

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Special Issue in honor of Joanna Overing: In the World and About the World: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge*

Article 14

May 2006

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Recommended Citation

Mentore, George (2006). "The Triumph and Sorrow of Beauty: Comparing the Recursive, Contrapuntal, and Cellular Aesthetics of Being," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol4/iss1/14>

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The Triumph and Sorrow of Beauty: Comparing the Recursive, Contrapuntal, and Cellular Aesthetics of Being

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INTRODUCTION

This is an anthropological essay about alternative forms of social being. It is written in tribute to the teachings of Joanna Overing. In this regard let me begin by making it patently obvious that such teachings have never failed to differentiate between textual representations and real people and that (as it has so clearly been reconfirmed by Tim Ingold in his most recent 2007 *Radcliff-Brown Lecture*) no one should confuse an anthropological essay for ethnographic description, as anthropology and ethnography do not amount to the same thing.

Overworked and often made to expire and become weakly what they represent, textual words remain practically all we possess in way of legitimately expressing the anthropological knowledge learned from cloistered academy and accomplished fieldwork. Yet regardless of how strongly and anxiously our literate community wishes textual words to be the world experienced, the latter can never actually be the sum of observed and felt human knowledge. The human imagination and its unlimited capacity for intellectual stimulus easily outstrip text. Left with the cultural legacy of textual words, however, the conscientious anthropologists must struggle with this limit in the project of translating different representations of the human experience. Therefore, this essay celebrates, in the spirit of her particular concern for the integrity of such anthropological ventures, the consistent Overing credo that any comparative knowledge *about* the world always proclaims its life *in* the world with some form of moral bias (Overing 1985; Overing and Passes 1999). Having firmly inculcated these concerns I here turn cautiously to a critical anthropological analysis of Amerindian, Antillean, and North American knowledge forms of social being.

I compare three cultural aesthetics of social being: (1) the recursive of Waiwai, (2) the contrapuntal of coastal Guyanese, and (3) the cellular of United States expatriates in Guyana. I argue that because Waiwai society privileges lateral visibility it tends to bring ideas about the fractal individual into association with recursive appeals of presence. Alternatively, for coastal Guyanese and United States societies respectively, they privilege axial visibility that brings their concepts about autonomous individualism into association with contrapuntal and cellular aesthetics of being.

My Foucaudian emphasis upon visibility arises from an understanding of modern societies as deeply “disciplinarian” and concerned with exercising a power that traverses every possible apparatus or institution as the surveillance knowledge of individual bodies. Because it efficiently induces “a state of conscious and permanent visibility,” one that “assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1978:201), the panopticon serves as the principal operator for this modern power/knowledge relation. In the circle around the central tower, its arrangement of individual cells “imposes ... an axial visibility” (1978:201). Thus, while its imposition of axial visibility stresses docility and surveillance, its arrangement also exhibits an aesthetic of the cellular. I contend, therefore, that in ideal forms of modern power, the social relations in Western individuals function like the panoptic effect—separating “cells” of identities and dividing selves from others. In this regard, lateral visibility would be the absence or demise of divided cells, the side walls of which having never been built or having been destroyed to allow communion between individual inmates. Lateral visibility displays then the equivalent of what occurs in many nonmodern societies, that is, the impossibility of “a collection of separated individuals” (1978:201). Also, with lateral visibility, a contrapuntal aesthetic can be obtained; its sonic admixtures invading and challenging the visual, helping to give form to different kinds of social being.

After opening with the theme of sorrow, I proceed to present the Waiwai triumph of beauty, where weaving, kinship, and counting reiterate the core principle to sequential movement in the assemblage of social personhood. For Waiwai society, the assembled aggregate and the fractal entities of the individual always integrally imply each other. In the example of coastal Guyanese society, where the contrapuntal authority of the voice makes its appeal to gathered audiences, this tends to bring forth the lateral visibility of the speaker. By contrast, the textual projects of the state seek out and place emphasis upon axial visibility, specifically for the establishment of greater control and obedience of its citizens. The former uses mimesis and looks for honor in the voice while the latter demands discipline and respect by way of the text. I conclude with the Jonestown Templars in the

forest of Guyana, the making of Western loneliness, and the modern desire for fellowship. And, in doing so, I ask what do cellular aesthetic and axial visibility mean for an understanding of United States mass killings.

The heuristic device applied to affect this analysis derives from anthropological considerations that work to identify the cultural spaces that express social relations. I hold that the propensity of such spaces for negotiating human relations stems from their ability to be the visible forms of knowing how to experience and confirm the social life of the self with others. I, therefore, single out lateral and axial visibility as the means for identifying these cultural spaces.¹ Because social relations always appear robust with ideas about an aesthetic of being, lateral and axial visibility serve thus as my general device for providing a comparative analysis of power and pleasure.

THE SORROW OF BEAUTY

He inhaled his breath. He held it deep inside his stomach. A feeling of panic cascaded over and down his body. It was deliberate. He wanted to impress in his speech as well as in his posture the feeling of an impending collapse. How better to bring to his talk the mood of a misgiving? Towatowa struggled to tell with old words this new tale about strange events on the other side of the forest:

“The Sunfish People are killing themselves.” He explained with an exhale of breath.

“They are killing themselves and their babies.”

“Many of them, many, many, of them.”

“The vultures have darkened the sky”

“They will soon be drunk on the meat of rotten flesh.”

“The earth will be writhing with worms.”

“Imminently the beauty of their village will have disappeared and the ugliness of the bad shall trumpet its victory.”

As Towatowa continued, the crowd contemplated in bewilderment the words and images they were receiving. For many days afterward, the Waiwai of Shepariymo village remained curious and intrigued. They had never before thought such kind of dying could manifest in the world.

