

10. Anexo 1: TO:

People of No Substance: Imposture and the Contingency of Morality in the Colombian Amazon

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This essay addresses the conditions and entailments of strategic imposture among People of the Center (Colombian Amazon). It examines individuals' accounts and evaluations of moral subjectivity and action, which often cite elements of coherent narratives and nondiscursive practices that bring together their social organization, livelihood practices, perspectival cosmology, and understandings of subjectivity. I will claim that persons are in part constituted by their self-interpretations against a backdrop of distinctions of worth between different kinds of being, action, and subjectivity, and that People of the Center's accounts of personhood reproduce and reveal just such a background. While arguing that explanations of human behavior need to attend to persons' self-consciousness and strategic intentions, the essay preempts the resurgence of radically efficacious humanist subjects endowed with an overarching grasp of their own constitution by insisting on the contingency, temporality, and *différance* (slippages of meaning) that characterize the symbolic deployments constitutive of persons.

During my fieldwork among People of the Center in the Colombian Amazon¹, I was struck by the sheer number of morally evaluative claims individuals made, portraying themselves as competent, admirable persons and others as ignorant, uncontrolled, or otherwise flawed miscreants. Often, people's moral portrayals were at some level rejected; others would express doubt about the truthfulness or authenticity of their expressions, particularly their self-representations, though rarely to their faces. I sometimes wondered: Were individuals simply persuaded that they were indeed admirable beings when they portrayed themselves as such, or did they describe themselves in those fashions with some sense that it was strategically advantageous to do so, whether they were persuaded that they were indeed

¹ The fuzzy category "People of the Center" includes patrilineal clans of the Middle Caquetá - Putumayo region of Colombia who speak Muinane, Uitoto, Okaina, Andoque, Nonuya, Bora, and Miraña. I carried out fieldwork mostly with speakers of Muinane and Uitoto along the Caquetá and Igarapará rivers and in the city of Leticia, between 1993 and 2008.

admirable beings or not?

People of the Center's evaluative expressions allow me to consider the matter of imposture both in my terms and in theirs. In their most frequent accounts of social life and morality, imposture—the usurpation of proper human subjectivity by immoral, extrinsic subjectivities—was a key practical and existential problem, tied to the conditions for constituting a self. From my own theoretical standpoint, imposture—presenting oneself as a kind of person one is not, is not perceived as, or is not persuaded one is, or somehow claiming to have certain qualities one might not have—is of interest for three reasons. First, self-aware intentionality may be one of imposture's constitutive sins and enabling conditions, and I believe that worthwhile explanations of human action and social life must bear in mind what people understand themselves to be and to be doing. Second, imposture, especially when it is unsuccessful, helps highlight that the intentions and understandings that motivate symbolic action do not determine the effects of such action². Finally, imposture and talk about impostors, in my experience, highlight people's sense of what is admirable, worthy, and despicable in subjectivity, appearance, and action.

I find that persons are partly constituted by our understandings (and misunderstandings) of ourselves. We come to be ourselves by performatively mirroring socially available linguistic and other symbolic forms. Others' iterations of these forms interpellate us, providing us in time with the forms and associations with which we achieve our sense of who and what we are and can be, what kind of world we inhabit, and what qualities are to be esteemed or despised. These forms allow us to perceive and to classify persons, actions, objects, and appearances, among other things, as individuals made, portraying themselves as competent, admirable persons and others as of a certain kind, in terms of qualitative distinctions of worth. This enables people in this or that time or place to *be* an observant child of Jehovah, or a macho man, or a streetwise cynic, or, among People of the Center, a tobacco-imbued, productive man and to perceive aspects of the self or of others as classy or tacky, nasty or sweet, righteous or sinful, among other possibilities. People who deploy other vocabularies and symbols may make different distinctions of worth³. For the purposes of this volume, I treat this motivating sense of qualitative worth as morality and see it as encompassing ethical evaluations of what constitutes “doing the right thing.”

² See Laidlaw's critique of the conflation of intentionality and efficacy (this volume).

³ My discussion here is inspired in part by Taylor (1985: 277–80).

Our selves—which are to a great extent constituted by our ongoing interpretations of our biographies, our relationships with others, and our own bodies, thoughts, and emotions—are bound to the intrinsically temporal and contingent social interactions that make the symbols we use available to us. In the intrinsically temporal process of sociality, groups pick up certain forms and associations more consistently than others. Individuals cite the forms in question, interpellating and making sense of situations and of each other, and making these forms available anew for others to cite. In this view, the main concerns of the individual members of a group, the matters they tend to subject to morally evaluative attention, are also the sedimented (or epidemiologically most widespread) product of contingent, performative citations; as social life goes on, however, the moral and aesthetic concerns of groups and of individuals change.

