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The Stench of Death and the Aromas of Life: The Poetics of Ways of Knowing and Sensory Process among Piaroa of the Orinoco Basin

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In Piaroa explanations, their culinary arts—their means for eating in a human and therefore civilized sort of way—are made possible through particular ways of knowing, which equally signify specific ways of doing things, such as curing illness or filling the forest with game, making meals and babies, beautiful baskets and blowgun darts, and also singing, laughing, sharing, and caring. An immense range of ways of knowing is required for the culinary arts, far beyond the obvious of fishing, hunting, gardening and cooking.¹ They include all those skills that human beings need for living comfortably, healthily, in community with others. But above all, the culinary arts include the knowledge of social consciousness and moral reasoning. To make a beautiful knot is a sign of social virtue. The clumsy knot emerges from moral laxity. Eating well, in a civilized manner, is a complicated business. To understand Amazonian ways of knowing we must explore all of the “taskscape”² of the culinary arts. We need archaeologies of taskscape to shed further light on the relations that hold between them. Poetics, aesthetics, and the psychology of beautiful social relatedness are all ways of knowing that are necessary to safely use the culinary arts. Without them, these arts become perverse, working against the tranquil, egalitarian style of life Piaroa consider properly human. The arts of the verbal and ways of laughing—both attached to skills for creating social relatedness—are not contingent or trivial. They are importantly integral to the arts of the culinary, which are first and foremost a social matter.³

Although Piaroa prize their intellect over all other faculties (Overing 1985a), for them, the knowledgeable human agent on earth is always a performer in the world (Overing 1999). To be able to do something well is to know it. Their gods may live in “ivory towers,” but Piaroa do not. This bodily side of intellect is important. For instance, it is through the flow of the blood of the human circulatory system that thoughts travel and thereby provide intelligence for action to each part of the body.⁴ Thus, as

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knowledge of the culinary arts increases so too does physical creativity and stamina. As Piaroa tell it, the intermingling of types of personal capacities (intellect, and physical effort, and also affect) is due to cosmic history. It is this existential relatedness of intellect to moral imagination and the sensory that makes engagement in their social culinary arts both unique and possible.

The implication of such a vision of the relatedness of capacities for “ways of knowing” is not a simple matter to translate. Amazonian peoples tend to understand the constitutive relationship of personal faculties and skills as never ending, ever shifting, and transforming.⁵ In Piaroa explanations such connections are sometimes beneficial, healthy, creative, and beautiful, and other times dangerous, destructive, unhealthy, and ugly (Overing 1989).⁶ There is no lineal way through which we can unfold indigenous understandings of ways of knowing or the dangers of their practice. What we can do is pluck at threads and demonstrate their multiple connections, to capture their ever-moving syntheses, and ambiguous integrations (also see Mentore *intra*).⁷

The conundrums that emerge through such “plucking” can be immense. For example, the tranquility loving Piaroa are peaceful people, who claim to be vegetarians. Yet, their shamans proclaim in their chanting: “I eat like jaguar!” Piaroa strongly value their intellectual capacities. Yet their beautiful thoughts are enclosed within beads made of the granite faeces of the subterranean monster Tapir/Anaconda (Overing 2004a). These beads of knowledge provide the beautiful internal decoration of each Piaroa. Yet, Piaroa brains were created from the puss of primordial syphilis (Overing 1986; 2006). With some trepidation, I begin to strum some of these threads by exploring more thoroughly their verbal arts. As mentioned, these verbal arts belong to their arts of the culinary. As such they are a very important way of knowing (and doing) for Piaroa. They, as the skills (or, ways of knowing) for hunting, gardening, having babies, are embodied.⁸ They too are wonderful and terrible.

Thus, in its own way, this strumming of mine is a journey into ethnopoetics.⁹ Although everyday verbal play is of substantial importance to the success of the culinary arts, it is in the nightly chanting of the great shamans that we find the verbal arts most brilliantly practiced. The poetics of shamanic chanting, and in particular the genres narrators use, will be my concern, along with the other ways of knowing that involve the culinary arts that such poetics unfold.

The genre most often used in shamanic chants is that of robustly bawdy grotesque realism (Overing 2004a). Through it, we discover a cosmic history that is filled with the folly of sensory madness, especially as it relates to the origin and use of the culinary arts. However, the genre

of grotesque realism is not always used by chanters. I have narrations telling of a sublime, beautiful, and benevolent side of power. They too are very important to the cosmic story of the culinary. Thus, the genre of the sublime must be understood in relation to the genre of the grotesque. It intertwines with the grotesque to express the larger picture of cosmic creation. It is through understanding how these two genres relate that we can begin to understand knowledge, and its bodily use, from Piaroa perspectives.

THE GENRE OF THE SUBLIME

I shall begin with the sublime, a chant vignette on the god Anemei, where the beauty, wisdom, and great power of sensory process is proclaimed. Here, the emphasis is upon the potency of their treasured capacities for voice, language, and song—in other words, the verbal arts. The chant tells of Anemei, one of the most powerful of Piaroa gods. He owns the words of shamanic chants. It is important also to remember that this is a chant. It is sung:

*Anemei's Crystal Box of Light*¹⁰

[Version Sung by Jose Luis, of the Upper Cua, 1977]

*He was born inside the nucleus of the seeds of cotton
inside Mæriweka, [the mountain house of the gods]
inside Mæriweka is the waterfall, Mæreya*

*He was born inside the seed of this waterfall
inside the seed of Ruwæire*

*He grew, and lived, an invisible man.
He never dies.*

*He was born within Anemei's purutsokinya [his crystal womb boxes of origin]
[here there was] Anemei's jaguar roar (huruburu) purutsokinya
[here there was] Anemei's insect biting, powerful brilliant light
[here there was] the brilliant light of Anemei's fossilised stone
[here there was] Anemei's brilliant light to combat the forces of illness
He was born inside these boxes of origin.*

*He names the skies
There were born the skies of the Grandfather of Anemei
These boxes belong to the Grandfather of Anemei
These waterfall skies were born.*

*Anemei was born within these skies, and lived there.
He had no shadow
He had his own light that came from within himself*