As the messages about the rising death toll of the Peoples Temple cult members at Jonestown circulated among the villagers, I took particular note of how the Waiwai interpreted and where in their intellectual scheme they placed the knowledge of these events. What I gathered was that the

dark shamanic forces at work must have been influencing or enticing away the *ekati* (spiritual vitalities) of each and every Templar. To be able to force out of each living body these vitalities that sustained life, and being able to deny the return of such vitalities to their human host, could only be the work of dark shamanic intent. How could a community of so many people be so terribly unconstrained by good will that it would allow the purpose of immorality to destroy it in this way? This, I believe, was the lingering question behind the look of perplexity on each face. To amass this amount of ill will against so many people at the same time and in the same place appeared to the Waiwai to be the most shocking thing they could imagine, and indeed, the very sorrow over the defeat of beauty. For them, there could be only one way to live, that is, in the splendor of kinship morality, whose main purpose is to keep such violence at bay.

THE TRIUMPH OF BEAUTY

The Waiwai, it can be ascertained, idealize social relations as if they manifest a woven pattern, one that reveals itself as individual reeds alternating under and over each other like known human responsibilities. The pattern entails *woyesii*: the replicating of an action in a sequence towards an assemblage, in other words, a woven pattern assimilates into itself each of its preceding plaits. When functioning as the overall effect of a tight plait of relationships, these “reeds of responsibility,” constitute the full and substantive life of an individual as social person. At one and the same time and in the same space of the individual body, the reeds of responsibility assemble as the very aggregate of society, as well as the veracity of an individual’s subjectivities.

Here in the conceptual anthropological understanding of Waiwai society—as they would manifest it as *ewto* and be interpreted by anthropology as “village”—no distinction should be drawn between society and individual. The Waiwai word for human individual is *toto*. In *ewtoto*: meaning both “the place where people live and the people who live in this place,” the two words are spliced together to form one. Note that this is the exact anthropological conclusion suggested for the “Fractal Person,” in that this “is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationship integrally implied” (Wagner 1991:163).

In the Waiwai model of the complete person, *čewyarono*, the vitality of spiritual substance (*ekati*) must first inhabit and give life to the body. In providing heat, movement, emotion, thought, and consciousness to

the individual, spiritual vitality becomes dispersed and housed at various locations within and throughout the body. The spiritual vitality of the eyes (*ewrikati*) can be observed when the tiny image of oneself can be seen reflected in the eyes of another. The spiritual vitality of the chest (*ewankati*) locates itself in the cavernous seat of the solar plexus. Even the very heat of the living body provides proof of the spiritual substances necessary for maintaining an active life. And yet, in addition to these differential subjectivities (made possible by Waiwai understandings of the body as having differential regions or parts offering location or “place” for such subjectivities), the social substantiveness of the body must be presented and brought into motion for *čewyarono* to be fully in the world as a proper comment about the world (see Rosengren, Santos-Granero and Werlang, *intra*, for discussion of similar notions among other Amerindian peoples).

The reciprocal relations of responsibility to others considered *o-yepamri* or *o-poyin* (my-kindred) epitomize the social identity of a *čewyarono*. So complete in *yepamri* relations is such a person, he or she understands him or herself to be independent from outside need or assistance, for all can be gained and achieved within the kind of wholeness implicit to being *čewyarono*. To subtract from or to add infinitely to such wholeness cannot, however, proportionally alter a *čewyarono*. Just like the individual reeds of a basket being woven, the fractality of the *čewyarono* personhood always assembles sequentially toward or away from a supplement or assimilation of wholeness. At the very moment or in the very ambience of being possibly without kindred (possibly subtracted to zero or indeed to an absence of being), or having too many kindred (possibly adding infinitum to becoming a supreme being), *čewyarono* substantively and recursively accounts proportional kindred. For example, in Waiwai society even an unknown guest/visitor (*parwana*) within the midst of the community immediately becomes and, indeed, has always been conceptually both *wošin* (affine) and *epeka* (consanguine). All those who instantly refer to the visitor as *wošin*—as is the custom—will have those living in the community who call them *wošin*, calling the visitor their *epeka*. Anecdotally, in this understanding of society, the first question to ask a visitor is not “where is your passport?” but “where are your kindred?”

The movement of fractality and wholeness operative in *čewyarono* has perhaps its most obvious corollary in the Waiwai counting system of *šim-šim* or *ukoknon macho*. *Šim-šim* actually refers more deliberately to the knotted string used for counting down the days to ceremonial events. The concept of a recurring unit of one can be inferred from the onomatopoeic repeating of the word *šim* and from each knot tied or untied on the string.

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Both inferences implicate the sun and its movement through the sky “tying-up” or completing a day (see Passes, *intra*, for similar importance of metaphor in Pa’ikwené mathematics). Take particular note, the word for hand, *kamorī*, builds on the word for sun, *kamo*. It is, however, in *ukoknon macho* that the idea of recursive counting best suggests itself. In historically adjusting to the previously unknown object of the camera (but certainly not to its already known capability) the Waiwai call cameras *ukoknon kacho*. Interestingly enough they call the relatively recently introduced Western calendar *nuni ukoknon* and map *rowo ukoknon*. Here the inference seems to be, like counting, that the camera, calendar, and map repeat holistically the objects of which they take account. In other words, they each do the work of assemblage: they assemble, respectively, the image of the subject/object in the photograph, the reappearance of the moon, and the surface of the earth. This assembling requires the sequential movement of wholeness to provide, in its action, a fractality recurring into wholeness once again. Thus the very principle of recursiveness can be apprehended in the Waiwai words for counting.

