors derive their strange power by rigorously contradicting whatever has been the assumed “fictional world presented by the surrounding discourse” (Hedges 283). Thus, the reader of surrealist poetry must engage in a constant process of “reframing:” one discovers a world which might contain a metaphor’s radical juxtaposition, only to have that world “reframed” for another anomalous combination (Hedges 286). Breton, when alluding to such a brand of metaphor, cites the poetic ideas of Pierre Reverdy: “it does not seem possible to bring together, unilaterally, what [Reverdy] calls ‘two distant realities’ [...] the value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors” (36-7). Juxtapositions like Reverdy’s “push against the very limits of sense” (Hedges 284).

Metaphor's process of conjoining "distant realities" constitutes a type of "alchemy" for Breton (see Balakian 34). As Anna Balakian has noted, surrealist metaphor is not about finding "correspondences" between this "world" and a more perfect one of forms as in the philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg and the symbolist writings of Charles Baudelaire (35). Rather, the coming-together of objects from "logically unrelated" spheres is more akin to a generative process of metamorphosis; these fragments of reality, in their surrealist juxtaposition, "become something else:" an alchemical reaction (Balakian 36). What underlies this "alchemical" quality of surrealist poetry—its constant striving to form new substances out of disparate elements—is a hermetic belief in "monistic notion of the universe" (Balakian 33). Through surrealist metaphor, it would be possible to imagine one (monist) world where objects that are seemingly unrelated are somehow uncannily interconnected. They could be fused to form something new.

Breton continues to produce documents deepening his surrealist principles (the second manifesto in 1930 is the next such step). To an increasing degree, the unexpected, deeply irreconcilable juxtaposition of images becomes the crux of surrealist dogma. In the 1930, second manifesto, he clarifies the purpose of the surrealist clash of opposites:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.  
(123)

What Breton calls the "opposition of antimonies" can be seen as a further development of his original surrealist conception of "metaphor," in which "two distant realities" are displayed in tandem. According to Breton, the division between "high and low," "life and death," and so forth might be reconciled—if viewed from a "certain point of mind." The implication is that the everyday (bourgeois) mind operates at a lower level

of consciousness. It takes a (surrealist) shock of intense “difference” to enter a higher realm, in which contradictions no longer appear like they are such—much in the same way that Freud’s conception of the dream-state denies the rational contradiction principle.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the theories of Freud however, it is interesting to speculate on the other possible sources for Breton’s radical philosophy: his thesis—that opposites actually might be united from a different vantage—has its precursors. Art historian Linda Henderson has noted that surrealism shares its “monism” with the mystical thinker P. D. Ouspensky, who writes of a higher-dimensional consciousness in which the logical dualism of three-dimensions will be overcome (Henderson 229). Ouspensky, who was widely read by the Russian futurists particularly, writes:

Our language is incapable of expressing the unity of opposites [...] “A is both A and Not-A” or “Everything is both A and Not-A,” represent[...] the principal axioms of higher logic, expressed in our language of concepts, sounds absurd from the standpoint of our usual logic, and is not essentially true. (206)

Indeed, in 1938—quite soon after Breton returns from Mexico—Breton, Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow-Ford meet in Brittany and “spen[d] the summer reading Ouspensky” (Henderson 229). The chronology here does not suggest that Breton developed his belief in an underlying “monism” from reading Ouspensky (although it is possible that he had read Ouspensky earlier than 1938). Nevertheless, the idea of a “higher dimensional” consciousness has been part of Breton’s writings (even before the summer of 1938): he writes in 1936 that “non-Euclidean geometry [...] shook to its very

---

<sup>2</sup> Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. ‘No’ seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary; so there is no way of deciding at a first glance whether any element that admits of a contrary is present in the dream-thoughts as a positive or as a negative.” (334)

foundations the edifice constructed by Descartes and Kant and ‘opened up’ rationalism” (“Crisis of the Object” 275). The theories of Ouspensky and the late-Bretonian conception (of “uniting antinomies”) share many commonalities.

Another source for this surrealist conceptualization of “monism:” Hegel. In his comprehensive intellectual history, *Marxism and Totality*,<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay discusses how the surrealist version of the Hegelian differs from the main tendency of “rationalist Hegelian Marxists” but nevertheless has major implications on alternative Marxisms, particularly Henri Lefebvre’s (287). Hegelian thought, as generally read, tends to imply a “rationalist logocentrism” of progress (286): two “things” synthesize to create an improved “thing.” The surrealists revisit Hegel’s writings—re-reading them in the context of their preference for the “irrational.” Ultimately, the surrealists will take Hegel to be their guide to aesthetics: the surrealists aimed for a Hegelian synthesis that would be almost spiritual in its implications. While most Hegelian totalities (especially in the realm of Marxist thought) synthesize polarities of “rationality,” surrealism demands an even wider “totality,” which would “include [...] both the rational and the irrational, sanity and madness, waking consciousness and the dream” (Jay 286).

The surrealists implement Hegel’s theories in two ways that break from standard Hegelianism, according to Martin Jay. Firstly, their Hegelian totality involves the “irrational.” On top of that, the method by which they achieve the Hegelian “sublation” is quite different from what is described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Breton envisions “an unmediated juxtaposition of seemingly discordant elements” (Jay 287). The lack of “mediation” differentiates surrealist practice from the focus on “progress” in Hegel’s

---

<sup>3</sup>I discovered this source-book, which describes the various strains of Marxist thought, in a citation from Robin Adèle Greeley’s “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas’s Mexico.”

*Phenomenology*, which calls for a back-and-forth “interplay” of mediated perceptions: Hegel discusses a series of moments of seeing-yourself-through-the-eyes-of-the-Other and vice-versa. Hegel’s description of the spirit gradually becoming ever-more perfected is at odds with surrealism’s cataclysmic moments of revelation. By contrast, surrealism’s Hegelian synthesis involves “an unexpected convergence of the dissimilar” from which “a new whole [...] would be revealed” (Jay 287). The chance encounter of extreme “difference” can produce a “marvelous” synthesis instantly (287).

For Breton, Mexico accomplishes the central Hegelian-surrealist synthesis in a variety of instances. Breton, in “Memory of Mexico,” describes the Mexican landscape explicitly within the defined terms of surrealist principles—the landscape itself reconciles “antimonies” (in a Hegelian fashion), and as art historian Amy Winter points out, expresses the “duality” of “life and death” (Winter 73). Breton summarizes near the beginning of the piece: “Th[e] ability to reconcile life and death is doubtlessly the principal lure of Mexico” (24). As Winter comments, Mexico became a “living archetype of the [s]urrealist imagination—a dream literally come true, to be grasped symbolically” (73). Thus: Breton finds in Mexico a real-life version of his surrealist “dream.” As a number of critics have noted,<sup>4</sup> he structures “Memory of Mexico” around series of clashing binaries. For Breton, the contrast between the Aztec deities Xochipilli (god “of flowers and lyrical poetry”) and Coatlicue (goddess “of the earth and of violent death”) creates an “electricity” in the atmosphere: he relates this essentially Mexican binary to the conflicting “poles of attraction” present in Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s starkly poetic

---

<sup>4</sup>For readings of “Memory of Mexico” that consider its persistent Hegelianism, see Keith Jordan’s “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism: The Good, the (Revalued) Bad, and the Ugly,” Amy Winter’s *Wolfgang Paalen* biography and Robin Adèle Greeley’s “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas’s Mexico.”

photographs (24-5). In “Memory of Mexico,” Breton manages to organize Mexican pre-Columbian mythology and contemporary Mexican art in the terms of his surrealist manifesto-writings.