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*He had the sounds of music
He had the powder to be used to combat rain
He had the force not to receive illness, and the force to combat illness.
He had no dirt
He was clean
He had no shadow
Wahari [creator god of people] had seen the entire world through his sorcery
but he could not see Anemei
Anemei lived inside the boxes of his Grandfather
He had no dirt
He had no shadow
Anemei lived first at Nyuema [mountain house of gods]
inside the waterfall, Mæreya
Inside Ronyetuwa
he lived within the mountain Ronyetuwa
and inside the mountain Rækinya'a
inside Rækinya'a
He lived inside the mountain(s).
He lived behind the waterfall where it was fresh.
When Wahari gazed at the mountain he could only see the waterfall.
no reflection of Anemei was there.
Anemei was invisible
He still lives
He is a man who never dies
He thought about life
Anemei thought through his heart and heard through his heart, not from beyond
it.
He never dies
He lives together with the world
He never disappears.*

There is exegesis from various sources, for instance from chanters. However, in working with the young man, Antonio, on Piaroa vocabulary and grammar, more about the words of the chant was explained to me. We were discussing a mythic event, one of the vignettes on Wahari, creator god of people, stealing good things for the Piaroa, to create a comfortable world for them. Antonio told me the following:

Wahari saw the crystal box of Anemei, and opened it. Inside was Anemei with all his powerful brilliant light. And also all the words of the chants (*buruburu*) were there. Anemei escaped with his songs, but Wahari was able to steal some of his mighty light. He then was able to create his own songs, like a fruit-laden tree, from the bit of light he stole, light imbued with the force of breeze behind the waterfall. Wahari also blew the light into the world. He formed the light of the world with Anemei's light. This was the light of life, and the life of chanting (*kækwæwhæ menyé*).

However these songs of Wahari were grotesqueries, too strong and wild, like so many of his other creations when they were achieved during bouts of extreme hubris and paranoia, as he thieved to create wonders for his Piaroa people. Shamans now receive, bit by bit, the clean and beautiful songs of Anemei. They receive them as a gift, and with his permission to use them. They are the songs that are essential to their culinary arts.

Let us look closer at the words of the chant on Anemei. Within the crystal box is “precious light,” and “precious air.” First, this light of Anemei is so bright you cannot approach it. It is light that will blind. It can burn. Anemei’s light is also named “the light of life” (*kakwæ moro*). This is puzzling, for *Kakæwæ* signifies “the life of the senses.” It does not, as one might expect, carry the name of “life of thoughts” (*ak’waru*).¹¹ Here, it is highlighted that the force of the senses always plays an important part in human “ways of knowing” (see Santos-Granero *intra*). Second, this precious light is also said to be “the life of chanting” (*kakwæwhæ menyé*). It is the life of words. The sensory capacities to sing and to speak are made possible through Anemei’s precious gift of light.

There is also Anemei’s gift of air (breathing, breath). The life of chanting is created through the air that comes from the breeze of *Mæreya*, Anemei’s waterfall, within the mountain.

Hakwauwha Mæreya [inside the waterfall, *Mæreya*] is the name of the sound of the waterfall: breathing and hearing invoked as a unit.

Hakwauwha Mærapa [inside *Mærapa*] is the sound of the air beneath the mountain of *Mæriweka*. It is the force of air that exists beneath the earth. We are being introduced to spatial ambiguity: the air behind the waterfall, high in the mountains, and the air beneath the mountain.

Providing more ambiguity, shamans say that this air that comes from the breeze of the waterfall *Mæreya* is also the light of sorcery. It is called *mæripa moro*. The singer is protected by this light that he receives from Anemei. It comes to live within the chanter. He is able to see, with this light, which animal is sending illness, and with it he is able to see the worlds through which he travels. The imagery suggests the crossing over of air and light, with the tactile and the visual translating into one another, evoking each other, time and again. Throughout the imagery of Piaroa narrative genres, such crossing over of the senses becomes critical to understanding the story told, and ways of knowing explored.¹²

Benevolent Anemei still sings. He sang, and he sings, for Piaroa people. He is very beautiful. He wears many, many beads. Where he sang there are many rooms of beautiful colors. The traveling shamans can see this beauty. Piaroa chanters sing the songs Anemei sang, and still sings. Because of his songs, he is called “The Master of all the Food in the World.” Yet another sensory capacity—eating—is introduced. Without

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Anemei's songs, Piaroa could not eat animals. Some "thinkers" therefore say they think about Anemei more than any of the other gods. He is the one who first saw animals as vegetables. The Piaroa therefore can be vegetarians because the shamans, through their singing of the songs of Anemei, transform game each night into sweet potatoes.¹³ They do this to make game safe to eat, for the game animals were once humans. (Wahari, toward the end of mythic time, in his greatest act of mad treachery, invited the people of the forest to a great feast. There, he got them very drunk, and then proceeds to transform them into game.) This human past of game animals makes them worrisome and very dangerous for eating. The arts of the culinary make such eating safe.

The shamanic thinkers are always learning, through the help of their hallucinogens. In order to learn, the thinker must hear the many sounds of the waterfall, for the songs of the Tianawa gods¹⁴ come from it. To be powerful they must also *see* the beautiful sounds of the waterfall. In this case, the visual takes precedence over the auditory. Nevertheless, we find that such hearing and seeing, sound and sight, in their own ways, crossover to translate into each other. To hear and to see the sounds of the waterfall has effect in the world, as a mighty increase ceremony. The competent singer must also hear and see all the sounds of animals, and also the flutes of the animals owned by the (sort of human) grandparents of the animals beneath the earth. In so doing, the chanter becomes, like Anemei, the "Master of Food of the World." However, each Piaroa ritual is said to be an increase ceremony, which is particularly significant for the young men who take part in their first ritual that endows their hunting abilities. If the initiate is able to see and hear, as does the shaman instructor, if he is able to experience the crossing over of hearing and seeing of the beautiful sounds of the waterfall, and those of the flutes, then he too will be able to eat as a "Master of all the food of the world." This hearing, seeing, eating, and also singing, becomes a unit of sensory force.

The ritual for becoming a hunter, and also for acquiring shamanic power, usually pertains to men, and is to men as pregnancy is to women. The forest is made fertile with animals, and the men acquire their own fertility. For men, as for women, such powerful fertility is personal to self, and must not be spoken of to others. Parallelism in the generative processes of men and women is a strong theme in Piaroa narrative imagery, and also in their ritual procedures, and thus an issue to be raised again below.