They do indeed have a recursive counting system that offers four basic numbers: *čewñe* (one), *asakī* (two), *osorowau* (three), and *thathoyere* (four). It is, however, a system where the counted digits assimilate to the final number reached. Hence, adding another digit to *thathoyere* would provide *čewñe-kamorī* (five, or literally “one-hand”). Continuing in the same way the sequence repeats itself but as *čewñe-šahara-kamorī* (six, or “one-and-a-hand”), *asakī-šahara-kamorī* (seven, or “two-and-a-hand”), *osorowau-šahara-kamorī* (eight, or “three-and-a-hand”), *thathoyere-šahara-kamorī* (nine, or “four-and-a-hand”), and *hanoro-kamorī* (ten, or literally “another-hand”). Sometimes instead of *hanoro-kamorī*, they will say *asatho-kamorī*, which literally translates as “a pair of hands” or “the hand twinned.” Although *iračon-hīrame-kitari* can be translated literally as “a-foot-split-away-from-its-pair,” it carries the principal meaning of “two hands and a foot,” in other words, the assemblage of fifteen. *Hanoro-kitari*, although translated as “another foot” actually means the assemblage of twenty. This sequence of counting fingers and toes, hands and feet that makes evident the Waiwai recursive numerical system, also reveals, in the constant completing of the whole, a single human individual: a *toto*.

The assembled aggregate of the individual always integrally implies its fractal entities and the fractal entities their aggregated assemblage. The scale or proportion remains the same; regardless of where, who, or when, the conceptual human scale of the individual does not alter. Even the perfectibility of the *čewyarono* manifests as an instance in a very human proportionality. Any increment in social status has to keep its scale; it is

proportionally exact and holistic in its multidimensionality. Any instance of such grandeur recurves to what preceded it in order to retain its human scale: any increase in social status does not then alter the proportions of the individual, or of society. In spiritual vitality and in social being, the fractal and total sum of the individual, as a person, retains the defining characteristics of a very human scale, even in their magnitude.

The Waiwai apply the same aesthetic criteria for all things beautiful as they do to the making of proper social beings. The assemblage points for material culture, humanity, and sociality are for them deliberately recursive in character and implicate, I would argue, the same conceptual schema of a continuity between fractality and an aggregated totality.

Consider the category of *o-yepamri*, my-kindred, as the contributing scale for the proper assemblage of the complete person, *čewyarono*; it always exemplifies the fact of *erowaray*—the similarity of appearance between things. In the case of kindred, it exemplifies the obvious resemblance between individuals from the same womb and, by implication, the same village. It is, however, *woyesi*, as the activated sequential assembling of kindred, which actually allows the resemblances to be observable and, indeed, be the instance for commentary about the reeds of social responsibility. *Čenporin*, beauty, can be appreciated as this assemblage of kindred. It is the totality or oneness produced by the recursiveness of the assembling that holds the aesthetic. The resemblances between kindred suggest a balance: a kind of harmony pleasing to Waiwai sensibility. The same effect can be produced at assemblage points other than that of kindred, for example, at baskets, canoes, and houses, even at the vaulted sphere of the universe. And yet, the production of such pleasure in the beauty of the complete, of oneness, necessitates the generative impulse of difference. In other words, kindred resemblances already imply an integral fractality.

To return now to *čewyarono* as an example of a magnified social status that, nevertheless, retains its human scale and unaltered proportions: I think we can establish the fact that kindred—which defines the magnitude of *čewyarono*—assembles as the fractality of completeness. When properly deployed as the reeds of responsibility, such kindred aggregation offers the *čew* prefix in *čew-ne* (one) to the *čew* prefix in *čew-yarono*: *yarono* being the agreement, “*yaro*,” or truth of the matter, in this case, the obvious expansive beauty of the totality assembled through kindred in *čewyarono*. The sequence follows the same pattern throughout. For example, in the particular instance of a *čewyarono* having kindred in the category of *kariṗamšam*—the designation for young unmarried men—the *kari* prefix derives directly from the word *kari-tu*, meaning to be or to feel strong. The

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word stem of *pam* has its equivalent in the stem for the word *ye-pam-ri*, kindred. It is as if the assembling for the concept of kindred recurses from the fractality of young men's strength. And yet this strength of youthful masculinity has its source, nonetheless, in the pre-existing categories of adulthood.

The social enlargement of young men and women into adulthood retains a relative scale. *Karipamšam* and *emasī* (young unmarried women) complement each other and thus provide each other with the relational potential for becoming *porintomo* (adult man) and *anačwan* (adult woman) respectively. Marriage and parenthood transform *karipamšam* and *emasī* into *porintomo* and *anačwan*. The strength of the young man that derives from his parents recursively constitutes the very supplement necessary to formulate the personhood of the new adult man. The same can be said for the young woman and her social enlargement into an adult woman. The reeds of responsibility integrally implied in each individual bring other individuals into form as proportionally complete persons. In the Waiwai kinship system, category terms in the second generation above and below ego designate all as kindred. Because of the preceding wholeness of *porintomo* and *anačwan*, senior people in the gendered forms of *pocha* (old man) and *chacha* (old woman) become at the same time grandfather and grandmother respective to everyone in ego's generation. Similarly, but without the difference of gender, all in the second generation below ego become *o-pari* (grandchild) to those in ego's generation. But I think it is with the particular category of *ewto mitwim* or *ewto yusom* (literally "village leader") we can see best the consistency of the conceptual model for the Waiwai recursive system of being and its tendency to produce a triumph of beauty even when a proportional increase in status or power appears.

Today the Waiwai use the word *kayaritomo* for village leader far more frequently than they do either *ewto mitwim* or *ewto yusom*. I have it on good authority that the missionaries introduced this word during the 1950s when they were carrying out evangelizing work and translating the Bible into Waiwai. It appears they compounded the word *karitu* ("strong") and *imo* (stem for "big") to capture their understanding of the overarching, singular power of political leadership. Given their particular North American perspective on the individual and political systems, the intent of the Texan missionaries must have been to interpret Waiwai leadership in terms of an accumulated and possessed axial power at the center. What must have appeared to them as Waiwai "chiefs"—big men whose enlargement of social status seemed to provide the authority to command and be obeyed—allowed for the missionary usurping of the old word with the new. How difficult must it have been for them not to see the lateral

pull of the Waiwai reeds of responsibility?