In this process, there is an important difference between the understandings and intentions that motivate subjects' production of symbolic forms, and the effects of these forms. People may know what they are doing when deploying symbols, may intend to do it, and may know why they are doing it, but they cannot really have a clear-sighted, overarching grasp of or control over the effects of what they do. The forms people mirror often interpellate others, but what those others make of these interpellations—how they interpret, cite, and transform them—is not determined by the interpellator's intentions. These interpretations are contingent upon those others' own symbolic constitutions and the particularities of the circumstances.

Methodologically, this view calls for interpretive attention to individuals, for it is individuals—or historical persons, if you will—who actually iterate symbolic forms (see Cohen 1994). This view presupposes that other individuals are thinking, feeling selves to whom things matter; I assume this, recognizing that I cannot ultimately distinguish between others' consciousness and my invention of their consciousness, and that my understanding of others' selves will always be based on my (critical and ironic, I hope) understanding of myself. The emphasis on individuals does not entail that this is a less than sociological approach, however; “thick” anthropological descriptions of institutions, groups, and categories also depend at some point on attending to individuals' conscious understandings of them as expressed in dialogue and other interactions.

In this essay, I will describe People of the Center's often-cited accounts of moral personhood, which

link phenomenological experience, cosmology, social organization, and livelihood. I find it important to underscore the coherence and phenomenological plausibility of these accounts, for I will argue that individuals among People of the Center produced many of their moral self-portrayals, critiques, and other discursive and nondiscursive actions in part on the basis of reflections upon themselves in terms of these accounts⁴. I will report on instances of talk about virtues, transgressions, and infelicities, specifically concerning key ritual and alimentary substances constitutive of persons, a matter of much moral solicitude by People of the Center and concerning which a contrast between authenticity and imposture often arose. Finally, I will attend to imposture in my sense of the word, in the case of an individual who portrayed himself as a kind of person others thought he was not; his unsuccessful citation of forms that in other circumstances could be part of felicitous performances highlighted these forms starkly.

People of the Center's Production of Morality

In this section I present what I interpret to have been a common, general picture of moral personhood among People of the Center; it is an abstraction from and summary of claims and accounts that I witnessed them produce between 1993 and 2008. In this general picture, Real People (human beings, the most paradigmatic of whom were usually the lineage or clan fellows of whoever was telling the story) were intentionally and materially fashioned by their parents and other kin out of key substances of divine origin. The most important of these substances is tobacco paste, the semen/sweat of the creator deity Grandfather of Tobacco. Other key substances include manioc starch and juice, hot chilies, certain “cool” herbs, and, for men, *mambe*⁵. These substances were the main components of well-made persons’ flesh and bodily fluids; being agents in themselves, the substances “spoke,” and their speeches constituted persons’ thoughts/ emotions⁶.

⁴ People of the Center are alive and well at the time I am giving this essay its final editorial touches—July 2010. I insist upon using the past tense in my descriptions in order to be coherent with my emphasis on the contingency, and especially the temporality, of the symbolic deployments that constitute social life in an ongoing fashion.

⁵ *Mambe*, also known as coca, is the Spanish term for a mildly stimulating green powder made of toasted coca leaves and the ashes of Cecropia leaves. Adult men who consumed it were called *mambeadores* (singular *mambeador*), and the exclusively male circle of seats where they consumed it ritually was known as the *mambeadero*.

⁶ People of the Center did not speak of thoughts and emotions as mutually distinct kinds of entity or experience.

Moral thoughts/emotions stemming from good substances led people to speak and otherwise interact with others sociably. The Muinane man Pablo, for instance, explained to me that the esteem one felt for one's kin when one looked at them was nothing other than one's tobacco—the tobacco constitutive of one's body—recognizing itself in others' bodies and saying, “That is my own body.” The term in Muinane for this kind of recognition was *ésikinihi*, which denoted both “remembering” and discerning appropriately.” Pablo and others also told me on different occasions that tobacco would say “My brother.” This was part of their explanation for the thought/emotional discernment of kin, conceived as an experience of remembering or being reminded that somebody was in fact kin. Tobacco's purported utterance, “My brother,” was the vocative term of address for one's kinsperson and a metonymical reference to caring, respectful treatment of him in general. Other substances also participated in the creation of moral subjectivity: for instance, basil and other cool herbs created tranquil states of mind and motivated women to work hard to nourish their kin.

Proper substances also led people to seek to produce new generations of Real People featuring healthy, competent bodies and sociable thoughts/ emotions that would enable them to live well together and perpetuate the cycle. New people were made out of and through the agency of proper substances: proper semen (understood to be another form of tobacco) coming from a man who had behaved well and carefully avoided polluting practices and foods; proper foodstuffs consumed by the mother during her pregnancy and by the child throughout her life but especially during the early years; and healthful, cold water, in which the child was counseled to bathe. Children were also supposed to undergo numerous body-shaping rituals involving a variety of substances that were incorporated into the body or otherwise impinged upon its form.