Finally, we find the connection between hunting and singing, which is translated into Anemei's "ethereal power" of *huruhuru*, his force of *huruhuru*. *Huruhuru* is translated variously as voice, language, the sound of

people talking, people singing, and people laughing together. It is used for each, and, categorically, for all, it is a potent splendor of sound. *Huruburu* is the mighty roar of jaguar, the life force of the culinary arts!

Shamans explain that their voice box is a flute. This flute is very beautiful and prized. It contains the sounds of their chants. It is the life force of these songs, *a'kwaru menye*, and as such endows a “life of thoughts” to shamanic chanting. Without it, a person can only do brute, things—kill, devour through a “life of the senses” alone, engage in pure animal behavior. Yet, this flute is called the “*jaguar of songs*.” Its force is *huruburu*, the jaguar’s roar (or, the force of air). In order to engage properly in the culinary arts, the life of the senses and the life of thoughts must be conjoined.

The spirit of songs is called “the spirit of hunger” (*au tui sa*). It is a spirit of powerful *thoughts*, and comes from the breath (as Anemei’s breeze). It emerges at the death of a singer in the form of jaguar, a predator without a “life of thoughts.” This jaguar soul emerging from the shaman’s body guards the beautiful flute of many colors that emerges from the larynx (Overing and Kaplan 1987; Overing 1993). In life, *Tekwæ* is the shaman’s spirit of fighting, the spirit of the hallucinogens the chanter uses when he sings. Words, language, song, laughter are all formed from the breeze of Anemei’s waterfall: *huruburu*, jaguar’s roar. The songs (*imenye*) given to the shaman chanters by Anemei, Cheheru, and Yubaeku, the greatest of the Tianawa gods, are battle songs, songs of the thinking, acting, mighty predator. They make civilized eating—the culinary arts—possible.¹⁵

A shaman’s song dwells in the heart. He thinks these songs in the heart, as Anemei does. To think these songs through the head, and not the heart, would be dangerous.

A BRIEF COMPARISON OF THE GENRES OF THE SUBLIME AND THE GROTESQUE

Upon reflection we find that the ethereal imagery that describes Anemei and his powers relate directly to all those ambiguities that are a hallmark of the genre of grotesque realism. In the chant of Anemei we find a grand ambivalence of the senses, a giddiness to their interplay. As Taussig observes of visions ministered by healers in the Upper Amazon, there is a “medley of the senses bleeding into each other’s zone of operations” (1993:57). There is, for Piaroa shamans, the crossing of seeing, hearing, breathing, and all with tactile experience, such as eating. There is the merging of light and air with the singing word, and of thoughts, words, songs, and actions. For humans alive, there is always such ambivalence

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at play. The two genres are inextricably linked in other ways. Through both, the chanter is unfolding ways in which bodily processes and sensory life are intimately involved in ways of knowing. Both are about using the culinary arts.

In other respects the genre of the sublime contrasts greatly with grotesque realism. For instance, there is no display and no imagery of the ludic in the sublime. The chanter makes little use of the comic poetics that are integral to most shamanic oral performances. In grotesque realism, the slapstick element is so strong that the audience can easily visualize, in caricature, the comic antics of powerful gods (whereas, in contrast, with the sublime, one envisions the stillness of the ethereal Anemei). The audience can laugh at the inevitable backfiring effects of all that hubris, madness, and wrath. In the end, these effects will make life for the Piaroa rather difficult. Chanters make deliberate and interesting use of irony, parody, and the absurd, genres that are also prized in everyday verbal play.

In the chants, grotesque realism is used for exploring the effects of certain appetites and bodily processes on ways of knowing: the vagina bleeding, ass shitting, ass bleeding, ass farting, tongue bleeding, armpits sweating, pus dripping, mouth vomiting. In contrast, the genre of the sublime proclaims the possibility of the poetry, power, and ethereal beauty of sensual capacities in their contributions to ways of knowing: eyes seeing, ears hearing, mouth singing. Grotesque realism centers, more or less, on the life of the senses as they relate, often perversely, to powerful and poisonous bodily processes, especially of the fertile nether parts. In contrast, the genre of the sublime focuses on the life of the senses as they relate to the fertile powers of the upper body, making possible, for example, the verbal arts. Both genres are concerned with the implications for *the human condition* of the mighty, mismanaged modes of creative power let loose in mythic time, and which today must also be used by Piaroa in their own culinary arts. This is the dilemma for human beings.

THE WORK OF THE GENRE OF THE GROTESQUE REALISM

There are many reasons that the genre of the bawdy grotesque is a powerful pedagogical tool for portrayals of, and reflections upon, many home truths of the human condition from a Piaroa point of view. Bakhtin speaks (1968:4) of the philosophical truths disclosed by the genre, and the originality and terror of its comic imagery. However strange the grotesque world might be, it is nevertheless *our* world. It unravels all kinds of truths

we might otherwise not see (Bakhtin 1968; Thomson 1972; Berger 1997). There are its paradoxes and ironies, its animal people and other monsters where nothing is clearly this or that. It plays on confusion, and the interplay of the monstrous and the ludicrous.

Another aspect of grotesque imagery that Bakhtin dwells upon, especially relevant to the chant narratives of Piaroa shamans, is its “bodiliness.” In grotesque realism, Bakhtin (1968:26) observes, the body is open. There are no clear boundaries between bodies or between bodies and the world (Bakhtin 1968:26). There is the ever unfinished, ever-creating body, and the body as a principle of endless degeneration—always twinned with regenerative reproductive abundance. A leading theme is this fertility of bodily life, particularly of its nether parts (Bakhtin 1968:27). There is the emphasis on apertures or convexities, on genitals, noses, assholes (Bakhtin 1968:4). Such imagery is normal to the poetics of the Piaroa chanter. The use of this genre allows the shaman chanter, and his audience, to reflect upon the elusive “world-openness” of their own bodies. It is an imagery that allows them to accept and take responsibility for the consequences of their own corporality, being ever entwined with destructive, abusive, and strange mythscape events.