Even though *kayaritomo* has successfully replaced the older terms for village leader, the character of leadership itself remains very much in the style of its traditional meaning. Waiwai leaders pull in the lateral concentric forces of society by allowing themselves to be subject to the tasks they undertake and in which they wish others would participate. Obedience derives not from any direct command, punishment, or potential of punishment made by individual or group, but rather from knowing an integral relationship already exists between self and other that delimits distinction between the two. When one convinces oneself to do a particular thing it implies that others—already part of one's fractal identity—will do so also as an integral repercussion of oneself. Therefore any accumulation of and increase in prestige, privilege, or authority from accomplishments by an individual amounts to a similar magnitude of empowerment to others. In other words, the exercise of power carries its own impact of subordination into the one who exercises it as well as into those upon whom it is exercised. While from one narrow vantage point hierarchy can clearly be observed in the rising elevation of each circle within the circle, when known and experienced as fractal, concentric lateral power reduces and nullifies the overall impression of rank. Here the recursive system of power produces a political aesthetic never reducing the individual to a single entity vulnerable to the negative effects of domination.

The comfort and solace achieved from being a fractal person among the Waiwai is the triumph of beauty. Individual autonomy cannot be contemplated. If it could, it would be as a distant shapeless form on the horizon of experience: sad and ugly. Indeed, an autonomy leading to solitude would be the obvious outcome of such a being, but in Waiwai theory, one totally out of the question. In their modes of knowledge, autonomy and solitude cannot even be posed as a possibility, much less as a query.

Rather than imposing theories about being and time on the Waiwai, perhaps it is better to consider accepting the obvious—that their assumptions and means of knowing exist in different historical and cultural frameworks. In their system of knowledge, seeking to be a complete person who in the process of perfectibility of an autonomous individuality has no grounds for desire. Here, in their knowledge system, seeking to objectify the singularity of an individual life, as an experience in chronological time, cannot begin to take affect. For this reason, disciplinary time cannot be used as a coercive technique upon the body. Measuring, protracting, documenting, and competing against time, so as to claim an achieved victory over life or to bring life under greater scrutiny and control, does not appear to have

relevance for the Waiwai. The beauty of a full life exists and cannot be denied to any individual who comes into the preexisting social world. Since assembled kindred exist in society, you therefore already exist. The Waiwai recursive system of being a social person distributes the splendor of life, not as moments retrieved from an absence, but as a simultaneous acknowledgement of preexisting presence.

CONTRAPUNTAL AUTHORITY

“Shatter,” “Reload,” and “Bin Laden” appear as words on privately owned vehicles. Today they name treasured properties and proclaim their owners’ power to possess and to do so in an aggressive masculine style. Virulent, vibrant texts reach out to snatch your attention as they speed by on the fronts and sides of taxis, minibuses, and donkey carts, all plying their trade in the busy streets of Georgetown, the capital city of Guyana. This is the coastal urban landscape of the soldiers who were stationed at Kanashen when the Waiwai were receiving the news about the deaths of the Templars. Here orality and textuality have had a long and contentious relationship: the voice and the written word have been embattled old warriors in the theatre of human conflict from the moment colonialism stepped off the deck in the New World. Beguiled into the ramparts of the voice, European text still continues in Guyana today to be mesmerized by the power of contrapuntal speech styles from Africa, India, and China. Here, in the delirium of its own conceit, text often presents itself confidently as the master rather than as the slave of the voice.

The concept of the individual in this social setting, I would argue, can be approached through an understanding of the contrapuntal authority of the voice. (Because of the historical, linguistic, regional, and theoretical confusion around the use of the term “Creole,” I here make the word “contrapuntal” do the work of conveying the idea of “mixture” which the former does in current scholarship on the Antilles. Also, in tribute to a little known but provocative article by Karl Riesman called “Contrapuntal Conversations,” I consider what he evokes for speech in Antigua to be a useful analytical device for interpreting Guyanese as well as Antillean identity in general.) Where the appeal to an immediate human audience provides the most meaningful and corroborative sense of individual empowerment, speech—rather than writing—overwhelms the social scene. Lateral visibility to a gathered audience provides the primary sense of presence that fulfills and comforts the individual. Even when this audience can be considered imaginary, for example, when individuals talk

to what may appear to be themselves, an appeal to gathered spectators brings forth the speaker and assumes an interlocutor for the voice. This is not madness. It is rather a question of an asserted presence in a continuous cultural campaign to redeem individual human respect.

To apply this kind of performance theory to Guyanese society requires taking seriously the sense of an individual honor, first made desirable, then permanently kept out of reach by perceived mysteries to esteem, whose origins now appear lost in a history of slavery, emancipation, indentured servitude, and European metropolitan greed (Wilson 1973; Rodney 1981; Patterson 1982; Abrahams 1983). This processing of the concept of lateral visibility, through the means of contrapuntal speech, fondly embraces the so-called negative and dividing ideals about “impurity” and “fragmentation” instituted in societies influenced by Antillean culture and history. Perhaps disconcerting to us, but quite the norm for coastal Guyanese society, contrapuntal authority acclaims the positive attributes of mixture and ambiguity. In so doing, it not only disperses away from the vulnerable self the cultural awareness of shame, but also retrieves for the individual a pride and dignity in the very appropriation and display of the impure and fragmented. Despite its overwhelming desire to be overcome by the axial visibility of European rationalist ideals, even the Guyanese state has had to deal with the realities of its own prevalence as a distinct contrapuntal polity. Arguably unknown, perhaps even to itself, the distinctive contrapuntal attributes of its statehood percolate up from a citizenry whose expressive lives depend upon an assertive presentment of a gregarious individualism.