In *Minotaure*, the text of “Memory of Mexico” is accompanied by a series of visuals—replicating the Bretonian device of image-text juxtaposition famously utilized in *Nadja* (1928) and *Mad Love* (1937). Breton often arranges the images on the magazine’s pages to imitate the surrealist clash he attests to in the Mexican landscape. The first two-page spread features two Bravo photographs: the left displays a cactus-like plant with dry leaves; the right: a dying man lying in his own blood with his arms splayed. Art historian Robin Adèle Greeley writes of the image-pairings that accompany Breton’s text: “Breton sets up a quasi-Hegelian dialectic, in which the ‘thesis’ of life is continually faced with the ‘antithesis’ of death, resulting in a holistic synthesis of the two that marks a continual life-cycle” (216). The droop of the leaves and of the dead arms (respectively) mirror one another: formally in the arrangement of the photos, Breton suggests a palpable “synthesis” in the Mexican landscape by displaying the two dialectically opposed photographs, one on each side of *Minotaure*’s spine.

Breton juxtaposes images expertly throughout *Minotaure*: he often pairs photographs whose subject matter clashes, but whose formal composition suggests an underlying connection across the surface-level oppositions. As Greeley has suggested, a reclining body suggests many things throughout “Memory of Mexico:” death (in the case of the previously mentioned protesting worker lying in his own blood); the dream state (in two cases: a sleeping boy by a window; and a naked woman lying on the floor with her eyes closed); and resurrection (a prone doll being pulled with an attached wire by a standing skeleton). In another purely formal correspondence, the cactus—the first image

of “Memory”—reappears in the plates of the two featured Diego Rivera paintings: “Casahuatl” and “The Couple.” The cactus imagery rhymes with the similarly-shaped crucifixes present in the images of pre-Columbian candelabras and of Catholic altars. Breton adds another layer to the formal correspondences: the title of Rivera’s “The Couple” suggests that his cactuses should be read as humanoid—a connection that Breton makes explicit when he writes: “One of the earlier images one has of Mexico consists of just such a giant candelabra-like cactus, from behind which a gun-bearing man with fiery eyes suddenly appears” (24). Breton plays up such resonances to create the sense that everything in the Mexican *paysage* is somehow uncannily connected.

Thus, Breton relies on “formal” comparisons such as the previously noted in an attempt to demonstrate his surrealist notion of union-of-opposites. Critics in the wake of Jacques Lacan have remarked on the inherent “formalism” of the surrealist project: ultimately, the surrealists try to avoid the simple “signifying” power of language in favor a more “figurative” use of language. In “Memory of Mexico,” Breton demonstrates that the alternative (“figural”) relationships between fragments of his Mexican travels reveal a deeper totality than that which their mere “signifying” power might approach. Following surrealist dogma in this regard, Jean-François Lyotard, in *Discourse Figure*, argues that the psycho-analytic processes—such as “condensation” and “displacement”—are manifest via purely imagistic operations—as in the case of rebus, in which the figural composition of the words-on-the-page reveals a hidden meaning (238). In placing such an importance on the “formal” structures of visual and written poetry, Lyotard differs from Lacan who maintains that Freudian “condensation” and “displacement” align with the

linguistic operators “metaphor” and “metonymy” respectively.<sup>5</sup> Breton’s “Memory of Mexico” is emblematic of the surrealist project for its consistent gaming with text and image, and for its emphasis on unanticipated “figural” coincidences in the Mexican archive of imagery.

Breton’s “formalist” treatment of the Mexican imaginary in the service of his Hegel-inflected surrealist principles can seem at times to be quite closed and totalizing; Robin Adèle Greeley also has analyzed the Hegelian schema present in “Memory of Mexico.” She identifies the root of Breton’s fascination with Mexico in the central opposition that organizes (according to Breton) pre-Columbian mythology. The first two images constitute the overriding binary that Breton will elaborate over the course “Memory of Mexico,” as Greeley writes:

The first two images locate the theme of human mortality within a tradition stemming back to the Aztec, who believed that death was necessary to maintain the cycle of life. Without human sacrifice, so the Aztec assumed, angry gods might not be able to choose to continue the cycle of time within which the cycle of life moved. Flowers in Aztec iconography not only symbolized the concept of rebirth from death, but were also the emblem of the powerful god of war and poetry, Xochipilli. (215)

Breton explains more fully Mexico’s ability to synthesize “life” and “death” in the corresponding passage which opens the text. The plants which frequent the text’s images—like the agave and the cactus—quite literally seem to be fed by the human blood that has been spilled on the earth. In this way, Breton means to convey the Aztec “cycle

---

<sup>5</sup> Lyotard writes in *Discourse, Figure*: “Condensation [...] treats words as if they were things. [...] Condensation [...] plays “freely” with the units of the initial text, freely, that is, relative to the constraints peculiar to the message, to any linguistic message. Hence condensation is a transgression of the rules of discourse. In what does this transgression consist? In condensation itself! To squeeze signifiers and signifieds together, mixing them up, is to neglect the stable distance separating the letters and words of a text, to scorn the distinctive, invariable graphemes of which they are composed, not to recognize [...] the space of discourse.” (238)

of life” that Greeley alludes to in her analysis of Breton’s allusions: “Red virgin land impregnated with the most generous blood [...] always ready like the omnipresent agave expressing it to burst into a single final bloom of desire and danger” (23). Breton utilizes Aztec mythology—its belief in regeneration principally—as an exemplar of surrealist dogma: the Hegelian sublation of opposites.

Critic Keith Jordan disapproves of Breton’s super-imposition of a Marxist framework onto an essentially different Aztec culture. He writes: “Breton imposes his own hermetic via Hegelian anticipation of a union of opposites as a teleological Absolute on to very different Mesoamerican ideas about the reciprocity of sacrifice and the bounty of gods, and the dual nature of a continually fluxing and dynamic universe” (45). For Jordan, Breton’s dialectical approach to the Mexican landscape closes whatever intrinsic meaning the Mexican artefacts might have had prior: they become objects for the surrealist project. In essence, Jordan’s article “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism” sees Breton’s effort to demonstrate “surrealism” using the imaginary of another culture as emblematic of the era’s typical modernist mode of art-making: a reliance on the perceived “primitivism” of other cultures to reanimate modernist art.

Martin Jay suggests how this impulse to investigate non-Western cultures on the part of the surrealists might coincide with a wider (Marxist) interest in discovering new totalities. As it becomes increasingly clear that the Third International cannot fulfill the desired “normative totality,” the next generation of Marxists (the surrealists might be included in this group) “gravitate [...] increasingly to the study of primitive societies [...] it was far less threatening to investigate a totality in exotic and distant lands than to confront the reasons for its absence at home” (Jay 283). Breton’s “Mexico” writings also

potentially evidence an interest in an even larger universal “totality”—a totality that includes the “home” and the “exotic” as antimonies that could be united through the surrealists’ Hegelian synthesis. Breton’s interest in finding a Marxist model alternative to the Third International colors much of his writings from this era: the dialectic quite clearly organizes “Memory of Mexico.” However, Breton’s ascription of a Marxist politics on to what he sees during his Mexican travels might result in a repetition of the dialectical, “primitivist” discourse so typical of the era.