POISONOUS FERTILITY, ORIFICES EXPELLING

In narrations of Piaroa shamans, the creation of the great arts of the culinary is a tale of poison, the uses of poison, and its misuses. This relationship of the culinary arts to toxicity is not unusual in Amazonia. They depend upon the knowledgeable use of poisons. As Guss (1990:105) reminds us, the activities of acquiring food in Amazonia are dominated by the need to control and master poisons. The plants, themselves, are often poisonous, with the transformational skills of cooking being necessary to dispel their danger. For Piaroa, the animals of the jungle are poisonous, and require shamanic skills to transform them into edible form. There is the curare used to hunt, and the poisons used to stun fish. In Amazonia, ways of knowing (the culinary arts) are always involved in the poisonous. To go beyond the obvious—to understand Amazonian *theories* of poison—we must explore epistemological matters, such as indigenous explanations of the relation of knowledge to poison.¹⁶ We may ask how does power—the capacity to act in this world as human beings—relate to poison? How does the corporeal relate to the epistemological in this query?

At the heart of all this questioning is the matter of the relationship

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of poison to fertility. In Piaroa narrations, we find that the powers required for creation were, from the very start, poisonous, a fact that gives a distinctive edge to mythic-time events. Bodies were, and still are, ever open to all this poison. Poison is mighty, it is fertile, and it can kill you. It has tremendous transformational power (Belaunde *intra*). The culinary arts were originally created through the most powerful and poisonous hallucinogens of the universe, comprised of vulture down and centre of the sun rust. Kuemoi, the author of these creations, was so poisoned by them he became a diabolical, crazy tyrant, ever plotting his next cannibalistic dinner (Overing 2004a, 2006). As the generative powers of the culinary arts increasingly contaminated creation time endeavors, the personal wills of its inhabitants became maddened by them. In the end, all social relationships were so poisoned that community set against community, devouring each other through Kuemoi's predatory, culinary forces. Thus, in Piaroa theory, all issue of transformative power must be carefully cleansed of its poison before it can be beneficial for human use.

Guss (1990:105–106) says that Yecuana understand poison as an integrating agent of transformation that can either be generative of new forms of life and capacities or cause death. This is an important point. This notion of poison, in Amazonian theory, tends to powerfully unite an array of ideas relating to the polarities of life and death, curing and killing, fertility and sterility, power and frailty, and knowledge and ignorance. It is precisely the interplay of such polarities—their ongoing syntheses—that has generative and degenerative force. Poison is deadly, and it endows life. The ambiguity of synthesis is always there, as will be seen throughout the remainder of this discussion.

Ethnographic detail is crucial to understanding these clusters of ideas, which always relate to the twinning of generative with degenerative capacities. For instance, Guss (1990:106) tells us that Yecuana apply the terms for poison and death to images woven into shamanic baskets, signifying the life and death potencies of items contained within a shaman's pouch. For Piaroa, the face paint of woman (signifying their knowledge of their own menstrual processes, and their mighty transformational powers) is called *k'eræu*, which proclaims sunstroke (poisoned by the rust of the sun), and also the dreaded illness of paranoia and tyranny that befell the creator gods. The syphilitic boils of the brain of an old shaman have the same name—*iwá mæruwa* (menstrual blood sorcery)—as the beautiful facial paint marks that tell of a woman's knowledge of her menstruation. As Guss notes of the Yecuana: "Humans must incorporate [death] into their very being if they are to survive" (1990:93) or reproduce. For Piaroa and Yecuana, it can be said that the activity of "culturing" is like an unfinished,

poisonous symphony, and, as Guss suggests, “a work of art never meant to be completed” (1990:67).

This daily act of engaging in the culinary arts is sometimes more like a high wire act. It entails the coping of open bodies with the poisons of bodily process, and with other people’s bodily processes as they engage in daily tasks. For Piaroa, the evidence on certain points became clear and consistent, from their chanting, from everyday verbal play, and from animated exegesis. First, the creative, fertile processes of the culinary arts require artful engagements with poison. Second, because of such engagement with the poisonous, there is the sexuality, fertility, and possible perversity of all sensory functions and excretions of the body. Poisonous bodily excretions were a main topic of everyday concern. In the first days of my fieldwork with Piaroa, I was warned not to step on the urine or excrement that animals left behind on jungle trails. Although the shaman transforms the flesh of animals into vegetable food, making game safe for human eating, the animals also pass their diseases to humans through their excretions, which includes not only urine and excrement, but also their blood and their glandular odors.

Chants dwell at length on the relation between the processes of fertility and poisonous disease. Both involve the expelling of bodily fluids. The following story, from a chant on Wahari’s creation of “sweet fruits,” plays with themes of strange pregnancies, the fertile effects of expelling from inappropriate orifices, fertile bleeding, and fertile urinating. Bleeding—the expelling of blood—appears as a very powerful conduit of both fertility and disease. The following is the chant through which the shaman makes both wild and cultivated sweet fruits safe for eating. They otherwise could cause bad stomachaches:

Sweet Fruits and the Origin of Stomach Ache

[taken from a vignette of a chant sung by Carlos, at Mapuræka, 1968]

Wahari, the creator god of the Piaroa, could not get sweet fruits from Kuemoui, who was the creator god of fruit. So Wahari decided to create his own. He grew a tree from his own stomach (from hallucinogens he took, poisoned by Kuemoui.) He got a lot of nice fruit from this tree. He travelled around with his tree, up and down the Orinoco River, feasting on fruit. When he ate it all up, he returned to his rapids below Puerto Ayacucho, waiting for more fruit to grow on his tree. Meanwhile, a woman named Parubu Awehtuwa’hu (a spirit of the dead) heard about this fruit, and wanted to try it. A bird of the river came by and told her where to find Wahari. She travelled to the rapids and found him. She begged him to give her one of his fruits to sample. She irritated him, so he answered, “No! You can’t have any. This is because when

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I eat this fruit I always get the fever of women—a swollen belly, pains, blood” (he was lying, of course). “This fruit is too dangerous for you,” he said. She insisted she wanted to try it anyway. So Wahari raped her. Then he just left. But the event had repercussions. His rape led to a fertile impregnation, of sorts. The woman almost got what she wanted, for this fruit of Wahari grew in her belly, and she bloated up and up, until she urinated blood. She just could not stop bleeding. She was in terrible pain. She travelled up river from one place to the next. Wherever she stopped, her blood fell on the ground, and at all these places sweet fruits grew wild! And, from that time, all people who eat unripe fruits of the jungle and of the gardens will suffer from a bad stomachache. They will be in terrible pain.