Bright, loud, pungent, hot, and spicy are attributes of coastal Guyanese society that intermingle with the subdued, moderate, clear, cool, and mild to form an aesthetic of being that is lived rather than reflected upon. Set on a dramatic stage of contradictions, the consciousness of being “Third World,”—that is, of having yet to “become” modern and “First World” and the actual lived reality of being this at the moment it is experienced as such—not only gets explained as an inferior form of existence but also as being no form of existence at all. It is as if coastal Guyanese society deliberately props up in front of its view, at its axial center, the Western rationalist tower of modernity only to counterpoint it with lateral relations in a contrapuntal display of an alternative authority system. Together the center and the circumference cancel each other out in the performance of everyday life. The security, which the lateral circumference provides against the center, requires the interplay of both the suppression of the latter and the triumph of the former while realizing such triumph as no triumph at all.²

The axial effort to contrive inferiority not only for lateral relations but also for any alternative Antillean identity hinges upon denying the interpretative worthiness of mimesis. The mimetic clearly augments performance. It permits, for example, the familiar to be recognized in unfamiliar scenes. It also, however uncritically, permits the copied to avoid the accusation of being fabricated: the copy serves to give to the original its originality. This latter point has worked in favor of the transmission of colonial power (where it is often argued, self-evident truth, rather than political coercion, has produced the experience and knowledge of colonized being). The structure of mimesis has allowed colonial powers—that consider the mimetic to be an invalid form of being—to make the confident and safe claim, for example, that the copy has no credence of its own. When the colonial gaze sees the copy, rather than being seen as the repeat of the authentic, real, true, or even as natural progress linked to inevitable forces of development, it is viewed instead as serving to identify the childlike, innocent, and feeble. On the other hand, what appears to the doubters of authenticity to be the mistaken product of the mimetic, colonial powers interpret as the obvious rational approach to knowledge and being. For example, instead of colonial powers saying and believing the colonized put on shirts and ties, listen to classical music, learn to be literate, and adopt bipartite parliamentary systems because they copy us, such powers say the colonized do so because it is simply the rational, appropriate thing to do.

Western and Western-influenced powers prefer this explanation because it deflects attention away from the fact that their so-called “original” is itself fabricated. Western and Western-influenced ideas of the individual identify, participate, and produce, yet also blatantly deny, the part they play in the inventing and placing of selfhood in the original. To these ideas and those individuals identified by them comes the confident sense of legitimate empowerment and benefits. They come directly from within societies established and determined by Western knowledge and truth. The character of a certain kind of rationalist order pervades. The character of an ironic kind of docility also becomes evident in the making and sustaining of a rationalist order. While the policing of pain and humiliation ranks high as an effort to achieve a greater sense of moral worth, it falls short and below the concern to monitor the efforts needed to establish greater control and obedience.

Let me briefly provide an example from Guyanese statehood: a case of the mimetic, the influence from colonialism, and the persistence of modern Western values producing instances and sites of axial visibility. Printed in black and red lettering on white signs outside the gates of many

government ministries in Georgetown is the command:

Ladies: No slippers, short pants, tights, fine strap or strapless dress or top, midriff or tubes, T-shirt with indecent language or art. Gents: No slippers, short pants, 3/4 pants, trunks, sleeveless jerseys, vests, T-shirt with indecent language or art. Dress appropriately—save yourself from any embarrassment. By order of the Management.

I do not have the space or the agenda to expound in-depth upon the relevant meanings presumed to be operative within Guyanese concepts about bodily adornment. It should be taken for granted, however, that a particular cultural logic does function to structure the dress code the state seeks to manage. I am less interested here in the logic of axial power to organize concepts of bodily adornment and more in the significant concern by the state for its power to command and to be obeyed vis-à-vis things like bodily adornment.

I once literally had to give my shirt to a man who had traveled fifty miles to the city from a rural coastal community to have his painful tooth extracted by a state administered dental clinic. The uniformed guard at the gate of the clinic had refused to let him enter because his shirt was torn. Examples of this kind of anxiety by the state about the lack of respect for its power are legion. They are made more incomprehensible by the fact that many of its agents know very well the kinds of hardship involved in traveling to the city from rural communities and the indignity felt by those who have to stoop to receive help from the state. To the prospect that the desired yet unrequited modern “cellular” (or panoptic induced) existence of its citizenry could be undermined by support from lateral sources, the state and its vulnerability at the center place the former in the position of behaving in Draconian ways. The Guyanese who operate under the influence of coastal culture do have and actively do instigate the mechanisms of a principle and the aesthetics of a being which find comfort in the lateral as opposed to the axial visible strategies of being. But, this alternative threatens the authority of the state and undermines its confidence to give commands and receive obedience from its citizens.

In the middle of the most choked intersection and on the busiest of shopping days in the city, I witnessed, along with many others, a fight between two men. They were stripped down to the waist. Each held up their hands folded into fists. They were poised like two pugilists from an Arcadian print. Traffic from all four directions had stopped and was backed up for at least four blocks. Crowds of pedestrians milled around the two protagonists, preventing the minibuses, cars, motorbikes, and

horse-drawn vehicles from moving. The pugilists swung at each other and the crowd roared. The crowd was jubilant. The pugilists were serious. The uniformed policemen, normally stationed here to direct traffic, hid amongst the crowd. No one seemed to think the fight between the two men needed to be stopped. Indeed, the general opinion appeared to be that one of them had insulted the other and the need to reclaim or defend honor had pulled both into the fight. No one present seemed perturbed that the main stream of traffic in the capital city had been brought to a standstill by two men on the busiest day in the week.

In coastal Guyanese society, through diverse informal codes of public conduct, each individual intuitively comes to know and believe that they have immediate access to a moral justice located in an audience. The right to appeal derives from a learnt sense of self-worth confirmed in the evident expressive ownership of the voice. It appears that the same demand from the state for respect also exists in its citizens. What the state seeks in text the citizen seeks in the voice. Both operate in Guyanese culture to offset or keep at bay what they call “eye-pass.”