### Chapter 3: A Self-Critical “Primitivism”

The modernists’ co-option of sources deemed “primitive” comes under the heaviest scrutiny in the aftermath of the Museum of Modern Art’s 1985 exhibition (and book) *‘Primitivism’ 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. The show pairs works by MOMA’s canonical modernist masters, such as *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, alongside their primitive “sources.” MOMA presents tribal objects without the appropriate contextualization—characteristically omitting their dates of creation. In so doing, the show, to a large extent, papers over the colonial legacy that allows for the modernists’ access to these objects—and continues their appropriation by the West in showing them merely as another stylistic source in the Western artist’s repertoire. MOMA’s all-too-easy narrative—centered around a formal comparison between the “primitive” and the “modern”—rightfully causes an uproar in the art historical discipline.

While acknowledging that MOMA should be credited for disrupting the typical Western fantasy that tribal art is “expressive,” critic Hal Foster argues that the show, in removing the tribal “art” from its original context, continues the standard art historical narrative when it comes to “primitivism.” For example, MOMA’s Alfred Barr in 1950 previously discusses “two waves” of interest in the “primitive.” Barr suggests, “The first might be called cubist-expressionist [...] concerned primarily with formal, plastic and emotional values of a direct kind [while] the second wave, quasi-surrealist, was more preoccupied with the fantastic and imaginative values of primitive” (quoted in Foster 53). According to Foster, such a retelling of the “primitivist” narrative—largely repeated in the MOMA show of 1985—assigns meaning on to the non-Western object in order to confirm MOMA’s formalist reading of art history. As the art-historical narrative goes, African art influences the cubists because it is (perceived as) more ‘stark,’ ‘reduced’ or

‘symbolic’ (approximating abstraction), and Oceanic and American art is more ‘magical’ and concerned with ‘narrative’ (approximating the surrealist interest in “myth”) (Foster 53).

Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton effectively summarize post-colonial studies’ critique of the modernists’ “primitivism.” Even though modernists such as Picasso and Breton are professedly anti-colonialist, often their “primitivist” outlook cannot help but repeat the essentializing strategies of the lasting colonial apparatus: the “primitive” exists as one half of an implicit binary opposition—with “civilized” constituting its other half. When the modernist artist praises the “primitive” for its “simplicity and authenticity,” (s)he then appropriates these positive, “primitive” elements to transform his/her own art—the modernist looks to the “primitive” as a way to re-energize the modern, which has lost its authentic edge (Antliff 170). “Primitivism,” according to Antliff and Leighton, operates across a range of binaries—all of which align to its guiding opposition of “primitive” versus “civilized:” modernist artists have leveraged similar binaries in fields as diverse such as race, class and gender. In the same way that MOMA omits the dates in the placards of the modernists’ “primitive sources,” modernist artists view the distant “primitive space” as if it existed outside “time”—a totally separate field of space-time from the West’s plodding progress of history (often depicted as circular rather than linear) (Antliff and Leighton 218).

Recent critics discussing Breton’s voyage to Mexico—and his written reflections “Memory of Mexico” and “Frida Kahlo de Rivera”—have seen how the surrealist leader falls into the trappings of the “primitivist” discourse that prevailed among modernist art at the time. Louise Tythacott, in her illuminating 2003 study *Surrealism and the Exotic*, summarizes the surrealist relationship to primitivism: “Though their radicalism enable[s]

them to stand outside some of the dominant bourgeois ideologies of European modernist society, they never totally br[eak] free of the boundaries of their own (largely French) race, language and culture” (14). Keith Jordan echoes the same in his article on “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism” (25). Tythacott and Jordan argue that the surrealists abandon cubism’s interest in “aesthetic primitivism” in favor of investigating the perceived “mythical” undercurrents of the pre-Columbian (Tythacott 14; Jordan 25-9).

Even before Breton travels abroad, the surrealists have been interested in the Americas—and Mexico in particular. The “Surrealist Map of the World” from a 1929 issue of *Variétés* shows a world-map distorted—with its land masses enlarged or shrunk to express their varying importance in the surrealist world-view (Tythacott 13). The surrealist map gives precedence—rendered in terms of their relative size—to non-Western societies over Europe and the United States; even among the non-Western, Mexico figures prominently (displayed as big as the continent Africa is). Previous to Breton’s travels, Breton and Éluard amass a large collection of “primitive” objects from their frequent explorations of the Paris flea markets—pre-Columbian art is especially prized: “Out of a total of 312 items there [are] 30 from Africa, 134 from Oceania, 124 from the Americas, 14 from Malaysia, and 7 ‘Divers’” (Maurer 546). Breton and Éluard’s collection of American objects (coupled with the “Surrealist Map”) suggests that Breton already has an appreciation for Mexican culture—particularly its pre-Columbian past—before he makes his journey there.

In his portrait of Frida Kahlo, Breton suggests that he has a preconceived notion of what Mexico might be like when he embarks on his travels: “I had long been impatient to go there, to put to the test the idea I had formulated of the kind of art which our own

era demanded, an art that would deliberately sacrifice the external model to the internal model, that would resolutely give perception precedence over representation” (141). He frames his journey to Mexico as a “test” that will either confirm (or deny) his original conceptualization: that Mexico itself might possess a certain special ability to express a surrealist sensibility. He wonders with great anticipation whether the artists in Mexico will feature a mode of painting starkly opposed to socialist realism and to the dry materialism that dominates European culture.

Surrealism, as a whole, develops more of an internationalist focus in the 1930s and following—which we can track: 1) via the French surrealists’ “gaze” towards locations beyond the continent; and 2) via the movement’s artistic impact on artists abroad. (My study is mostly concerned with the former component—Breton’s writings in particular.) The study of surrealism in this global context is a growing area of interest in (transnational) studies of modernism. Particularly important has been Louise Tythacott’s work *Surrealism and the Exotic*, which lauds Breton’s anti-colonialist stance while noting the early surrealist tendency to “primitivize” other cultures: surrealism believes that it has found in Mexico (for example) an illogical realm that might disrupt the West’s rationalism.

Breton’s writings reflecting on his time in Mexico, certainly to a degree, reflect this “primitivist” viewpoint. Breton sees, in the personage of Kahlo, an exemplar of someone who possesses innately the qualities of surrealism. Breton emphasizes that Kahlo paints in a surrealist fashion “without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself” and that her work is “a spontaneous outpouring of our own questioning spirit” (144). Breton’s praise of Kahlo recalls a series of tropes present in the 19th century movement, romanticism. In “On naïve and

sentimental poetry,” for example, Schiller sketches two distinct categories of poets: those who (like Kahlo) can channel the “natural” and the “primitive” as if they were second nature to her, so to speak; and those who must labor against the prevailing modernity that surrounds them (like Breton) to create an approximation of the “natural,” or at least to express a profound longing for that (unattainable) “natural” poetry. As if to underscore his implied connection to the two phases of romanticism, Breton indeed writes of Kahlo that her self-portrait recalls “the most glorious days of German romanticism” (143). Kahlo, for Breton, is as naively romantic as Schiller’s Goethe.

Scholars such as Keith Jordan and Amy Winter (in her critical biography of Wolfgang Paalen) consider how Breton quite literally objectifies Kahlo (Jordan 46; Winter 80). Breton compares her physique to a pre-Columbian statue (like those he previously collects in the Paris flea markets). Breton describes the apparition of Kahlo, as if she emerges directly from the material of the Mexican soil: “I had never held in my hand a lump of that red earth from which had emerged the statuettes of Colima which are half-woman, half-swan, their make-up already beautifully applied by nature; and, lastly, I had not yet set eyes on Frida Kahlo de Rivera, resembling these statuettes in her bearing and adorned, too, like a fairy-tale princess, with magic spells at her finger-tips” (143). Breton’s associations, in this case, quite closely follow the logic of primitivism—tracking a number of the parallel binary oppositions that Antliff and Leighten note are characteristic of the “primitivist” discourse—femininity equals nature equals timelessness.