As persons grew, their own and others' actions instilled competencies and flaws in their bodies. The young man who wove a basket, or made *mambe*, or helped fell the forest for the first time had to work diligently and carefully, without laziness or rest but also without haste, for his demeanor, skill, and speed would become embodied and he would thence- forth continue to work in that fashion. If he left the basket unfinished and went to sleep, this would become a part of his body and his way of working, and he would forever be a slow, inconsistent weaver. A girl who was lazy and who often interrupted her first attempts to grate manioc would also incorporate this flawed way of proceeding. My friend Lazarus once proudly pointed out his own efficacy and speed at making vegetable salt for his tobacco paste, telling me that he was like this because “that's how I grasped (or became set)”; that is,

that was how his body had been shaped. They explicitly likened the processes of embodiment of skills and attitudes to making pottery; bodies, like pots, would set and harden in the shape and with the features given to them while in their early stages of fabrication.

Well-made Real People were capable of contributing to pleasurable community life. This ideally involved living in close-knit patrilineal settlements, where siblings, parents, in-marrying women, and children interrelated respectfully and caringly because they had true substances inside them, where there was an abundance of food and ritual substances, because people's bodies were properly fashioned and so were healthy, hardworking, and productive, and where dance rituals were frequent and enjoyable. In such circumstances, individuals' thoughts/emotions and general bodily states would be "cool," a term that encompassed the virtues and states of tranquility, judiciousness, and bodily well-being⁷.

The achievement of the good life and the production of new Real People were accomplished against the grain of the surrounding hostile cosmos, most of whose denizens were eager to sabotage Real People's existence and reproduction. Animals in particular, fearful of human predation upon them and jealous of Real People's morally productive ways and communities, were the origin and cause of a great many human tribulations. They too had originally been created by the Grandfather of Tobacco. Early in creation they had been human in appearance, and like the Real People that would come after, they received tobacco and counsel from the creator. Unlike Real People, however, animals did not hearken to the creator's prescriptions. They misbehaved in myriad fashions and therefore could not achieve the cool, pleasurable, productive, sociable existence that Real People would eventually achieve. They were variously sleepy, lazy, horny, incestuous, indiscriminately playful, confused, surly, murderous, or otherwise miscreant and corrupted their tobaccos. The indignant creator then transformed them into their beastly shapes, consigned their corrupted and pathogenic tobaccos into them forever, and warned them that they would thenceforth be the game of Real People. Ever after, these beings had deployed their substances and other warped accoutrements against human beings, and the latter had been obliged to use rituals to extirpate evil substances from each other.

People of the Center's stories about these matters featured certain perspectival premises: namely, that each kind of being perceived the members of its species—others with bodies like its own—as human and those of other species as nonhuman. So an animal could in a variety of ways deposit its

⁷ See Lambek (this volume) on Aristotle's very similar account of the cultivation of virtuous dispositions.

subjectivity-making substance into a member of the human species and cause that person to think/feel and behave toward other persons as an animal would toward its conspecifics. This was a common explanation of violence and anger; people attributed to angry others the subjectivity of animals: for example, I recall a woman tearfully screaming at her husband, who had just mistreated her, that he had a big-toothed animal inside and that he should kill it. Because of perspectivism, though, the claim in cases like this was not that angry people perceived others as animal bodies, which would have been phenomenologically implausible as an explanation of everyday tribulations, but rather that the person perceived other persons in the same way an animal perceived its conspecifics—namely, as human—but failed to have the loving, humane thoughts/emotions toward them that a Real Person had. Instead, they would abuse their fellows in the sundry fashions that jaguars, coatis, and other beasts mistreated theirs⁸.

Substances, Social Organization, and Livelihood

People of the Center's most frequent expressions of moral solicitude cohered well with this general picture of the cosmos, of personhood, and of social life; many of them were articulated in terms of persons' bodily composition, particularly whether their actions manifested human or in-human substances. With these terms, they addressed whether people were pleasurable or even healthy to reside with, productive, knowledgeable, or competent, whether their thoughts/emotions—especially their anger—were truly human, and especially whether they behaved in the proper fashion kinspersons should. People of the Center cited this picture piecemeal in many of their activities, such as their accounts of the counsels children should receive, their quarrels with each other, a variety of rituals, and some of their practices of livelihood and of social organization.