Eye-pass, or what is called in other parts of the Antilles as “cut-eye,” has been defined as “a deliberate, aggressive attempt to curtail or reduce someone else’s being” (Sanders 1987:135). In common usage, “to take your eyes and pass someone” is “to humiliate or belittle another by claiming some form of moral superiority” (1987:135). To express disrespect deliberately—to shame someone publicly in order to claim higher moral standing over them—is considered an act of supreme injustice. Because it targets the inadequacies of the individual being humiliated as an oblique technique for drawing attention to the esteem of the individual performing the shaming, eye-pass is always considered iniquitous. Quite apart from the eye-passer making claims to an honor he or she does not deserve, it is unjust if not outright wicked to build one’s esteem on the demise of another. By thinking so little of someone, you would not be deterred by their ability to defend themselves from shaming, denies that someone their just desserts. Every individual possesses the irreducible moral worth of an honor that can and should be defended. To disrespect such honor, “to take your eyes and pass” such honor by deliberately attacking it inflicts an emotional hurt upon the individual (and, I might even add, upon the community itself). It is an unjust form of violence because it operates under the false assumption of a moral weakness on the part of the victim (and perhaps even on the part of the victim’s community).

When the contrapuntal Guyanese asserts individual self will and, in counterpoint, helps orchestrate an aesthetic of sociality with others,

they permit perceived natural justice to manifest its absolute presence. Incorporating rather than vanquishing the oppositional contribution of others provides an inherent morality to enter society and to display its existence. Even in the political theatre of known unequal relations between the state and citizen, the character of the entrance and performance of this morality cannot be but suggestive of a relative horizontal equity. It does so because its features absolutely depend upon the asserted contribution of others. The contrapuntal Guyanese person always aggressively seeks to implicate others, to draw them into counterpoint and, in so doing, to give lyrical meaning to moral existence. Each contributing subject adds to the volume and orchestrated shape of moral existence. In coastal society, contrapuntal authority flays naked the lie embedded in modern political claims about democracy and the “rule of law.” As it exposes the fact of equality unachieved, it also immediately introduces and provides the needed sanctuary of equity. In empirically embodied ways, the processes of contrapuntal authority deliver the confirmed truths of an available and accessed equity to each individual subject.

Clock towers and traffic lights—built and put in place during British rule to instill a measured order and obedience among the colonized—stand as broken monuments of a contradictory hegemony. Today not a single clock tower chimes or tocks its regime of punctuality over coastal Guyana. In these edifices, Greenwich Mean Time can no longer copy and relay its command from the tiny hill in London to the wide shores of South America. Even as consumer capitalism and the developed sense of autonomous individualism cultivated markets for the purchase of personal “time-pieces” (watches), the latter became stage props in the play of status rather than instruments of docility for the contrapuntal Guyanese. Similarly, Georgetown streets have traffic lights other than as a reminder of the nation’s failure to be modern or indeed of the nation’s success in defeating the regime of colonial ideology. The assertive individual subjectivities of its road users carefully negotiate busy traffic intersections avoiding the kind of harm presumed to result from the lack of an effaced authority. Found not only in these particular cultural sites but also throughout coastal Guyanese society, the counterpoint of lateral and axial visibility represents the contrapuntal authority of a very distinctive response to being in the modern world. It is the kind of response the soldiers stationed at Kanashen carried with them into the southern forest.

At the time of the Jonestown killings, the soldiers made their memory and lived experience of contrapuntal identity resonate around the forest. They purposely evacuated the solitude and tedium of daily life in the

forest with the sweet din of their voices. The noise they made every day could be heard for miles around rebounding off the wall of trees and ricocheting back to them within the compound. Each soldier found refuge from their loneliness by inflicting an intrusive presence into their surroundings. With such action, each pulled their comrades into the shared world of being impinged upon and having similarly to retaliate. These young men knew already how to arm themselves against the civic experience of modern solitude and in the forest they intuitively brought such tactics into effect. They carried with them from coastal society the learnt knowledge of contrapuntal authority. When news of Jonestown came to them over the radiophone from army units closer to the scene, their incredulity was, like those of other coastal Guyanese, thick upon their faces and throughout their various attempts to explain the event. Like the Waiwai, they could not quite fathom the impulses of the Templars to take their lives and those of their kindred in such circumstances. Like the Waiwai, the soldiers already possessed and had serving them a viable social means of eradicating individual loneliness, but it was one which proved inadequate for interpreting the actions of the Templars from the Templars' point of view.

CELLULAR AESTHETICS

I do not want to delve extensively into the events of Jonestown. A good deal has already been written about the deaths of 922 United States citizens in the Northwest region of Guyana on November 18, 1978 (see Lewis 1979; Mills 1979; Weightman 1983; Hall 1987; Chidester 1988; Maaga 1998). My main interests here rest with the strictures of knowledge which informed the actions occurring on that faithful day. I seek an anthropology of the event made to reveal something of the quality of relations existing between society and its members, particularly when placed in a setting of comparative analysis. Thus when positioned to view United States national society not from a perspective of economic fetishism or religious delirium but rather from what I am calling the aesthetics of cellular being, the killings at Jonestown do not appear extraordinary, but rather as a predictable outcome to life in perhaps the most advanced of industrialized societies.

I am not going to bare down upon the capitalist alienation theories often cited as the cause for the heightened development of modern individualism (Williams 1964; Lewis 1979; Rodney 1988). I believe them to be suspect in often implying a socialist alternative and thus do

not critically crack open the problem of centralized state power. I do not consider the political archrival of capitalism to be communism. Rather, they are copartners strategically set in opposition to each other to divert attention away from the fact that both historically come out of the same modern imaginings and social formations. Perhaps no better place to witness this assertion than in the compromise of religious and political ideology of the Peoples Temple church, where apostolic socialism was the guiding theology of its faithful.