Breton’s “primitivism” is laid bare in “Memory of Mexico,” in which Breton notes that Mexico has “barely awakened from its mythological past [and] keeps evolving under the protection of Xochipilli, the god of flowers and lyrical poetry, and of Coatlicue,

the goddess of the earth and of violent death” (24). Breton celebrates the pre-Colombian here, saying that Mexico still remains under the sway of Aztec gods and goddesses. He quite consciously notes that historical distinctions such as past and present are irrelevant in Mexico’s supposedly mythical realm. The bulk of the “Mexico” reminiscence concerns a visit to a decrepit house in Guadalajara that is falling apart in the aftermath of the 1910 revolution. Within this labyrinthine space, nostalgic traces of the past remain, most notably the haunting presence of the upper-class landowners (including the matriarch’s dead body which remains locked up in an upstairs bedroom, per her death wishes). Now, the house is mostly overrun by a peasant class, recently given the right to own land. Breton evokes a Mexico in which two temporalities exist coextensively: the pre-revolutionary past and the post-revolutionary present are both very active in Breton’s reverie—two temporal spaces which compete in a sort of interminable, dialectical struggle.

“Memory of Mexico” culminates with an image of an alluring woman who, in her beauty, somehow manages to supersede these two coexistent spaces (of pre- and post-revolution). Instead, she resides in a space that must be considered utopic. She embodies, for Breton, an artistic creation not beholden to any specific space or time, an autonomous art that does not have to be classified as “engaged” or “reactionary.”

The spell she cast over me at that moment was such that I failed to inquire after her position: who could she be, the daughter or sister of one of the individuals who haunted the place in the days of splendor, or was she of the race of those who invaded it? No matter: as long as she was there, I did not care about her origin, I was quite content to simply render thanks for her existence. Such is beauty. (28)

In these final moments of the piece, Breton’s “primitivism” becomes self-conscious as Breton injects himself into the narrative, critiquing his own way of looking at her: “I failed to inquire...” “I did not care about...” “I was quite content to...” Breton’s

“I” invades. Seemingly as he is remembering, and as he is writing these words on the page, he realizes that he is willfully turning his back on whatever might be the historical or materialist circumstances of this woman, instead chronicling her image for its sheer beauty.

Breton’s self-consciousness (when it comes to his gaze towards the supposedly “primitive”) emerges at other points in his writings on Mexico. In the portrait of “Frida Kahlo,” Keith Jordan has noted a “self-awareness” (46), and Winter also deems the attitude one of “confessing his own ‘imperious’ vision” (Winter 78; quoted in Jordan 46). For both critics, however, the self-awareness does not change the fact that Breton uses Mexico’s “primitivism” in the service of his own surrealist project. Breton’s self-consciousness as an observer—his rhetoric of humility here—does not approach the extremes of another traveler Claude Levi-Strauss, who in *Tristes Tropiques*, discusses the violence of his own act of writing. In the same vein of Levi-Strauss however, Breton’s self-conscious “primitivism” separates it from previous versions of this high modernist trope. At many points in “Frida Kahlo de Rivera” and “Memory of Mexico,” we see Breton reflecting on his own status as a European entering Mexico.

The eyes of all the children of Europe, among them the eyes of the child I once was, had preceded me there [...] Now, with the same eyes that I used to cast over imaginary sites, I was able to see the prodigious sierra racing across my view with the speed of a galloping horse [...] I was able to see the specific silhouette of the adventurer, brother of the poet, outlined at a greater height and more imperiously than anywhere else, laden with heavy ornaments of felt, metal and leather.  
(“Frida” 141)

Breton watches himself watching. His eyes cross the Mexican countryside almost like a conquistador’s: his eyes are coded “European;” he likens his gaze to “a galloping horse” (possibly suggestive of conquest) and mentions a poet being like an “adventurer.”

His “imperious” vantage—“at a greater height”—suggests the perspective of someone surveying the land before entering it. Breton, here, makes evident the colonial power-relations, into which he (as a European observer) is stepping. He contextualizes his own gaze: indeed he reveals the hyper-relativity of his viewpoint. As he views the “other” from his “imperious” vantage, he becomes aware of the colonialist resemblance of the “primitivist” discourse that his writing continues.

Breton’s perspective vacillates dramatically over the course of his Mexican writings, producing a destabilizing effect: while we have just seen him self-conscious of his “imperial” perspective, at other points (more commonly actually), he will identify with the other side of the “primitivist” binary. In an episode from “Memory of Mexico,” one of the wealthy landowners of the estate tries to maintain hold of his former property. He meanders around the house

while the barbarians, myself included, were camping out in front of the very doors of the bedrooms. (27)

In this instance, Breton does not play the role of the “adventurer” as he did in “Frida Kahlo” (141) but the “barbarian.” He feels an affinity with the Mexican revolutionaries who have recently struggled against the landowning class in the 1910 revolution—probably because he (along with the surrealist movement broadly speaking) is professedly anti-colonialist. (The discourse surrounding Mexico’s 1910 revolution in this era often continues to be coded in the same colonial terms of “civilized” and “barbarian.” The peasant class takes up the mantle of *indigenismo* as a way to consolidate nationalist sentiment—Breton could have very easily picked up on these associations having stayed with Rivera who employs many of the same tropes in his murals.) The very conscious shifts in perspective in Breton’s Mexico writings—expressing an allegiance

with the “barbarian” at one point, yet considering his own “European” vantage at another—give Breton’s “primitivist” writings a uniquely self-critical tone. To a certain degree, in his varied perspective, Breton begins to destabilize the very “primitivist” binaries that he has set up for himself in the first place.

## Chapter 4: The Surrealist Ethnographic Method

This next section will continue in the same vein of the previous—analyzing the way that Breton represents Mexico in his travel-writing (particularly in *Minotaure*'s "Memory of Mexico"). It re-asks: To what extent does Breton manage to disrupt the binary of "primitivist" discourse that has organized much of modernist art? The emphasis on Hegelian dialectics in surrealist theorizations at this moment (1938) serves to present Mexico as a land not beholden to the strictures of Western logic—innately able to unite oppositional categories (such as life and death). Thus, in many ways, Breton depicts Mexico as a prime example of the West's "other:" what in Europe seems irrational, in Mexico is only "natural." However, Breton's pervasive Hegelianism often seems to break at its seams: the surrealist aesthetic is predicated on the anomalous juxtaposition; the characteristic clashing of "bricolage," in many cases, acts as disruptive force rather than as a synthetic method to create a Hegelian union. Furthermore, in "Memory of Mexico," Breton celebrates the hybridities of the European and the pre-Columbian present in the Mexican landscape. To a degree, Breton's "bricolage" and the hybridity of the Mexican fragment work to undo the "primitivist" rhetoric in his Mexican reminiscences.

Jahan Ramazani's recent work *A Transnational Poetics* suggests that it might be possible to revisit the typical postcolonial critique, which paints the relationship between "postcolonialism and Western modernism as adversarial" (96). To start, Ramazani presents numerous examples from postcolonial literatures, which incorporate Western modernist techniques in order to suggest a flow between "the Western modernist" and "the postcolonial." In fact, "modernist bricolage [...] has helped postcolonial poets aesthetically encode intersections among multiple cultural vectors" (99). At the same time, Ramazani is careful not to equate postcolonial literature with Euromodernism:

postcolonial writers, according to Ramazani, explore hybridities and refashion bricolage “across immense differences of power, topography, culture and economics” while by comparison the Euromodernist’s perspective is quite limited in this regard—only able to remix “materials made available by imperial and ethnographic forays” (10).