The imagery of tobacco, selfhood, and group membership infused the talk and other practices that reproduced People of the Center's patrilineal emphasis. Their kinship terminology, though positing the transmission of kinship along both female and male lines, favored the patrilineal. Patrilineality had corporate implications: most of these people resided in settlements constituted by sets of male siblings with their unmarried sisters, their wives, and their children, and each of their frequent dance rituals was organized as an exchange of foodstuffs and esoteric services between the patriline segment hosting it and the patriline of guests who came to sing and dance. They often articulated their

⁸ See Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Londoño Sulkin (2005) for in-depth discussions of perspectivism.

patrilineality in terms of tobacco, claiming, for instance, that the bodies of the members of their lineages were made up of their patrilineal ancestors' strains of tobacco. Given tobacco's subjectivity-creating nature, consubstantiality implied that people of the same clan, and especially of the same lineage, shared the same thoughts/emotions and moral inclinations; at a meeting of clans who spoke different languages, I recall that several men stressed in hortatory speeches that their tobacco and therefore their thoughts/emotions were "the same" and that therefore they all shared a common purpose. On other occasions, in the privacy of their own *mambeadero*, a set of men would stress instead the distinctiveness of their own strain of tobacco and the consequent differences between their own virtuous ways and those of other lineages and clans.

One conversation with a Muinane man suggested that he evaluated the virtue of possible courses of action in terms of values tied to this account of masculine selfhood in relation to patrilineality. Ariel, reporting troubles with his older and notoriously authoritarian brother David, told me he often thought about uprooting and leaving the settlement. Nonetheless, he said, he knew brothers should stay together and feared the weakness that would ensue from being away from his patriline. As I read his claims, he feared he would become a less capable agent and a less admirable one.

The centrality of cultivated substances to People of the Center's understandings of moral personhood linked as well to their talk about livelihood practices such as gardening⁹.⁹ In fact, one way in which Muinane *mambeadores* spoke about the morality of practices was by situating them in a metonymical "Cool Path," whose more literal referent was the path that led from the *maloca*—the large, multi-family residential and ceremonial house—to the garden in which the vital work of growing tobacco, manioc, and other key cultigens took place. Abstract counsels state that people should "stay on the Cool Path" and never wander from it lest they step on thorns; this was a prescription to the effect that youths should not seek knowledge or pursue endeavors other than those that led to the production of desirable material abundance. "Wandering from the path" into the jungle stood for miscreant pursuits such as sorcery and adulterous relations, and "stepping on thorns" corresponded to the tribulations that would result from the miscreancy.

Another horticultural trope concerning moral personhood was that of baskets; People of the Center

⁹ People of the Center subsisted mainly by hunting, fishing, gathering, and slash-and-burn horticulture.

wove a wide variety of these, ranging from some made to be beautiful, tough, and durable to others fashioned haphazardly for immediate, hasty use. These were used to carry coca leaves, manioc tubers, tobacco, and all sorts of garden produce. The abdominal and chest cavity of the human body is also a basket, however: the “Basket of Knowledge.” A well-made person’s Basket of Knowledge was well woven through esoteric body-making rituals, so that good speeches would stay in it and not fall through; it has to be kept clean through dietary practices, daily vomiting, and good counsel. Productivity and other features of a desirable lifestyle were evidence that a person’s Basket of Knowledge was the real thing and not an animalistic version.

Moral knowledge—part of the Cool Path, in one trope, and something kept in individuals’ Baskets of Knowledge, in another—included myths, charms, dance-ritual protocols, and songs, which people claimed were variously intended to make gardening practices effective, to shape, nourish, and heal people, to hunt, and to produce a propitious climate for human endeavors. Knowledge of this kind was intrinsically tied to tobacco and to patrilineality. First, each patriline had its own knowledge and ritual responsibilities; second, the patriline’s tobacco was the source and incarnation of knowledge and purportedly what made that knowledge effective.

An important aspect of all the key substances—and hence of person-hood—in relation to livelihood was that their most salient capability was for predatory action. This was particularly so for tobacco. In many narratives, it appeared as a virtually omniscient being, invulnerable to all evil and threats, which it could proscribe, burn, cook, or kill. Being a central component of Real People’s bodies, it generated their awareness and their capacity for action in the world, a kind of action that more often than not involved predatory transformations. People of the Center treated a great many of their livelihood and ritual activities, such as felling the forest to make gardens, healing the sick, making tools, building a house, and holding a dance ritual, as involving death-dealing deployments against trees and other forest beings. The knowledge to carry out these tasks was consigned to tobacco, and it was in itself dangerous. It had to be acquired, transmitted, and used carefully and with proper protocol, lest its capability to burn, kill, or otherwise harm turn upon the deployer, learner, or teacher, or his family. In their moral self-portrayals, men among People of the Center likened themselves to tobacco, speaking approvingly of their tobacco’s and their own predatory capabilities.

People of the Center spoke of yet other virtues in terms of substances: thus, people should be

productive, like tobacco and coca; or “cool” and unfazably calm, like sweet manioc, certain herbs, and tobacco; or consistent, like certain strains of chili, among other virtues with substantial exemplars.