I am also not going to be tempted by pseudo or genuine socio-psychological theories like “brainwashing” and “cognitive dissonance” to explain the increased sense of longing and loneliness often said to be indicative of modern Western life (Festinger 1957; Brehm and Cohen 1962; Aronson 1969; Hassan 1990; Singer 1995). For me, such theories seem to prevail because, within the cultural paradigms producing them, the space for identity and motivation is already occupied by a strong sense of the independent ego. In this space the brain and its cognition are considered principal players in human action. Hence weak brains and childlike cognitive response (rather than the realities of social existence) provide explanations for the drastic results of those lonely people influenced by the ravings of charismatic cult leaders, heavy-metal pop singers, and the devil himself. Instead, however, I am going to presume any such cultural knowledge about selfhood, assembled in society, reveals a great deal about the meanings and forms of its members’ actions.

It would be quite easy to trace the anxiety the modern state betrays about its legitimate right to use violence to its strongly held views about selfhood. We can witness, for instance, the imprint of state concern about its own power to kill through some of its evocative twentieth century rituals, beliefs, and ecstatic expressions such as the deployment of armies into international warfare, the government-sanctioned racial “cleansings” of the Holocaust, and capital punishment. The nervousness stems in part from the tremendous responsibilities it has taken unto itself for being the only legitimate user of violence. As with economic systems and labor, so too with human polities and violence: society appears to recognize, in its various ways, that each and every one of its members has the potential to use physical force. One could argue administrating such force for economic production and for political power tends to be the fundamental interest of all societies. As part of our social contract with the state and as a statement about our vulnerable isolation, we modern citizens have agreed to offer up to the state our known individual potential to use violence. Ideally, in other words, the state uses violence legitimately on our behalf.

The remarkable ways in which modern Western societies have gone

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about administrating the human energy of their citizens consistently points to the rationalization theories of logical efficiency. What seems to have informed these theories in targeting the embodied energy of individuals has been a consistently propagated knowledge about the self. Thus, by first objectifying individual subjectivity as autonomous, speaking directly to this autonomy, indulging it with independent desires, claiming dominant juridical bonds to it, and having consequently constructed its separate cells of identity, the modern state then tactically offers itself as the confident protector deserving of recipient loyalty from its autonomous subjects. This confidence belies, nonetheless, an anxiety, for while it rests upon claims about knowing the subject, such knowledge can only come about upon first accepting an epistemological lack and obstacle to knowing the subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987; Foucault 1978).

Putting the human rights of individuals in the law, encouraging debate about such rights, and situating the principle of rights in constantly deliberated concepts about human life have all intentionally contributed to a usurping. I am referring to the usurping of dominant legitimate authority over the individual by such traditional categories as the family, households, neighborhoods, villages, clans, and so-called tribes. In modern polities it is the nation that has become the ideal community through which the widest and strongest sentiments of devotion should presumably circulate. In other words, the national community claims to be the cultural form of dominant relations in which the state and its citizens should seek and act out their primary loyalties to each other (Anderson 1995).

The obedience to the state and its power to demand such obedience through sentiments of loyalty and devotion in the nation depends upon first isolating each citizen within their own cellular identity. In our modern world, these identities regularly appear to be race, class, gender, and age. They have become the avenues toward a modern type of individualism we should all be investing in, crafting, monitoring, and policing, not only for our own sense of self, but also for the kind of knowledge the state has of itself through its member citizens. Bodies marked by their race, class, gender, and age assist (at least temporarily) in abating any anxiety the state may have about the kind of knowledge it possesses on what is inside each motivated individual with the potential for using violence. Knowledge about the potential use of violence from racial bodies, as well as those marked by class, gender, and age, should better inform axial power in its task of administrating and ordering society more effectively. In addition, by each citizen investing internally in their own individual identity and creating an overriding reality for individual difference, they provide centralized state power with the justification for its own existence.

Whenever disputes arise between the differences, the state can step in and claim (usually through the law) to be the only impartial or legal source of arbitration.

We in the modern nation-state live everyday with contradictions embedded in the constant proclamations about the availability of pleasure and liberty. They are splattered on the walls of our cell. For example, very few children traveling to school from their homes in buses with installed surveillance cameras can miss seeing the stain of the lie to liberty. The posters in classrooms glare down their antinomies to pleasure, for they warn each pupil against stimulating their body with drugs, alcohol, and sex. For every college student who has to leave the comfort of family and home for the four-year liminal life, the impact of being disciplined by the academy strangely echoes what they experienced in their natal nest. Even graduating into the new, seemingly liberated status of “licensed driver” requires following the strict codes of conduct on the roads: stop at red lights, go at green lights, and stay on the right side of median lines. Vehicles made to travel at speeds of 140 miles an hour can nowhere on public highways be driven at such speeds without breaking the law. In all directions of modern life in the United States, the techniques of command and obedience continue doggedly to bring forth the experience as well as making true the axial power of the state and the disciplined autonomy of the self.

Now what might all this mean for an understanding of the Jonestown deaths and all the other similar celebrated mass killings by United States citizens during the late twentieth century? I would argue the answer initially revolves around attempts to re-appropriate violence as an expression of individual empowerment and the eradication of solitude. In popular culture, we regularly suspend our sense of reality when bombarded by the raw images of violence on the screen. The viciousness of violence and its powers to hurt and kill all become safe on the silver screen. Yet, for those of us who never experience the visceral reality of taking life or giving death (and, indeed, appreciate that we do not even have to slaughter a chicken for our food), we must never ever lose the knowledge and truth that physical violence can hurt and kill. While the ordinary citizen must give up the right to use violence and the state (if it aspires to being modern in a Western style) must use this right on behalf of its citizens, both, nonetheless, must also retain confidence in the power of violence to produce its devastating effects. In such a world, power and violence have to be intertwined as one and must so remain. Thus, in this logic, the reappropriation of violence by the Templars should be viewed as a reappropriation of power.