After discussing examples from postcolonial literature that use modernist techniques, Ramazani reconsiders the work of Western modernists—to see the way in which the poetry of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound attempts to “assimilate[...] non-Western texts and artifacts” (109). Characteristic of these writers’ output is, notably in the case of Yeats, a “self-interrupting, self-thematizing” style (112), which calls attention to the modernist’s orientalist gaze—much in the same way that Breton’s point-of-view acknowledges his implication within the colonial legacy of the European “eyes” that visited Mexico before him. In the case of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the citations of Sanskrit texts are subsumed within the frame of the Western master-text, but to a degree are allowed to “write back to an empire” (110). The modernist technique of “bricolage” as employed by these modernists results in a jaggedness, in which the cited-texts themselves have a certain degree of autonomy within the overarching structure of the modernist work itself. In the same way, despite Breton’s totalizing Hegelianism which closes the representations of Mexico in a sought-after union, the surrealist practice of “bricolage” as evidenced in “Memory of Mexico” performs locally a form of hybridity. In addition, Breton makes concrete reference to the political and historical moment of 1938 Mexico—however, his form of addressing the political is entirely distinct from the dominant, more realist model of the era.

Hal Foster characterizes the “primitivist” impulse in modernist art as a false resolution to a real problem (echoing Levi-Strauss’ analysis of inter-tribal gift-giving

practices). (The problem-without-resolution in this case is a brutal colonial legacy.) “Bricolage,” however, may constitute a counter-discourse to the overriding “primitivism” of the era, according to Foster: the practice of “bricolage” acknowledges the unclassified difference and the “transgressive” power of the “other,” never fully subsuming its artefacts into a modernist system—in this way, the “bricoleur” does not seek the ultimate (compensatory) resolution of “primitivism.” Foster writes, “Rather than seek to master the primitive—or alternatively to fetishize its difference into opposition or identity—these primitivists [the so-called dissident, “ethnographic surrealists”] welcomed ‘the unclassified, unsought Other’” (Foster 63, quoting Clifford). Whether Breton and his travel-writings of this era would fit into this category of the “ethnographic surrealist” remains a topic for debate. On the one hand, the main thrust of Breton’s poetic reminiscence of Mexico is to identify and to describe a central Mexican trait, its supposed ability to unite opposites: the Mexican landscape constitutes the Hegelian-surrealist “logic.” On the other, Breton’s “Memory of Mexico” consistently utilizes juxtapositions and a collage technique—suggesting, potentially, a ragged jumble of different artefacts, figures and images from Mexico. In this way, these fragmentary “bits” of Mexico would be allowed to exist for themselves without a totalizing meaning ascribed to them.

James Clifford discusses how, in France of the 1920s and 30s, the practices of ethnography and of surrealism develop in tandem—arguing that, in their early stages, the two fields often interpenetrate methodologically. In the intellectual history that Clifford traces, the technique of anthropologist Marcel Mauss—via his student and early surrealist collaborator Alfred Métraux—was influential on the dissident surrealist circle, centered around Georges Bataille. In his 1924 study *The Gift*, Mauss develops the concept of “total social phenomena” that “give expression” to “all kinds of institutions at one and the same

time—religious, juridical, and moral” (3). Mauss examines intriguing habitual practices in a culture that serve as a sign for an entire set of beliefs—a proto-structuralist approach to studying cultures. As Martin Jay suggests, alternative Marxist concepts of “totality” (like Althusser’s) stem from this belief in a “total social phenomena” that find their way (almost insidiously) into the practices of all parts of daily life (282).

Breton certainly is aware of Mauss’ ethnographic methodology—“total social phenomena”—while he is in Mexico, and makes use of its general principles. Breton extrapolates—from his observations of small details in the Mexican landscape—large concepts about the “surrealist” ordering of the culture as a whole. In his lecture “Visit with Leon Trotsky,” Breton praises Trotsky’s adeptness in making connections between observed minutia at an “Indian market” and the (presumed) larger cultural structure that they evidence:

Whether our attention was caught by the architecture of the surrounding houses, or by the many-colored stalls, or by the passing peasants draped in serapes combining the sun and the night, and by their extraordinarily noble bearing, Trotsky always managed to link this minor fact of observation to a more general phenomenon, to see in it a spark of hope for the adjustment of this world’s values, to draw from it a stimulus to carry on our struggle. (41)

For Breton as well as Trotsky, “fact[s] of observation” describe “more general phenomenon.” The startling revelation of these “facts” might lead to a serious “adjustment of [commonly held] values.” At least according to Breton, there is a clear point of connection between Trotsky’s Marxist thought and Breton’s surrealist method: as Martin Jay has elaborated, the impulse to search for totalizing descriptions of reality are indeed present in both projects. The “facts,” in Marxist thought, are evidence of a class structure in dialectical struggle; the “facts,” in surrealist dogma, perhaps evidence the same—but often the dialectic is rendered in even wider, more all-encompassing

terms. Dialectics that include reality and dream—irrationality and rationality—work to foment revolution on a psychological level.

Nevertheless, as Jay elaborates, the “total-social-phenomena” method, for Mauss, is merely “an aid to research, not yet the foundation of a full-fledged theory” (Jay 282). Mauss’ writings and lectures do not have the ordered feel of a Levi-Strauss; they are deliriously fragmented, and as Clifford cites from the reminiscences of a student of Mauss, “inspir[ing of] confusion” (124). Clifford summarizes succinctly: “Mauss’s lectures were not theoretical demonstrations. They stressed, in their divagating way, concrete ethnographic fact; he had a sharp eye for the significant detail” (123). More than *The Gift* of 1924, the later Mauss lecture, “Techniques of the Body” (1934), seems representative generally of his anthropological style: within, Mauss lists (in detail) the way that people of different cultures utilize their body in different situations. He notes strangenesses of bodily practices: that English soldiers cannot march properly to a French marching-tune (72); that “girls raised in the convent” walk with their hands in a fist (72); that Maori women are taught by their mothers at a young age to swing their hips in a distinct way (74). Mauss’ notation of difference does not seem add up to prove any one specific point. Rather, through his specificity and his attention to the “concrete” detail, he undercuts preconceived generalizations about cultures—he shows that practices of the body are indeed learned “techniques” and not essentially “natural” features.

For Clifford, Mauss’ ethnographic listing of striking bodily “techniques” approximates the “bricolage” effect as featured in the surrealist journals of the era—particularly in the Bataille-run *Documents* journal. The principal method employed by the dissident *Documents* group is “ethnographic juxtaposition for the purpose of perturbing commonplace symbols” (Clifford 132). *Documents*—which in its masthead lists

“ethnography” as one of its topics for consideration—contains images of miscellanea from around the world: “big toes; folk crafts; *Fantômas* (a popular mystery series) covers; Hollywood sets; African Melanesian, pre-Columbian, and French carnival masks ...” (Clifford 132). By including such a range of objects without contextualization, *Documents* calls deeply into question preconceived systems of classification, division and definition. After *Documents* ends its brief run in 1930, the next surrealist journal *Minotaure*—this one run by Breton—will feature many of the same contributors. Clifford claims, however, that the disruptive “ethnographic” sensibility of *Documents* is quite dramatically changed in the new incarnation, under Breton’s helm:

The artifacts of otherness were replaced, generally, by Breton’s category of the surreal—located in the mythic or psychoanalytic unconscious and all too easily co-opted by romantic notions of artistic genius or inspiration. The concrete cultural artifact was no longer called upon to play a disruptive, illuminatory role. (134)