In mythic times, you never knew what would be the results of your fertile ejaculating, peeing, and bleeding. Such expelling was from a variety of orifices and organs of the nether parts. Here, we have the image of bloody urinating that creates all the sweet fruits of the jungle and the gardens. However, in this story it is not always clear which organs are exactly involved. There is certainly the activity of Wahari’s penis, and of his pregnant stomach, which expelled a fruit tree. There is the performance of Parubu’s urinary tract, but whether the gestation of fruit occurred in her womb or her stomach is not clear. It is also not obvious whether the rape involved her vagina or her rectum. We can, nevertheless, begin to understand the linkage made between digestion and the processes of gestation, a not unusual theme in begetting activities of the gods. For instance, the ethereal Tianawa gods spend their time inhaling powerful hallucinogens, which when digested or gestated in their bellies, are defecated as children gods. Similarly, in the story of sweet fruits, the poisonous hallucinogens Wahari digests in his stomach are transformed into his fruit tree, a kind of “tree of life.” There were no “normal” procreative acts in mythic time.

In this vignette on the origin of sweet fruits, we are provided with imagery that is typical of grotesque realism poetics. But all is not evident in this tale. Its ambiguities are plentiful. There are the open orifices and very active nether parts, giving expression to a profusion of fertile possibilities. Does the rape cause the spirit woman to suffer menstruation? Is she peculiarly miscarrying? There is also monstrous behavior, the wild and strange generative activities and progeny of gods and spirits: factors when combined insisting on the twinning of degenerate process with regenerative abundance.

In time, the listener of shamanic narrations comes to realize that narrators are weaving grand, ever-shifting, fractal syntheses that link poison, monstrous conduct, and excessive bodily processes, with the culinary arts. The fractal imagery of one narration sheds light on the

next. The gift of the great chanter is the brilliant interweaving—between chants, within chants, and condensed within the many-layered evocative words of his chant—of fractals (Overing 1990). Thus, the imagery of the vignette on the origin of sweet fruit is better understood when placed within the context of other episodes. The chant below, on the origin of curare, is especially compelling toward this end. It contains imagery that drastically transforms any listener’s former understanding of the grander scheme of creation time. Its poetics make full use of the darker side of grotesque realism, and in so doing unfolds an ominous overall design of mythic-time history. All narrative fractals that involve wayward expelling from the orifices of the body are made intellectually richer when placed within the context of the imagery used in the narration of the origin of curare.

The shaman, Jose Luis Sucre, entitled his chant on curare as “the origin of miscarriage,” which is significant. It is yet another of the vignettes on the misadventures of Wahari when attempting to create his own culinary arts to give to Piaroa people. As with the vignette on sweet fruits, the imagery of expelling blood is an important key to the story. Thus further light is shed on the extraordinary complexities of the letting of blood. As noted earlier, blood is responsible for circulating all thoughts throughout the body. Thus, blood is always knowledgeable in one way or another (see Belaunde 2002, and *intra*; Brown 1985). Blood is also very poisonous, at least the expelling of blood is. Likewise, curare is one of the most poisonous of Piaroa culinary tools for bodies that are open to the world.

The Origin of Miscarriage

[based on the chant of Jose Luis Sucre, of the Lower Cuao, in 1977]¹⁷

Wahari tried to get some curare from crazy Kuemoi, the creator of curare, but couldn’t. His wife, Maizefood, daughter of Kuemoi, manages to get some from her father to give her husband. Wahari quickly discovers that his father-in-law had set yet another trap for him. The old man had placed a poisonous stone in this curare that would zap its user to the heart, killing him and transforming him into good game for him to eat! Wahari was made crazy from simply handling the packet! Maddened, he plots to make his own curare by going hunting for Toucan. He sharpens his blowgun darts, placing a strong poisonous hallucinogen that he divines from the jungle on their tips. He sets out to hunt with some relatives, and sees Toucan sitting in a tree, happily eating its fruit. Wahari shoots Toucan with his poisoned dart. Wounded and befuddled, Toucan flies around the world, divining all types of curare plants. Wherever he defecates and vomits, curare plants grow. He returns to his tree, and falls down dead.

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In the process of looking for dead Toucan, Wahari becomes really crazy and gripped with a strong desire to kill people. He wants to kill his own brother and his sons-in-law. Wahari sets a trap for them. He transforms dead Toucan into a living, dreadful, subterranean monster, Tapir/Anaconda, as the tool to kill his relatives. Wahari's plotting fails and his kin people manage to escape his blood lust, but they are thoroughly terrified. Wahari then goes to fetch dead Toucan, and transforms Tapir/Anaconda back into dead Toucan by striking him over the head with his blowgun. When he picks Toucan up by the bill, blood flows from his anus. He then lifts Toucan up by his feet, and Toucan vomits blood.

Wahari proclaims: "All people who live after me will suffer from this. When men kill animals with curare, and people then eat this game, they will suffer from vomiting blood and blood flowing from the anus and vagina.

Through his poisonous attack on Toucan, Wahari created the sickness of miscarriage. It was miscarriage, not curare plants, which Toucan created. In the story of sweet fruits, similarly, it was stomachache that Spirit Woman created through her bloody urinating, not sweet fruits of the jungle. In her rape by Wahari, Spirit Woman was poisoned by Wahari's semen, which had been affected by the poisonous hallucinogens he had imbibed to create his own "fruit tree." Once again, in grotesque realism, things are not what they seem. The chanter, Carlos, had not made clear to me the punch line. The vignettes on Wahari's creation of his own culinary arts are in fact about his creation of the horrid illnesses that people would come to suffer. In the end, Wahari, originally a god of unity and accord, became a foolish tyrant, his will poisoned by the deadly hallucinogens of Kuemoi (Overing 2004a).