Having accepted the autonomy but not the isolation of cellular being,

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modern individualism appears to reach out for something more humanly intimate than the protective juridical force of the state. It seeks out a lateral community that is closer, as well as more intuitive, than the imagined fraternity of the nation and the filial bond of the state. When these cannot be found, or when found, either cannot fulfill the requirement of eradicating the deep solitude of cellular being or cannot defend it against attack, drastic measures often materialize. In this regard, its particular identification with power and its procedures for using this power to assert the distinctive character of an autonomous cellular individualism in defense against attack, made the Jonestown violence very much in line with United States culture and society.

In their style of reappropriation, where the very ritual of suicide had been practiced many times before the actual event, the Templars had been repeatedly shown a kind of self-empowerment. Yes, ironically so, because at one level their actions of self-immolation may be seen as the result of extremely obedient followers, ones without any means available to them for achieving liberty through a will to power. Yet if we were to see their beliefs and actions in the same light that we often direct upon devoted and patriotic nationals who readily and willingly volunteer to die as well as fight for their nation in the military, the irony may not appear so strange.

The Templars discovered in their church and pastor an immediacy of human comfort as well as devotion to a cause securing them an instant fertile achievement of selfhood. Keep in mind at Jonestown that 70–80 percent of the Templars categorized themselves as urban African Americans. Consider also that of all the residents at Jonestown, two-thirds were women: 49 percent black women and 14 percent white women. Of the 49 percent black women, 14 percent were 66 years of age or older. Only 10 percent of all the residents were white men. The 70 infants of five years and younger averaged 8 percent and the 417 children and youths between the ages of six and nineteen averaged 46 percent of the total population (Maaga 1998:9). Within the rigor of discipline techniques already available to them as part of their cultural knowledge, these men, women, and children imagined and lived a paradise on earth within the commune.

Achieved through both the lateral and axial forms of commune relations, it was nevertheless the cellular aesthetic of the latter, with its strict hierarchical framework, which stamped the most discerning features of their community. Armed guards at the rituals of worship, watchtowers around the compound, regimented routines of work, education, sleep, and beatings, as well as complete and utter devotion to their pastor, all provided for the proper functioning and dominance of axial power. In the end,

the issue for the Templars was not self-destruction. In the words of their pastor and “father” Jim Jones, “We didn’t commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide” (Maaga 1978:164). They gave their lives as a gift of death to protect their church and what it meant to them. At the time, both were under siege by the agents of the state and United States public opinion. They sacrificed their own lives and those of their children as a gift to Jones and to God. In so doing, they reclaimed not only their will to power but also the effect of violence in such power.

CONCLUSION

The simple assumption put forward in this paper has been, for the Waiwai, that the privileging of lateral visibility brings ideas about a fractal individual into association with recursive power, while for U.S. and coastal Guyanese societies, respectively, the privileging of axial visibility brings concepts about an autonomous individual into association with cellular and contrapuntal relations of power. It has been argued that, in its agenda to achieve a greater efficiency for the workings of its political relations with its citizens, the desire of the modern state, expressed through its privileged use of axial visibility, de-emphasizes lateral relations and brings about categorically isolated and solitary forms of individuals.

For the coastal Guyanese, having to live constantly within an ethic of modernity, the scenario has been one of a refusal to succumb to such notions of identity. The apparent result for them has been a collective sense of a lack of fulfillment with regards to achieving modernity, or, in other words, a continuing experience of feeling “Third World.” Primarily because lateral visibility still remains a strong source for the expressive use of contrapuntal authority, the debilitating effects of being Third World have not, however, produced a demoralized society. For the Templars, who found themselves in Guyana with the cultural values of the United States of America, their attempts at eradicating the civic experience of modern solitude brought them to the “cult,” the comfort of its congregation, and ultimately the serene bliss of death in the afterlife.

Let me conclude on this rather hesitant but suggestive note taken from the Waiwai material and placed within the broader context of Amerindian modes of knowledge. One of the hidden hunches I hold—often subliminally guiding my research—has been the suspicion that Amerindian modes of knowledge possess the ability to keep a tight grip upon multiple concepts at the very moment they are brought into use. In contrast, lineal Western styles of knowledge, subject to their particular history of metaphysics, force

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us to release at the instance we most need to use them the structures by which concepts are brought forth. It then becomes a somewhat contorted task for the anthropologist to represent Amerindian knowledge when the means of representation cannot close the gap between the sign and the signifier, except of course by the antinomy of the suspension of knowledge itself. Amerindian modes of knowing, I believe, do not have the desire to close on the foundations of truth, for truth already is: truth is already experienced and not, as it so often is with us, desired, standing forth in front of us yet to be possessed. Perhaps then the product of the teachings I have been attempting to present here has been taking place with the teacher behind me and, behind her, the teachings of an Amerindian experience.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. I wrote the foundation of the ideas in this paper for the conference “In the World and About the World: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge” organized by myself and Fernando Santos-Granero, held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia on November 28 and 29, 2005. I am grateful to all of the participants in that conference for their helpful comments and generous support. I am particularly grateful, however, to Laura Mentore, the Waiwai, and the Wapishana people of Erepoimo village for their substantive contribution to my ideas. I dedicate this paper to Čana and Kamina.

1. I take my lead here not only from Michel Foucault (1978:200), but also from the many anthropologists before him who have written on the subject of social space.

2. It is, I believe, a question of a certain kind of consciousness, what Edouard Glissant (1989:195–220) refers to as the promise of a reflective “national theater” living in Antillean folkloric beliefs, unaware of its power for positive change.

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