Remember that “Memory of Mexico” is published in *Minotaure*: and so, apparently, Clifford does not consider Breton’s production of this era (including his writings on Mexico) reflective of the surrealist “ethnographic” method. (It is important to note that “*ethnologie*” as well as “*mythologie*” remain in *Minotaure*’s masthead however.) For Clifford, perhaps Breton is not sufficiently “concrete” in the mold of Mauss’ listing of ethnographic “facts.” In Clifford’s terms, the “Memory” might have been too “romantic”—or too poetic—or too influenced by “mythical” generalizations. After all, Breton flatly admits, “There is no dismissing this romantic vision” (Breton 23), when introducing his article. Despite this potential shift in modality—from a disruptive “ethnographic” method (*Documents*-style) to more of a personal reminiscence (*Minotaure*)—there are quite a few carryovers: I would argue that the probing “ethnographic” sensibility does not go entirely away in Breton’s trip to Mexico. The

disruptive impulse of surrealist ethnography remains, to a certain degree. While Breton continues to order his observations to fit his preconceived notions of Hegelian-surrealist unions, “Memory of Mexico” remains a disjunctive composite of Breton’s concrete notations.

Much in the same caustic manner of the Documents journal, Breton replicates the “ethnographic” aesthetic of collage with his “Memory of Mexico” in *Minotaure*. Breton disrupts his own romanticist travelogue by inter-splicing visual images of “Mexicanidad.” In their variety, taken from all levels of culture, these visual fragments will never fully coincide with Breton’s narrative progression through Mexico’s space. In the opening passage of the “Memory,” Breton describes Emiliano Zapata’s harsh training of the revolutionary generals as being done in the “hard way.” At the end of the memory, however, a miniature José Guadalupe Posada print depicts Zapata: here, the mythologized figure is represented in a far lighter manner, as a cartoon—adding an ironic, popular overtone to his otherwise heavy, serious treatment of the recent revolution. Breton has theorized on these woodblock-prints in an interview: “These compositions tell us of what might be the passage from ‘humor’ to action.”<sup>6</sup> But the antimonies are not always so clearly defined as Breton presents in his schema related to Mexico. While surrealist juxtaposition technically (according to manifesto number two) is meant to generate a sense of the marvelous by uniting opposites, often the collage-effect yields an unwieldy sense of difference that does not align so rigidly to the marvelous’ form. Concluding with Posada’s print seems to bring down the figure

---

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Bradu: “Estas composiciones nos informan de lo que puede ser el paso del ‘humor’ a la acción” (43).

“Zapata” from the mythical realm of a “marvelous revolution” and into a more quotidian place of mass media.

As Clifford elicits in his discussion of the collage-aesthetic in the journal *Documents*, surrealist ethnographic practice valorizes objects that resist prescribed codes of classification. Equally, in *Minotaure*, I might argue, this feature of surrealist ethnography is demonstrated by Breton’s choice of the images in “Memory of Mexico.” Mexican’s culture, for Breton, disrupts the “primitivist” framework to a degree: the hybrid objects of syncretic belief-systems do not map on to the “primitivist” categories of “Western” and “non-Western.” Breton writes, “its pyramids [are] made up of several layers of stones corresponding to very distant cultures that have covered and obscurely penetrated one another” (24). Many of accompanying visuals in *Minotaure* reflect this “penetration” of disparate traditions: a “Day of the Dead” *calavera*, which has the familiar Catholic cross inlaid between the eyes, for example. Breton mirrors this type of cultural inter-penetration with the well-suited aesthetic of “bricolage” which allows for a type of ever-present feeling of multiplicity. Hal Foster writes:

When these ‘ethnographic surrealists’ did aestheticize, it tended to be in the interests of ‘cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms.’ Which is to say that they prized in the tribal object not its *raisonnable* form but its *bricolé* heterogeneity, not its mediatory possibilities but its transgressive value. (62)

Rather than breaking entirely from the “ethnographic surrealist” practice, as Clifford seems to suggest in his dismissal of *Minotaure*, Breton, somewhat, continues what the *Documents* journal has established as a surrealist destabilizing technique: “bricolage”—both in terms of the magazine’s composition and in terms of the featured “hybrid” objects themselves. These examples of Mexican hybridities—like the *calavera*, the various remarked-upon levels of cultures interpenetrating one another—are ripped

from their ordinary context. While Breton often suggests that the goal of his method is a final Hegelian synthesis, often the end result remains an amalgamation of various fragments.

Critics have noted the doubleness of the “bricolage” method: the technique, at once, takes apart, and puts back together in a reconfiguration. According to Martin Jay, “the rubric of modernism contained both nihilistic and constructivist impulses in varying measure” (284). Breton’s deployment of surrealist-ethnographic practices contains both sides of modernist project: a consideration of “difference,” in all of its multiplicity in the Mexican landscape; as well as a desire to somehow imagine a synthesis. In his discussion of anthropological humanism (a synthetic model of explaining “ethnographic” observations) and surrealist ethnography (a more destabilizing method), Clifford notes that the synthetic and the deconstructive modes “presuppose each other [...] within a complex process that generates cultural meanings, definitions of self and other” (146). In Breton’s travel-writings, both modernist tendencies (fragmentation and reconfiguration) are in evidence simultaneously.

## Chapter 5: An Alternative Marxism

As I have shown in previous sections, “Memory of Mexico” describes a landscape that often seems as if it exists outside of rational, historical time. The revolutions of 1810 and 1910 are equated—and the Mexican revolutionary spirit is something ever-present, rather than the result of a build-up, or the climax of historical time: “At least there is still one country in the world where the wind of liberation has not abated. That wind in 1810, in 1910 has irresistibly rumbled with the voice of all the green organs that thrust up over there into the stormy sky” (22). Mexico has a sort of inherent, natural quality of “liberation,” reaching all the way back to the Aztec empire, that might surface and “show[...] how utterly real it [is]” (22). “Memory of Mexico” continues in a distinctly ahistorical register: Mexico “ha[s] barely awakened from its mythological past” (24), and its arts register a “sense of fate” (25). Finally, in the decrepit “palace of fate” where Rivera and Breton travel, two distinct moments—of the pre-revolutionary landowning class and of the post-revolutionary uprisers—are coexistent in a state of perpetual struggle. Breton’s description of the ever-presence of revolution—just lurking under the surface of Mexico’s “red, virgin land”—could be viewed as just another romantic, “primitivist” vision of history: while the West seems to operate by the principles of progress and causality, the “primitive” “other” seems to operate in a cyclical time—revolution is more prone to manifest itself in Mexico because its “earth” itself contains the necessary prerequisites.

