Practically Invisible

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Racism is a collective cumulative experience (Feagin and Sikes 1994 [citation in original]). Any act of aggression against an individual Indian is an attack against all Indians. The individual does not exist as such in the racist aggressor’s imagination. The presence of an Indian evokes the generic Indian who needs to be kept in his or her proper social location. Carlos de la Torre (1999, 105)

Within the hierarchy of ethnicities in Ecuador, as we have seen, indigeneity is often a liability. In the piece from which the epigraph above is taken, Ecuadorian sociologist Carlos de la Torre analyzes what he calls “everyday forms” of racism in Ecuador; for rural individuals, external perceptions by self-described white Ecuadorians of their ethnicity have significant concrete effects in limiting their access to various aspects of social, economic, and political processes in the country. De la Torre refers to the “generic Indian,” the constructed category of indigeneity as a whole and the entire set of related discriminatory dispositions that inform and are generated by the habitus of upper-class Ecuadorians. Clearly, the awareness of such dispositions is central to the attempts of individuals and groups to distance themselves from the negative effects of being identifiable as indigenous.

Many anthropologists have analyzed the effects of displacement, such as through forced migration, on the construction of group identity (see Daniel et al. 1996; Malkki 1992, 1995). What I consider in this chapter is the possibility of being displaced while in one’s original location—being displaced through racialized geography and external constructions of authenticity—and what kinds of agentive cultural production are possible in those circumstances. Can indigenous groups actively challenge external narratives of authenticity through metacultural performance without forfeiting indigeneity as cultural capital? More succinctly, what happens when another kind of “generic Indian” is put on public display?

To address this question, two strands of anthropological analysis seem particularly salient: mimicry/mimesis, and the production of dispositions in fields of practice. In terms of the first, is it possible to destabilize dominant discourses and shift the fields of cultural production through mimicry? Several instances of anthropological analysis of mimicry and mimesis in colonial situations consider whether colonized individuals...
are ever able to access the colonial Self or its defining categories—whiteness, dominance, modernity (Bhabha 1994; Ahern 2007; Taussig 1992; but cf. Ferguson 2006). The status of the Other as “not-quite/not-White” that is imposed by colonizers is generally viewed as limiting mimesis, but rendering mimicry (mockery) more effective.

Agua Blancans, of course, are not only “not-quite, not-White” (Bhabha 1994); they are also not-quite-indigenous, as outlined in the introduction. Anthropologist Mary Weismantel has considered another, far more visible case of an Ecuadorian group constructed and perceived as of ambiguous ethnicity: highland cholas (market women) (Weismantel 2001, passim). In a chapter on how cholas “perform race,” Weismantel insightfully compares the effects of ethnic slippage to those of gender slippage for a more clearly identified public: “like a straight audience at a drag show, viewers equipped with only two racial categories find themselves frustrated in their desire to read a unitary race into what they see . . . if the clothing is itself layered, multiple, subject to more than one reading, the body that inhabits it might turn out to be equally complicated . . . to intentionally occupy a position in between is a brazen disruption of the binary categories themselves” (2001, 112). Considering the performance of both race and gender in the Andes, Weismantel cogently demonstrates how destabilizing the performance of in-between categories can be. What her analysis suggests is that the externally attributed status of not-quite-mestizo/not-quite-indigenous provides performers with even more boundaries to transcend and blur through their performances. Given that Agua Blancans are multiply ambiguous, but also less visible overall than their highland counterparts, I want to consider whether their performances are effective in creating spaces for cultural productions that might ultimately render them visible without fixing that visibility in negative ways.

The second analytical approach I want to employ incorporates both practice theory and a discursive analysis that includes extralinguistic factors. In her discussion of the above example, Weismantel notes that “the market women’s exuberant clothing styles perform race and sex as improvisational collages constantly subject to revision: they thus undermine the notion that the social order that exists, must be” (2001, 126). How does practice challenge discourse and perceptions of social order? To what extent are social actors constrained by the received identities into which they are categorized? Like Weismantel, I want to highlight poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht’s question of whether “a particular kind of performance might actually change the people who witness it” (Weismantel 2001, 116).

I want also, however, to consider whether performance might actually change the performers themselves. Is it possible for Agua Blanca performers both to destabilize received categories of ethnicity for their audiences and to challenge their own embodied histories as expressed through dispositions within the social fields available to them? Answering this question requires a consideration of several interrelated theoretical approaches and concepts: Bourdieusian practice theory, Tanya Luhrmann’s concept of interpretive drift, Sherry Ortner’s “serious game” theory, and the perception of “suitability” or “appropriateness” outlined in various studies, from Bourdieu
to Mimi Sheller. I will try to outline some of these approaches here as prologue to the analysis of the particular performance that is the subject of this chapter.