False Substances and Spurious Baskets

Just as tobacco paste and other properly produced substances axiomatically generated moral subjectivity and actions, animals’ and other nonhuman beings’ substances generated miscreant thoughts and actions. Proper tobacco, though a predatory substance, for example, was the source of the capacity to recognize kin as such and of the consequent thoughts/emotions of loving care, whereas animals’ tobaccos were the source of socially disruptive thoughts/emotions. The Muinane man Jona’s explained that the tobacco of a jaguar “does not say ‘My brother,’ ”: a claim to the effect that the tobacco of beasts did not generate awareness of the proper way in which one should address another—a metonymy for how one should treat them—but instead generated murderous anger.

One way in which Muinane people referred to animals and their tobaccos when these impinged upon human subjectivities was as “those who walk in others’ names”: in a word, impostors. I often posed to them the question of intentionality: Was the miscreant aware of his or her miscreancy? Did the foreign tobacco usurping a person’s real tobacco know itself to be evil? Did it sense that it was an impostor sabotaging humanity intentionally? My interlocutors were split about this. In some cases, they stated that, when a person misbehaves, out in the forest the animals who had placed the false tobacco in the person would laugh; after all, they hated, envied, and feared Real People and wanted to harm them. In other cases, however, the impostor constituted by the usurping tobacco speaking through a person’s body was persuaded of his or her own authenticity. My friend Pablo explained to me that this was why miscreants often failed to see their own acts as miscreancy, as gestures that were not really their own.

One of the central existential problems for the *mambeadores* was the discrimination of Real speeches, substances, and baskets from their false counterparts. They spoke, both in myths and in explanations of particular instances of action, of tobaccos and other beings who appeared to be the real thing but were not. The mythical Anaconda of Food, for instance, had a beautifully woven basket filled with an

abundance of wholesome-looking manioc, coca leaves, tobacco, and fruit. He spoke beautifully in the *mam- beadero*, and his words sounded wise and appealing. And yet no good came of it all; the basket was a false basket, all appearance but no true substance. His speeches, though they spoke of productive work and abundance and thus were supposed to create these, produced only strife and tribulations.

The tobacco and coca of the False Woman—a sexually indiscriminate mythical being, mother of vanity, incestuous desires, and other flawed thoughts/emotions—similarly looked like the real thing. The *mambeadores* who spoke to me about her stated that those who spoke her speech felt themselves to be speaking well, but their speech was carried off by the wind, remaining “unfixed” and thus never being fruitful. I heard Muinane elders blaming her false substances for people’s preference for white men’s knowledge and ways, contrasting this with the perspicacious steadfastness of the firmly seated *mambeador*, who, counseled and made strong by his own tobacco, stuck fast to Muinane speeches and ways.

In several myths, one or another false tobacco would claim “I am invincible!” but would then be vanquished by Real Tobacco in some contest. These tobaccos spoke through bodies and caused people to think/feel that they were powerful, wise, unbeatable Real People and to make the same kind of self-aggrandizing, unsupported claims. Part of the problem with these tobaccos, a man once explained to me, was that their angry, some- times profane speeches tasted fatty and delicious; they were a pleasure to say and caused people to wish to continue to use them.

People of the Center’s use of chilies in their rhetoric exemplifies well their talk about moral failures and achievements in terms of substances, with statements to the effect that particular instances of thoughts/emotions, talk, and other actions revealed proper, false, or no substance. Chilies were opposite for talk about anger, the thought/emotion that most solicited People of the Center’s attention. Anger was an object of great ambivalence, for it was treated as either the most salient symptom of animalistic subjectivity or as an indicator of predatory capabilities.

Chilies, the Muinane elder Pedro once explained to me, were spicy hot because of the sun that shone upon them and entered them. Like chilies, women got red-faced working in the garden under the sun, and they too got hot and therefore sometimes scolded others. Nevertheless, he said, women were supposed to consign the heat and anger they received from the sun into their chilies and chili pot, and

not direct it against their husbands and children. Embodied in foods prepared with these chilies, women's anger could make it into people's very flesh, where its angry spiciness would ward off evil.

Pedro's wife Sara told me that when a woman's chili paste was hot, others would say "this woman is angry in truth! She is painful (spicy hot), like her chili paste!" Yet if her chili paste, chili pot, and other preparations with chilies were not hot, people would scorn any anger she showed, saying "How can you claim to be angry, when you do not have hot chilies?" or "your anger is empty . . . you have not 'shown' yet!" The latter expression pointed out that the woman had not materially proven that she had proper thoughts/emotions. One of Sara's points was that a woman who was bad tempered, but whose chilies proved not to be hot, thereby showed her lack of moral substance. Others could point to her scolding or her incensed gossip as the empty, fruitless speech of a lazy woman who had not worked as much as she should have. Such a woman's blustering—which lacked an underlying predatory substance—could be treated with little fear, unlike the effective anger of someone constituted by proper substances and unlike the truly dangerous and immoral fury of someone with an animalistic substance inside her.