At the same time, Breton is not unaware of the specificity of the political situation in Mexico. In “Memory of Mexico” after all, he mentions the dates “1810” and “1910” to mark the important revolutions against the Spanish and the Porfiriato respectively. He also discusses in great detail the contemporary political moment in Mexico in other texts

at the time—such as his lecture “Visit with Leon Trotsky.” Breton relates a fragment of Trotsky’s writings, which are a justification for President Cárdenas’s recent nationalization of the oil industry; he declaims Trotsky’s words:

Without harboring illusions and without fear of calumny, progressive workers will lend their complete support to the Mexican people in their struggle against imperialist powers. The expropriation of oil is neither socialism nor communism but a profoundly progressive measure of national self-defense. (43)

Quoting Trotsky here, Breton has a distinct sense of the political situation in Mexico. Prior to Cárdenas’s nationalization measures, foreign oil companies represent a major threat to labor rights, as they have grossly failed to listen to the demands of Mexican workers’ unions: “Those unions understood foreign oil company refusal to accede to labour demands as part and parcel of a long history of colonial and imperialist disregard for Mexico’s autonomy” (Greeley 213). As Robin Adèle Greeley describes, the motivation to nationalize oil “br[ought] together anti-imperialist, national and proletarian interests” (212). In the end, Trotsky hopes that Mexico can catalyze his Fourth International as workers (worldwide) rally in solidarity with the Mexican oil unions (Greeley 213). After Cárdenas moves to nationalize the oil industry, oil companies in the US and Britain lobby for an “economic boycott of Mexico,” and the labor conflict becomes important internationally (Greeley 212). Breton, in an interview, discusses Mexican efforts “to end the exploitation of man by man” (Bradú 128; quoted in Usabiaga 5), of which the nationalization project is one. According to the critic Usabiaga, “Mexico [...] could have represented a sort of progressive government within an international context dominated, exponentially, by the rise of fascism” (5). Mexico, at this moment for Breton, seems to be at the forefront of an international workers’ liberation movement—in a climate where elsewhere revolution is being quashed by a wave of fascism.

As Greeley shows in her essay “For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas’s Mexico,” Breton’s “Memory of Mexico” is indeed quite connected to the immediate historical situation of Mexico. However, the method by which Breton chooses to express the struggle of the proletarian class (against the imperial pressure of British and American oil companies) is more difficult to track than it would be in a strictly realist rendering. The opening image of *Bravo*—adjacent to that of the cactus—shows a man assassinated at a workers’ strike (Greeley 212). As Greeley notes, this image which anchors the foregoing discussion alludes directly to the strife in the wake of the nationalization of the oil industry: while President Cárdenas has wrested control away from foreign influence, he is unwilling to give the administration of the oil operations to the unions—leading to strikes like the ones depicted in “Memory of Mexico” (Greeley 213). Causing further problems for the proletarian class in Mexico, the union heads have capitulated to Cárdenas—without the full support of those that they represent (Greeley 214). The immediate context of 1938 Mexico underlies Breton’s reflection, “Memory of Mexico,” and is indeed directly alluded to in the photographic images that break up the romantic narrative.

Instead of describing class-conflict in a direct way, Breton pulls sample elements from a Mexican past, present and future—to create a certain surrealist imaginary that elicits a popular struggle in a poetic way. The romantic (and oftentimes “primitivist”) tropes (previously described in this report) function as direct commentary on an immediate political situation. As Jordan writes, the “juxtaposition of the images of peasants with the Aztec monument expands this mystical utopian view of the pre-Columbian to the political” (45). In fact, the resonance of the oil-worker struggle across various temporalities—the Aztec empire, the 1810 and the 1910 revolutions—enables the

work to be more affective than a strictly historical-materialist account would be of the same scenario. Opposed to the view that art must be beholden to any immediate context, Breton instead unites various fragments of Mexican culture to create a totalizing vision of class struggle: “the wind of liberation has not abated,” and the implication seems to be that it never will (following Trotsky’s belief in the importance of constant revolution). The main rhetorical device of Breton’s “Memory of Mexico” is to dislocate trace cultural-fragments of Mexico—Bravo photographs, Posada prints, Rivera paintings, images of cacti, religious artifacts, etc. Breton recontextualizes these objects, placing them within a Hegelian system of surrealism: they are meant to “figure” the unity of opposites that characterizes revolution (and surreality). In this contemporary era, when socialist realism is an increasingly common mode of artistic-creation in France, Breton’s writings on Mexico represent a clear contrast but nevertheless provide a model for a socially engaged production.

Greeley’s essay on the subject shows that there are even rifts between Trotsky’s exemplar of Marxist art (classical realism), and Breton’s view (surrealism). Indeed, biographical accounts of Breton and Trotsky’s meetings in Mexico confirm their disagreement on points relating to aesthetic matters. Trotsky’s “literary tastes [do] not extend past the nineteenth century, and particularly the novels of the great realists” (Polizzotti 457). In their conversations, Trotsky speaks of the “broader reality” contained within the novels of Emile Zola to “Breton’s dismay” (Polizzotti 457). Breton’s wife, Jacqueline Lamba, remembers that “[Trotsky’s] readings [are] very classical [...] and this gap separated them” (Polizzotti 458). While, like Breton, he is opposed to Stalin’s mandates, Trotsky does not seem willing to abandon his preference for a realist and naturalist aesthetic. Mark Polizzotti affirms that Trotsky has distanced himself from his

previous work of literary criticism *Literature and Revolution* (wherein aesthetic concerns are secondary to the dialectical materialist process); nevertheless, Trotsky's comments at the time suggest that perhaps his views have not evolved as much as previously thought. The tension between Breton and Trotsky (at least when it comes to their appreciation of literature) makes itself manifest in the construction of their "For an Independent Revolutionary Art."

The manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art," created by Breton and Trotsky, declares that artistic creation should be an "end" in and of itself—and not a "means" to either support oneself monetarily or to promote any particular ideological position. In this way, Breton and Trotsky separate their vision for the production of art from the Stalinist strain of engaged art of socialist realism—Breton accuses the socialist-realist artists as only subscribing to the code because they are being paid to do so (31-2). Instead, they argue for the following "formula:" "complete freedom for art" (32). In "Visit with Leon Trotsky," Breton makes clear that Trotsky was the one who authorized this "formula"—erasing "unhesitatingly" the clause that once followed: "except against the proletarian revolution" (45). In Breton's retelling of the manifesto's genesis, Breton and Trotsky seem to be in sync on the subject.

Trotsky and Breton sense a need to distinguish their "independent revolutionary" art from the "political indifferentism" of a "so-called pure art that [serves] the forces of reaction" (32-3). It remains somewhat oblique, in the manifesto, how to ensure that the "independence" of the art in fact *generates* an art with a positive "revolutionary" quality—what will keep it from falling into the trap of political "indifference" or even "reaction," as they put it? This "ivory-towerism" is precisely what Breton is accused of in the Mexican press upon his arrival in 1938 (Polizzotti 459). Typical of Breton's reception

in Mexico at the time is, for example, Adolfo Menéndez Samara's refutation: "[surrealism] is an immanent, subjective, psychological search instead of an objective, material investigation [...] it is not possible to form a combination of two things that reject each other fundamentally: the realistic thought of Marx and the idealistic creation of Hegel" (quoted in Bradu 120; in a June 1, 1938 issue of *Letras de Mexico*, translation mine). The irony is, of course, that Marx is fundamentally influenced by Hegel—Breton recognizes this, and reconfigures his view of Marxist thought to comport with both Hegel's idealism and Marx's realism.