The imagery of the grotesque expresses with great color this plight of Wahari. Over time, his behavior escalates in arrogance and violence. He refuses Spirit Woman's request for fruit, then he rapes and abandons her. He intentionally kills Toucan to create curare and he plots the murder of his own kin people. It was Wahari's bad social behavior that instigated poisonous, yet fertile, bodily processes in others. In both vignettes, we find that inordinate expelling from the orifices—urinating blood, excreting blood, vomiting blood¹⁸—is initiated by Wahari's violent actions. The imagery is of fertile raping and fertile killing, both degenerative routes to fecundity resulting in unfortunate issue.¹⁹

All of Wahari's attempts to create his own tools for culinary endeavors fail. Instead of fire and curare, he manages to create burns and miscarriage, along with gonorrhea, paralysis, blindness, skin fungus, and sore throat. Each is poisonous to human sensory capacities, and each work against constructive use of the organs of the senses. They sabotage culinary arts and healthy ways of knowing. It was all of these diseases, these perverse

creations of Wahari that he gave as “thoughts” to the animals (replacing their own knowledge of useful culinary arts.) The animals now, through their excretions, *impregnate people* with these perverse culinary arts of Wahari (Overing 2004b). Animal “thoughts”—similar to human thoughts—are circulated by blood throughout the body. This is why animal blood is so poisonous to humans. It carries the knowledge of disease.

We can begin to understand more fully the reasons for Piaroa giving immense importance to the topic of poisonous bodily fluids. They link the following bodily processes: (1) the perverse, but fertile, excretions of creation time, (2) the disease-carrying excretions of animals, and (3) the waste products of human beings today. Together, they form a powerful unit of corporeal theory that deals with the dangerous sensory capacities of nether parts for urinating, defecating, vomiting, and ejaculating. Again, the imagery evoked is that of endless processes of degeneration and regeneration, digestion and gestation.

EVERYDAY EXCRETING: THE STENCH OF DEATH, THE AROMAS OF LIFE

The poisonous fertility of bodily fluids is not a matter for gods alone. A side effect of living with others is that each person absorbs poisons emitted from the bodily excretions of those with whom they live. Kinspeople can thereby dangerously impregnate each other, causing illness, or lingering weakness (Overing 2004b). Specific linguistic classifications of bodily emissions, which Piaroa use in everyday talk and also chant language, shed further light on this process of poisoning (Overing 1986; 2006). In everyday expression all bodily excretions can be lumped together as *i'sæwa*, or treated separately, according to the aperture involved. There are, however, more interesting ways Piaroa subdivide and classify expelling from orifices of the body. In the chant on Toucan, to defecate, vomit, and ejaculate are referred to by the same term, *edéku*, or *edekwa'a*, a play on the fertilizing powers of bodily expulsions. The suffix used in the second term, *wa'a* expresses the stench of these processes, the stench of death, the odor of a dying organism. Like miscarriage (the topic of the chant), the expelling of vomit, excrement, and semen relates to dying, but potentially fertile tissue. In fact, the word for miscarriage, *pui'kwa*, also means ejaculation. Fertility and death are ever twinned. Death's sign is its stench. Therefore, it is not surprising that Piaroa explained to me that what is particularly poisonous in the expulsions of poisonous bodily fluids is their odor of death—ass shitting, ass farting, urethra peeing, vagina bleeding, armpits sweating, and tongue bleeding.

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In everyday verbal banter, much fun is made of farts (Overing 1986; 2006), or as Piaroa say, “shit smoke” (*titē iso’pha*), a phrase made good use of in off-color joking to emphasize the olfactory potency of wayward farting. Among young men, a fart can give rise to interesting “father-in-law jokes,” such as “your father-in-law is shitting!” or “he’s shouting!” or “he’s vomiting!” In Piaroa logic, all such expulsions can cross over, unified by their violence, excessiveness, and lack of mastery of bodily process. Or, the farter might be teased that he is “vomiting his father-in-law!” which refers to the hallucinogenic drugs the older man uses. The young man’s father-in-law has greater knowledge than his son-in-law, and thus his bodily excretions—his knowing sweat, urine, excrement, *and* farts—are dangerous to the health of his son-in-law, who is less powerful than he. The lad, in farting, is *ridding* himself of such contamination. Such cleansing of poison gives him strength, a principle that will be further explained below. Conversely, the young man’s “fart-smoke” is dangerous for his friends, who are unwillingly impregnated (raped?) by it. In breathing his deadly shit smoke there is transference of poison (the generative power of hallucinogens) from him to them.

A discussion of the work of menstrual bleeding will further clarify this interplay of the degenerative and (re)generative in the bodily processes of expelling. Both women and men menstruate. A woman has the transformational knowledge to create babies. It is the fertility of her “thoughts” that allows her to do this. Essential to the process of achieving sufficient generative power to give birth is her menstruation. She is bodily cleansed by it, and thus made powerfully and properly fertile (see Belaunde, *intra*). Her bleeding vagina expels all dangerous poisons she has internalized each month in the course of living with other people. Menstrual blood is so dangerous for others, particularly children and young men, because the woman is powerfully cleansing herself of the unmastered thoughts shed by everyone else (a process similar to the young man’s farts mentioned above, but much more potent.) A menstruating woman must not cook for the vulnerable, for they would *ingest* the poisonous odor of her bleeding, which would impregnate and make them ill. However, it is the releasing of this same blood that makes a menstruating women strong and knowledgeably fertile. Again, we have at play the ambiguity of the twinned principles of degeneration and regeneration, that is, expelling is procreative and expelling contaminates.

Shamans explained to me that much of their transformational strength for shamanic arts is acquired through ritual “menstruation.” In such menstruating, they can achieve as potent, but different, generative capacities as those of women creating babies, although it is only every six months that they menstruate. A shaman conducts a ritual where he forces

a stingray spine through his tongue and also the tongues of his apprentices. Thus, they “menstruate” through the tongue, not the vagina.²⁰ Through this letting of blood they too cleanse themselves mightily of all the poison accumulated from the excretions of other members of their community, especially from the menstrual poison women shed. As it is for women, so the bleeding of men gives them great strength, allowing them to master their own embodied thoughts, so as not to be so dangerous to others in their own expelling of bodily fluids. It also provides them with the strength for their daily shamanic duties. Masculine letting of blood from the tongue is nevertheless very dangerous to women. If they should *see* the ceremony, gain knowledge of it through sight, they would become very ill, and perhaps die. A similar fate could happen to men who view the blood of childbirth or smell its odor. Young men who come into physical contact with menstrual blood could die of weakening illness. Seeing, smelling, touching—all sensory means of acquiring knowledge—can also defeat, even kill, knowledgeable agency, as Belaunde (*intra*) would say. Men and women are equal in their dangers—as well as usefulness—to one another. Women have fertile vaginas. Men have vaginal tongues. And the story goes on. All orifices—noses, eyes, mouths, ears, vaginas, anuses—are fertile. They are all dangerously open to the world. In grotesque realism this state of affairs is ludicrous, hilarious, but nevertheless powerfully generative and impressively risky.