On Unproductive Impostors

Talk of substances sometimes conflated the stuff constitutive of bodies and subjectivities and the already-processed but still unincorporated products of livelihood practices, such as tobacco paste, *mambe*, and cooked food-stuffs. These unincorporated substances were treated as important, tangible evidence of the propriety of the embodied stuff. Material productivity was thus a matter of much moral solicitude among People of the Center.

I witnessed a serious negotiation of morality in terms of substances while doing my first stint of fieldwork at a Muinane community in 1993. Jonás' wife Lilith announced that she was convoking a drinking bout. She had prepared a large vat of starchy plantain drink, and people would pair off and give each other gourdful after gourdful of the stuff in a contest to see who could drink the most. As we headed toward the *maloca* (the multi-family residential and ceremonial house) to drink, David, the leader of that community, explained to me that several weeks earlier he had thrown at Lilith's doorstep

a wild pig he'd shot, saying to her, "There's your gossip." I inquired into the affair and gathered that Lilith had been talking about another woman in the community and that this had generated some tribulations. David's gesture of giving her the pig with the claim that the carcass was her gossip was a complex challenge and insult, as well as a purported favor. It basically suggested that her talk had been gossip or lies, generated by the antisocial substance of a wild pig inside her, and that David's killing of the pig had been a transformation and removal of the substances inside her and a violent recommitment of them into the animal. As I interpret such claims, he was not claiming that *she* had behaved in an ill-intentioned manner; rather, his claim was that it had not been her but a spurious (impostorial) self who had misbehaved.

By killing the pig, David had purportedly healed her of her antisocial, ultimately inhuman gossiping ways. By giving her the transformed substance of her false talk, now in the form of nourishing game, he obliged her to reciprocate with the product of her own hard work. By working hard and successfully on a nourishing endeavor and producing a tangible, consumable substance, she showed that she had proper corporeal substance—after all, it made itself manifest in her productivity—and that therefore her talk was not empty bluster or animalistic sabotaging of community life. From participation in similar events, I gather there had also been room for Lilith to turn tables on David; should he have found himself full before she did and unable to swallow any more of the drink she proffered, she could well have scornfully told him not to challenge a real woman, when he himself could not deal with her response.

Elsewhere (Londoño Sulkin 2006: 214) I discuss an anecdote that seems to me particularly eloquent on the matter of substances in relation to morality, and concerns imposture in the sense of contrived pretense. Lazarus, a Muinane man in his mid-forties, described a recent conversation he had had with Jonás' son Abel, a young man who was visiting Lazarus's settlement. According to Lazarus, Abel had addressed him in the *mambeadero*, saying "Yo ya tengo mando" (roughly, "I already have power"), which constituted a claim to the effect that he had knowledge and esoteric capabilities. Lazarus had asked him who had given him that knowledge and legitimized his use of it. Abel had responded with the names of four older men, all more or less recognized as knowledgeable. Lazarus had then responded, "so let's see, where is it? Where is that of which you speak?" This was an unequivocal request for tobacco paste and *mambe*, the prime manifestations of a young man's knowledge and capabilities. On that occasion, the request amounted to a harsh put-down. Abel had

moved around a lot in recent years and therefore did not have a garden in which to produce *mambe* or tobacco. He had to admit that he had none, whereupon Lazarus continued: “one should never say that if one has nothing to show. . . and less so to me, who just had to give you *mambe* and tobacco paste because you have none of your own. Never again talk to me thus, saying trash like that.” Lazarus reported that he had then warned Abel against the shame of making such serious claims, only to fail to live up to them, and that Abel had stated that he had learned an important lesson that day.

I had known Abel since he was sixteen or so and had always found him eager to present himself as a man of competence in all fields. Claims like his—a form of gendered bragging—were actually quite typical of men there; a great many times one or another had spoken, in the context of conversations with me or with a small group of people, about their great knowledge and exceptional competence in matters esoteric or otherwise. In my experience, only a few older men could speak confidently in this fashion even in large meetings, knowing they would not be challenged. Youths who tried this often “passed”; others would somehow signal their acknowledgment of the claims, or at least remain silent and not challenge them. There was always, however, the risk of being put down or challenged. Occasionally, older men would refer to “the young men of today” in general, protesting that these behaved as if they were elders and sages, forgetting that their fathers were still alive and thus merited their sons’ deference. Abel seemed to me paradigmatic of such men, being rather more intense than others in his production of claims to competence beyond his years.