While Trotsky and Breton agree on the necessity for an "independent" art against Stalinist strictures, the "revolutionary" character which must result is fundamentally different. According to Mark Polizzotti, "the manifesto shows the basic differences between Trotsky the pragmatist and Breton the quasi-utopian" (463). For Trotsky, art "express[es] the needs of [...] mankind in its time," and the necessity of the arts would essentially go away once life had satisfied these desires (Polizzotti 463). For Breton, by contrast, the surrealist artistic project would maintain its critique of reality—even after the revolution was realized—by probing ever-deeper into the "unconscious" realm (Polizzotti 463). Robin Adèle Greeley's report on the subject clarifies the differences in Trotsky's and Breton's Marxist viewpoints: for Breton and the surrealists, the cultural sphere—the "ideological superstructures"—do not reflect material conditions exclusively (as Trotsky affirms in *Literature and Revolution*—and largely his view hasn't changed by this point). Greeley quotes a portion of the manifesto that did not make it into the final version after Trotsky's edits:

The analysis of ideological superstructures [...] allows to subsist as *partially* irreducible to [the economic conditions of life] three factors [namely, art, science, and the pursuit of the social ideal in its most elevated form] that contribute,

through their partial autonomy, to the progressive modification of society. [...] in them one finds translated distinct and fundamental aspirations, capable of reaction on the base of material necessity and of furnishing certain complementary elements of appraisal. All other conceptions of history will inevitably fall into fatalism. (220)

As Greeley illuminates in her essay, Breton's interpretation of Marxist thought places far more emphasis on the "partially autonomous" artistic sphere—and its ability to refer back with its own agency to a mass populace—than does Trotsky's (seeing as he struck this paragraph from the final version). Greeley aligns Breton's revision of the dogmatic Marxist viewpoint—that art always reflects society—with other similar versions such as Walter Benjamin's and Antonio Gramsci's (220). When Breton discusses "independent" art in this manifesto, thus, he means it to a degree that Trotsky is unwilling to permit. Trotsky's revisions to the manuscript suggest that he did not find "much room in Marxism for any notion of the relative autonomy of aesthetic configurations" (Greeley 221).

In this way, Breton mobilizes the category "primitive" in the purely cultural sphere. In "Memory of Mexico," Breton freely recalibrates and reconfigures the real-life elements he witnesses in the Mexican *paysage* to create a utopic (ultimately "primitivist") vision of Mexico. As critic Jean-Claude Blachère has commented (37), Breton's "Memory" has the quality of portraying an authentic, lived reality. Breton frequently situates himself within the landscape: "Isn't that where I found myself on several occasions?" Yet, the "reality" of this place is always called into question by the land's distinctive aesthetic quality, its "fantastic" character, and Blachère asserts that the place is a poetic construction (37). In the following passage, Breton evokes a space that is at once, physically traversed by Breton, as well as, extended into an imagined mirage beyond the immediately material:

We had to cross a bizarre courtyard and climb a genuinely fantastic set of stairs. However accustomed the eye may be in Mexico to the baroque architecture and decoration of colonial times, it is impossible for it not react in a unique way to the interior layout of this former private mansion that had fallen prey to some sort of parasitic disease of the most corrosive kind. The monumental stairs open out onto landings made to look like grounds-facing perrons with faded green half-balusters. Those landings are lined with tall streetlamps repeated in trompe l'oeil on the walls. (26)

Quite literally Breton walks through “real” space—a “bizarre courtyard,” a “set of stairs”—and into a space of the purely aesthetic: “trompe l'oeil.” These formal constructions that Breton refers to throughout the piece—such as Posada’s prints and Bravo’s photographs—always have some connection to a revolutionary struggle that Breton seems to witness in the Mexican landscape. While there is a glancing reference to contemporary political issues (the nationalization of the oil industry), Breton situates the immediate struggle within a much larger frame of an contra-imperial, revolutionary history, “conceptualizing historical time in grand sweeps from the country’s pre-conquest past to the twentieth century” (Greeley 215). Breton’s rhetorical move most certainly faces the pitfalls of previous versions of Euromodernist “primitivist” discourse—in that it presents an overly romantic conception of the West’s “other.” At the same time, Breton bases his aesthetic philosophy on a Marxism that allows for a “free” cultural sphere: as such, his “primitivist” piece “Memory of Mexico” attempts to render—in purely aesthetic terms—an affective and phenomenological impression of the contemporary moment in Mexico.

## Works Cited

- Antliff, Mark, and Patricia Leighten. "Primitive." *Critical Terms for Art History*. Ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. 2nd ed. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003. 217-233. Print.
- Balakian, Anna. "Metaphor and Metamorphosis and André Breton's Poetics." *French Studies* 9.1 (1965): 34-41. Print.
- Blachère, Jean-Claude. "Les clés du palais-masure." *Mexique, Miroir Magnétique*. Ed. Henri Béhar. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1999. 33-43. Print. Mélusine 19.
- Bradú, Fabienne. *Breton en México*. México DF: Vuelta, 1996. Print.
- Breton, André. "Crisis of the Object (1936)." *Surrealism and Painting*. Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2002. 275-80. Print.
- - -. "Frida Kahlo de Rivera (1938)." *Surrealism and Painting*. Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2002. 141-4. Print.
- - -. "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art (1938)." *Free Rein*. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1996. 29-34. Print.
- - -. *Manifestos of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1969. Print.
- - -. "Memory of Mexico (1938)." *Free Rein*. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1996. 23-8. Print.
- - -. "Souvenir du Mexique." *Minotaure* 12-3 (1939): 31-43. Print.
- - -. "Visit with Leon Trotsky (1938)." *Free Rein*. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1996. 35-47. Print.
- Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Surrealism." *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. 117-151. Print.
- Foster, Hal. "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art." *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 45-70. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778488>>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Comp. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2010. *Ebook Reader*. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.utxa.ebib.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/patron/Read.aspx?p=481158>>.
- Greeley, Robin Adèle. "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico." *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*. Ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003. 204-25. Print. *Studies in European Cultural Transition* 16.
- - -. *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. Print.

- Hedges, Inez. "Surrealist Metaphor: Frame Theory and Componential Analysis." *Poetics Today* 4.2 (1983): 275-295. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 May 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772289>>.
- Henderson, Linda. "Mysticism, Romanticism and the Fourth Dimension." *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Comp. Maurice Tuchman, Judi Freeman, and Carel Blotkamp. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986. 219-237. Print.
- Jay, Martin. "Henri Lefebvre, the Surrealists and the Reception of Hegelian Marxism in France." *Marxism and Totality*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1984. 276-299. Print.
- Jordan, Keith. "Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism: The Good, the (Revalued) Bad, and the Ugly." *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 2.1 (2008): 25-63. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud." *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. 412-41. Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Discourse, Figure*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2011. Print.
- Maurer, Evan. "Dada and Surrealism." *'Primitivism' 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Ed. William Rubin. New York: MOMA, 1985. 534-593. Print.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Ipswich, MA: Routledge, 2001. 1-9. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <<http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=71492&site=ehost-live>>.
- - -. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society* 2.1 (1973): 70-88. *Scribd*. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <[http://www.scribd.com/hagay\\_bar/d/29890878-Marcel-Mauss-Techniques-of-the-Body](http://www.scribd.com/hagay_bar/d/29890878-Marcel-Mauss-Techniques-of-the-Body)>.
- Ouspensky, P. D. *Tertium Organum*. Trans. Claude Bragdon and Nicholas Bessaraboff. New York: Knopf, 1922. *Google Books*. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=khYVAAAAYAAJ>>.
- Polizzotti, Mark. "For an Independent Revolutionary Art (January 1937-June 1939)." *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of Andre Breton*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1995. 441-72. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity." *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2009. 95-115. *Ebook Library*. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <<http://utxa.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=448578>>.
- Schneider, Luis Mario. *México y el surrealismo (1925-1950)*. México DF: Artes y Libros, 1978. Print.
- Tythacott, Louise. *Surrealism and the Exotic*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Usabiaga, Daniel Garza. "André Breton, Surrealism and Mexico, 1938-1970: A Critical Overview." *Arara*. Ed. Ian Dudley, Zanna Gilbert, and Andrés David Montenegro. University of Essex, 2011. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/arara/araraissue10.html>>.

Winter, Amy. "Surrealism in Mexico/Mexico in Surrealism: Prelude to Exile." *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 71-84. Print.