We return to a major principle of Piaroa theory that relates bodily process and knowledge to the two faces of poison as a potent agent of transformation. Adult expelling of poisonous bodily fluids from orifices of the body—vagina bleeding, tongue bleeding, armpits sweating, ass expelling—can be self-fertilizing. All these apertures act as creative tools for open bodies. Such expelling becomes an important operator in the mastery of knowledge. It is the means through which a person sheds toxic unmastered knowledge, which otherwise could make you sick, or even crazy. The curing shaman gives the patient hallucinogens to imbibe or inhale, which travel through the body of the patient, having the effect of giving it a good, thorough cleansing. The ritual concludes with the patient violently vomiting and defecating, which rids the patient of the toxins of unmastered knowledge. At the same time, one’s own expelling is dangerous to the health of others, who are vulnerably open to the poisons of another’s excretions. Your kinspeople *absorb* into their bodies what you have sloughed off. If orifices are expelling, the senses of others are receiving. Nose inhaling, eyes seeing, skin absorbing, mouth tasting, ears hearing—all dangerous dances of the senses. Inadvertent seeing, absorbing, tasting, or hearing can be very dangerous to the health, and for this reason powerful ritual is usually held in the forest, far from the village. Whereas,

a knowing, intentional seeing, absorbing, tasting, or hearing—where the intellect is working with the senses—is what a healthy acquisition of knowledge is about in Piaroa epistemology. Their rituals, aiming to set into effect the regenerative face of poison's agency, make use of cleansing procedures, or a controlled opening of the body, to allow knowing poisons to enter it. In hunting ritual, young men undergo wasp and poisonous ant rituals, where they are deliberately stung (the body made open) on forehead, cheeks, chest and upper arms. The poison of these fierce insects is directed to enter critical corporeal areas, where knowledgeable strength is required for the predator activities of the blowgun hunter.

The absorbing by the senses can, then, be a positive reproductive act. For Piaroa, many factors contribute to the creation or transformation of a person's life forces over time. The act of endowing knowledge is work that procreates (Overing 1985b). Teaching children to hear well, see well, absorb well, is preparing them to use their sensory capacities in the jungle environment. Also, one smells and inhales the good odors of cooked food, and of people creating food. One sees, tastes, and absorbs their beauty—and their potency. This force of beauty is important (Overing 1989). The senses are working in partnership with thought, and thought standing up (*tak'wakomenæ*) is a beautiful process. People are surrounded in daily life by the beautiful and knowledgeable creations of others, for example, their blowguns and traps, combs and hammocks, plants of the gardens, children, laughter and speaking, the chanting of the shaman. All of this is to be absorbed through the work of the senses, and circulated by the blood to all parts of the body.

BACK TO THE GENRE OF THE SUBLIME

Piaroa capacity for regeneration is made possible through their use of their beautiful, cleansed knowledge. This returns us to the genre of the sublime, where the language is lyrical and verses well framed, and where emphasis is upon beautiful and creative possibilities for life, rather than upon grotesqueries that lurk around the corner. Whereas grotesque imagery dwells most forcefully on active nether parts, the focus within the sublime is upon organs and senses relating to the upper body: eyes seeing, ears hearing, mouth ingesting, nose inhaling, mouth blowing. There is the busy interplay of all these senses at work, a dizziness of upper body functioning. There is the role of tongue, mouth and larynx, working together, in speaking, singing, and blowing. These are the organs and related sensory capacities upon which language and the verbal arts rely. They are also the particular powers of the shaman, making use of

the breeze of Anemei by singing, speaking, blowing: by singing Anemei's "songs of life," and by using Anemei's "light of life." Shamans use the force of air from beneath the earth, making use in their travels of Anemei's burning, brilliant, precious light, with their noses inhaling hallucinogens and tobacco, their mouths ingesting hallucinogens, their eyes seeing other worlds, and their ears hearing in other worlds. Each and all are using the potent transformational powers, which rhetoric and song bestow.

Such sensual processes are powerfully generative. Nose inhaling is a mighty tool in shamanic arts, marked by the shaman's nostril being the "vaginal passage of the nose" (*tshímu i'sæ'hu*).²¹ The woman's vagina and its passage is *keri i'sæ'hu*. In both instances, the reference to passage is feminized by the suffix "hu," which speaks of the transformational potency of shamanic inhaling of hallucinogens. Hallucinogens are fertilizing, and the shaman is willingly impregnated. Similarly, ordinary people smell cooking aromas, and are, with pleasure, impregnated. The organ of the nose is an important passage for acquiring knowledge.

The chant of Anemei is specifically about the extraordinary transformational possibilities that are linked to the verbal arts of a shaman, the life of his words, his chanting, and his traveling. The source of such beautiful, brilliant powers is the crystal womb box of Anemei. These are also the most dangerous powers that humans can use, the most akin to those of creator gods in their more destructive escapades. The words of the songs may be those of Anemei, but they are also battle songs of a life of predation that also just happen to bestow the might of the culinary arts, as the crazy predator god, Kuemoi, originally created them. The imagery evokes not just the sublime, but also the life of a mighty predator, with a mouth to ingest carnivorously. There is the might, the roar, and the food of the jaguar that the shaman is acquiring.

All these predator powers of jaguar remain beautiful while in Anemei's hands, within his crystal boxes of light, song, and breeze. They are safe because Anemei lives alone. He never had to deal with other beings. He is not a social being. He has no lower body desire. He does not eat. He does not fart, vomit, or expel excrement. He has no desire to use his predator forces. His sensory capacities relate to his upper body. He spends eternity singing his beautiful songs, ever cleaning their force. Despite his personal mightiness, he never participates socially in creative processes of regeneration or degeneration. Because his life is physiologically restricted, he has no greed. Because he lives with no one, no one can poison his tranquility. He never wants to murder, nor does he covet the goods of others. He never lusts for power or sex. He is totally self-sufficient. Anemei is not a human being. Nor does he have the capacities to live a human sort of life, which is social. He has no reason to misuse his

beautiful powers.