As a sixteen-year-old in the settlement where I first met him, his classificatory uncle David referred to him once as “my nephew, that white dog,” that is, as a weakling incapable of much. Years later, in another settlement, he had managed to achieve some standing as a schoolteacher and was often outspoken in settlement meetings. From conversations with Lazarus, I can only say that he found Abel overbearing and despised the way some elders seemed to acknowledge Abel’s competence and even deferred to him on some settlement issues. It was in the context of a conversation about this that he reported on the interaction he’d had with Abel.

Refracted through Lazarus’s account, Abel’s claim—though formally very similar to claims he and other men often made—seems to me to have been singularly infelicitous. Lazarus frankly rejected the other’s presentation and self-portrayal as a man of knowledge and, furthermore, rejected the footings of equality that Abel’s demeanor and claims seemed to have been trying to establish. Lazarus’s anecdote,

however, was still a series of citations that reproduced a certain ideal of admirable agency, one that incorporated the explicit sense that ostensible material productivity, specifically, of key substances, was the critical evidence of morality and competence. The anecdote also had other interesting features: Lazarus was portraying himself to me as a no-nonsense, knowledgeable elder who came out on top in a confrontation on matters of proven knowledge and morality. His utterances at that moment were felicitous, if you will; I indeed treated him as a respectable, efficacious man of knowledge.

Was Abel persuaded that he was in fact already a man of knowledge? Or was he posturing, trying on the desired trappings of adult manhood, with some sense that his claims might be contested and that he was not really, or not yet, what he claimed to be? The closest I came to having a Muinane answer this question was when Lazarus's brother Pablo told me, after a meeting in which Abel had been particularly overbearing, that Abel was "sick." He explained that it had not been Abel's own true speech we had heard him produce but some pathogenic animal's. Producing ostentatious claims to knowledge and esoteric capability were likely candidates for this kind of accusation, both in myths and in daily life. If there was an impostor, it was the animal, not Abel himself.

Contingency, Citationality, and Morality

A thick description of People of the Center's social existence—who they married, where and with whom they lived, how they spoke and otherwise treated each other, and a great many other aspects of their everyday lives—must consider individuals' own interpretive sense of what it was that they were doing and what kind of being they were, could, or should be, where this kind of being was defined by more or less articulated distinctions of worth. Their expressions of this sense seemed to me to have been shaped, and in turn to have reproduced, very coherent, phenomenologically persuasive accounts of self, much like those I described above. They manifested their conviction that human bodies were indeed constituted by cultivated substances, and that their own and others' behaviors, whether human or inhuman, had been caused by human or inhuman substances of extraneous origin.

Individuals seemed to perceive intimately the moral worth of persons, events, subjectivities, and actions, in at least some of the terms of these accounts, and to be motivated by this perception. I

believe that they *saw* that predatory capability of an esoteric kind—and the anger that came with it—was profoundly admirable, and that lack of productivity, and the anger that came with it, was despicable, much as some of us might *see* that a man is being cruel when he kicks a dog or that a certain person is beautiful. By “seeing” I mean here the sense individuals have of the straightforward obviousness or givenness of the moral and aesthetic quality of something they observe or consider, a sense that I would insist is the product of our own contingently constituted understandings of self.

Lazarus and other full-grown men expressed an intimate sense that they were constituted by tobacco and that they had effectively matured into capable substance producers and esoteric predators. Young men like Abel at times deployed some of the same narratives and symbolic forms that made manifest such older men’s self-understandings. My take on this, informed by my theoretical preferences but also by memories of my own little posturings and impostures, was that Abel in particular was citing forms—namely, producing quite typical forms of narrative self-portrayal, in a certain institutional setting—that he and others had deployed in the past to pass more or less successfully as men with esteemed qualities, but that he did not take for granted that he was indeed that virtuous kind of fellow. He knew that some people in fact did not perceive him as such, but he clearly desired to be understood and treated in those terms. In general, people expressed keen awareness of the likelihood that their actions and subjectivities would be questioned and criticized, because in fact at the time it was a common practice to question and criticize; this probably constituted a further motivation for them to seek to preempt that their subjectivities and actions be treated as the product of less than human substance¹⁰. I thus interpret Abel’s claims along these lines, as being his reflexive fabrication. Nonetheless, I found no evidence to suggest that he himself was reflective and reflexive about the very fact that he admired a certain kind of person.

The gist of my argument is that People of the Center evaluate subjectivity and action with intelligence, at times planning their own gestures strategically or even histrionically, but that this does not entail that they were free, utilitarian agents with a radically clear-sighted grasp of the conditions and processes of their own constitution. Rather, they thought, planned, evaluated, interpreted themselves, and developed their concerns through symbolic forms acquired in historical

¹⁰ See Keane (this volume) and Zigon (2008: 165) on conflicts and moral breakdowns enabling conscious reflection on moral/ethical matters.

social interaction. This is in line with my claim that subjects do not decide what it is that matters to them, as, in my experience, I don't *choose* to find that a certain person is beautiful, or a certain style cool, or a certain act admirable or cruel. I just do, doubtless as a product of the infinitely complex and mostly opaque process of my becoming who I am, in my unique social and historical context.

I witnessed no instances in which People of the Center objectified or questioned reflexively their admiration for virtues such as predatory capability and productivity. Having said this, I very much wish to elide the picture of a monolithic culture that travels through the generations as a heavy, stable mass programming entire populations to perceive themselves and their world in a certain way, or to admire or despise certain qualities. This is a mirage produced by numbers of individuals citing more or less similar forms in a certain period of time. The same applies to any "system" of morality or ethics; it is a contingent, historical product of people using a particular vocabulary, establishing and reproducing certain institutions, and otherwise citing symbolic forms. Some narratives, nondiscursive practices, institutions, and other symbolically constituted forms are cited more often, making them all the more available and perhaps therefore more compelling. But because they are made of symbols dependent on temporal citations by persons, they cannot be perfectly shared or monolithic, or protected from objectification or reflexive rearticulation. After all, contingent events—accidents, deaths, the arrival of new neighbors with a different vocabulary—can lead us to articulate, understand, and perceive distinctions of worth differently.

In their accounts of personhood, People of the Center cited different elements of the overall account I have given, doing so selectively, trans- formatively, strategically, or contradictorily. Some made use of other symbolic resources altogether, to interact, to account for, or to evaluate their own and others' subjectivities and actions. Young men, for example, sometimes produced frankly admiring descriptions of incorrigible young indigenous leaders who stole the government's monetary subsidies to indigenous communities and spent them on trips to urban centers to indulge in prostitutes and booze and who generally knew how to come out on top in legal skirmishes, debates, arguments, and fights with their elders or with "white people," while ignoring judiciousness and propriety.

An example of variety and contestation in accounts of substances and selves was a case in which Jona's, who had briefly been trained as a missionary, reflected upon an Evangelical Protestant's claim

years before that Jonás' necklace with a cross constituted idolatry. Jona's told those of us present that the same could be said of coca and tobacco, for what were these, if not mere plants? However, like the cross, they served to "remind him of God" and "made him feel closer to Him." Jona's was amalgamating the tobacco and Christian deities, and objectifying his own thoughts in a manner that did not treat these as stemming from substances. After Jona's had left, Pedro, an older man, made manifest the more prevalent local semiotic ideology, with its attributions of agency to substances, telling me that Jonás' talk would upset his own coca and tobacco, which would cease to work for him¹¹.

A final example is that of People of the Center in the diasporic setting of the Amazonian city of Leticia, who seemed to me to be citing less often the discursive and nondiscursive forms that reproduced ideals of personhood that privileged membership in patrilineal groups and compliance with corresponding values. Men there were more likely to move away from their kinsmen than their counterparts in the Medio Caquetá; women often chose after marriage, to reside with their mothers and sisters (Nieto 2006; something rare in the Medio Caquetá), and many stereotyped *malocas* as authentic markers of indigenous tradition in the face of acculturation, rather than treating them as structural symbols of patrilineal groups.

People of the Center's understandings of the kinds of beings they were, could be, or should be, and of what constituted the good life, were causally and symbolically tied to practices of livelihood and social organization. Changes in any of them—for whatever reason—entailed indeterminate changes in the others. These understandings and practices were symbolic deployments, and as such, material, temporal, contingent, and subject to *différance* or slippages in the meanings individuals made of them. This precludes treating People of the Center's social life and the changes intrinsic to it—for instance, changes in their desires, their enactments of leadership, or their ways of building or engaging with *malocas*—as products of the efficacious intentions of agents endowed with a clear-sighted and overarching grasp of the process. Yet it was on the basis of their interpretations of themselves and of each other that individuals deployed symbolic forms in the interactions that constituted their social lives. This is why I see People of the Center's social life as a contingent process that shaped individuals' moral reflections, reflexivity, and intentions, and in which these in turn played a causal but in

¹¹ Christian references did not constitute an overarching theme in People of the Center's morally evaluative talk, despite the presence of Catholic missionaries since the 1930s and Evangelical missionaries in the 1960s. Keane's discussion of Christian semiotic ideologies (this volume) suggests interesting research questions, however.

fundamental ways nonteleological role¹².

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¹² Social life is subject to the causal effects of the materiality of signs (Keane, this volume), but this does not entail that human beings have an overarching grasp of the process. I depart from the Marxian anthropological view (e.g., Bloch 1977), according to which social change may result from individuals' episodic emancipation from false ideology, by virtue of a universally shared human cognitive capacity that grants them clear-sighted access to a presymbolic, unconstructed "real world."