The shaman chanter—to the extent that he, as a social human being is able—emulates Anemei. He, like Anemei, thinks his songs through his heart. Each night he cleans, with the light of Anemei, the songs he chants, making them beautiful and safe to use. His flute of the throat contains the beautiful, knowledgeable songs of Anemei, no other than the songs of the predator, made mighty through the force of jaguar's roar, *huruburu*. How do we interpret the function of the bleeding, vaginal tongue of this shaman chanter, which is not a feature of Anemei? Does it, perhaps, relate to Anemei's use of the force of jaguar in his singing? Or, does it signify the bloody devouring mouth of jaguar of the jungle? Neither answer will do. Rather, the menstrual tongue pertains directly to the *human use* of culinary skills. The shaman's menstruation serves as a social, knowledgeable human tool allowing for *civilized use* of the toxic creations of Kuemoi. The same can be said for the menstruation of women. In both cases the individual, male or female, is not only made powerfully fertile, but most importantly acquires the strength to use their increased generative power in knowledgeable and *socially* responsible ways. The careful mastery of generative power is necessary to humanized culinary arts. When the shaman menstruates, he sheds the poison of Kuemoi that he, himself, has not been able to clean from the potent songs of Anemei. Because of this procedure, he does not, in life, devour like the jaguar of the jungle.

The critical question that chanters raise in using the genre of grotesque realism is that of the safety of the forces of Anemei in the hands of living, eating, fornicating human beings! *Huruburu* (jaguar's roar, jaguar's breeze) is the most poignant and ambiguous image possible for the human condition. *Huruburu* ("jaguar's roar") also signifies specific ways in which human beings—and human beings alone—engage with one another, including people speaking, people laughing, people singing, and people eating. This is an existential situation that allows for the bawdy humor of grotesque realism. The image of Anemei is of purity and tranquility, an image of perfection, a state of existence never attainable by living people. Nor would it really be desired. Anemei lives alone. Anemei does not eat, nor make love. For Piaroa, wisdom depends upon understanding the messages of bawdy grotesque realism, with its playfulness, bodiliness, ambiguities, and with its messages of death and regeneration. It is the poisonous culinary arts that are both enabling of a community of social relationships, and also *destructive of that life*, that sociability. This is the misery of cosmic folly. Sociable fertile relationships must really be worked at. They must be knowledgeable.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. For my students, who taught me so much over the years, in particular about the strong and interesting link between sense and sensibility.

1. As Gow observed (1989), it would be a mistake to equate Amazonian culinary arts with the notion of “subsistence” activities.

2. The term *taskscape* is used by Tim Ingold to describe an integrated, whole experience that includes both work and socialness: “... just as the landscape is an array of related features, so—by analogy—the *taskscape* is an array of related activities” (1993:158–162).

3. See Passes (2000) on speaking and laughing as powerful tools of Pa’ikwené culinary arts. See Overing (2000) on the relation of laughter to sociality and work among Piaroa.

4. Belaunde notes (*intra*) that the notion of the embodiment of knowledge through the circulation of blood through the body is probably widespread in Amazonia.

5. Londoño-Sulkin (*intra*) tells of similar ideas among the Muinane. Also see Lagrou (2000), on Cashinahua ideas on embodiment of thoughts.

6. See Londoño-Sulkin (*intra*, 2000), on similar ideas among the Muinane.

7. Guss (1990), writing on Yecuana, relates such multiple connections and synthesising to their weaving.

8. See McCallum (2001) on Cashinahua understanding of gender, and its skills, as embodied knowledge.

9. It is Dell Hymes who created the subdiscipline of ethnopoetics (see Hymes 1981, 2003) in demonstrating the poetics of North American Indian narrators, and it is my desire that my own wanderings into the ethnography of poetics be a tribute to his great work. In disclosing the structures of indigenous poetics, his emphasis has been upon the indigenous knowledge and creation of them. In other words, it was the narrators who taught him, and he who then passed on their knowledge and practice to us. It is in large part because of this recognition of the vital importance of pedagogy that Hymes’ work became so significant to the development of an ethnographic endeavour worthy of present day political (they *do* have poetics and they create their own structures), as well as scholarly standards. In unfolding aspects of Piaroa chant language, my own interest has not been so much with “structures,” but with the learning and transmitting of indigenous knowledges more generally. This too is a pedagogical pursuit. It is not a methodological one. The real question is how can we learn from our teachers—indigenous people—to hear, see, and understand their alternative ontologies, metaphysics, and political and social philosophies. How can we slowly grow into a mental state that allows us to escape sufficiently our own ways of knowing—our own ideas about existence in the world—enabling us finally to begin to understand our indigenous teachers? While pedagogy makes us equals in conversation—they teach us and we then go back home and try to teach as we were taught, the grand narratives of methodology, in which I am not so interested in using, take for

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granted, and create, political and intellectual asymmetry between anthropologists and indigenous people. As a final, but not unimportant point, my own teachers were not only the five great shamans I studied with, but also all the other people, young and old, with whom I lived. This experience of the everyday poetics of ordinary conversations, judgements, jokes, and commentaries was as significant to my learning to hear and see in a Piaroa way as the more formal teaching of shamans.

10. Note the predominance of 3 and 5 line verses, a pattern that Hymes (1981) suggests might be widespread in Amerindian narrations.

11. For further Piaroa explication of the distinction between “the life of the senses” and “the life of thoughts” see Overing (1985a).

12. Taussig, in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993:57–58), has relevant comments on the crossing of the senses in visual and nonvisual imagery.

13. The home of Piaroa people is in the Guiana Highlands, where sweet potatoes grow well. Piaroa women grow many varieties of potato.

14. The Tianawa are present-day, as opposed to creation time gods.

15. It is not only from the bodies of shamans that souls emerge at death as predators. At the death of all men and women, a number of predator souls are released from their bodies (see Overing and Kaplan 1987; Overing 1993).

16. Cf., Guss (1990) on the importance of poison in Yecuana theories of knowledge and generative capacity.

17. Also see Overing (2006).

18. Vomiting emerges from the stomach, an organ of the nether parts in Piaroa logic.

19. Cf. Conklin (2001) on the abdominal “pregnancy” of the Wari killer, who is “impregnated” by the blood of the enemy victim.

20. Margherita Margiotti (personal communication) tells me that Cuna speak of the vaginal juices of the tongue. Also see the rich discussion by Isacson (1993) on the interesting generative organs of the Emberá.

21. See Isacson (1993) on the concept among Embera of the “vaginal nose.”

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