In his introduction to Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*, editor John Thompson presents a succinct overview of several of Bourdieu's concepts, including habitus, fields, dispositions, and capital:

The body is the site of incorporated history. The practical schemes through which the body is organized are the product of history and, at the same time, the source of practices and perceptions which reproduce that history. . . . But when individuals act, they always do so in specific social contexts or settings. Hence particular practices or perceptions should be seen, not as the product of the habitus as such but as the product of the relation between the habitus, on the one hand, and the specific social contexts or ‘fields’ within which individuals act, on the other. . . . One of the most important properties of fields is the way in which they allow one form of capital to be converted into another. (Thompson in Bourdieu 1991, 13–14)

Practice is our activity in the external world, activity that is often extralinguistic, taken for granted, based on cues we learned from watching others practice long before we could become aware of the implications of such practice in social terms. What Thompson highlights in the above quote is that, over time and through practice, we come to embody and put into practice particular identities that are associated with specific social contexts or fields of practice—identities that thereby come to appear suitable or appropriate within those fields.

Considering the convoluted relationships between consumer and consumed, subject and object, within the intertwined processes of colonization, commodification, and imagining of the Caribbean, anthropologist Mimi Sheller points to specific products whose consumption was undertaken by Westerners not only for its own sake, but also for its capacity to redefine the consumer in particular ways: “coffee was . . . generally recognised to stimulate the mind and arouse mental activity (Schivelbusch 1992, 110), thus contributing towards a certain kind of embodied ‘habitus’ suitable to a bourgeois disposition (Bourdieu 1984)” (2006, 85). Again, the production and reproduction of social realities occurs through practice. Practice is always situated—in landscapes, in bodies, in class hierarchies—much as the habitus it produces are always similarly situated. In the above quote Sheller points to the process of acquiring a “suitable” disposition through particular practices (including consumption) which enable that disposition gradually to become embodied, part and parcel of the individual practicing within a field to which he or she is “suited.” In other words, our perceptions of who belongs where in the social landscape have a great deal to do with how they practice—whether they act in suitable or appropriate ways. Suitability, here, might be defined as that which appropriately reflects discourse (expectations) through practice.
Furthermore, perceptions of suitability that are linked to the situated nature of practice guide perceptions of others, but also of the self and of place to begin with. We categorize ourselves and others through practice, through observing how specific bodies engage with specific settings. Because belonging and visibility are located in bodies, Foucault’s concepts of biopower (1976) suggest that these constructions of identity through situated practice are also technologies of control that reinforce the concept of racialized geography.

Dominant groups in the Andes construct their own identities through practice, through consuming particular goods (including people-as-commodities, consumed via labor, marriage, and other processes) in particular ways calculated to produce the embodied habitus suitable to an upper class, white disposition. As we have seen in Chapter 1, those dominant groups also construct discourses about other groups and about the landscape such that particular subordinate groups only become effectively visible in the places they are imagined to occupy. In “white” spaces the majority (mestizos) are invisible in the productive (positive) sense, but other groups not imagined to be present are invisible in the restrictive (negative) sense. As Foucault suggested, these intertwined processes of social production also produce, or attempt to produce, docile bodies at all social levels—bodies that will act in ways that reproduce social hierarchies without reflection. By living in particular ways, by following a particular set of rules, we construct both the fields we play upon and ourselves as players, as well as the perception of what are suitable practices or habitus within those fields.

Practice is also context-dependent or relational (see Sampson et al. 2005, 23–25), which means that it is not entirely an unconscious choice. This suggests that the choice of practice and the subsequent construction of fields of interaction may be guided by discourse, but might also be changed, particularly with the introduction of new interlocutors, or what I would like to call interpracticors—those whose practice intersects with our own, both informing it and being informed by it. This realization means that the concept of interpretive drift is also relevant.

Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann developed the model of interpretive drift, which she describes as “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s matter of interpreting events as they become more involved with a particular activity” (1989, 312). Luhrmann conducted a study of modern-day witchcraft among upper- and middle-class individuals in England—lawyers, accountants, medical doctors, and others trained in Western logic and scientific paradigms—in order to address the question of how people participate in and internalize activities that apparently contradict the logical models of the world they have already learned. One of her more important conclusions is that changing the ways we view the world is a slow process, one that is not necessarily planned, and one in which changes in belief often follow (rather than precede) changes in action or practice. She shows not only that individuals can and do engage with conflicting logical systems, but also that people tend to feel more connected to the models that they put into practice in a supportive community.
In constructing Andean racialized geographies in the first place—in constructing spaces of situated practice that both produce and reflect socially relevant differences—colonizers’ discourse on difference and suitability had originally to be reinforced, in a Gramscian sense, by coercion in the form of forced limitations on practice and on geography itself. Over time, ongoing practice of inequality led to a sort of interpretive drift in which individuals and groups (who may have initially protested markers of inequality) began to reproduce attitudes or dispositions, resulting in “naturalized” practice. In other words, over time and through interpretive drift, individuals seem to internalize the production of their own inequality through practice, even while they may still recognize the unfairness of the situation (see, for example, Goldstein 2003, 89; Ahern 2007, 6; Canessa 2012, 28).

As we have seen in the preceding two chapters, in many senses the Ecuadorian nation itself is constituted through the process of producing racialized geographies—geographies which are in turn comprised of perceptions of suitable fields, subjects, and modes of production. In other words, the perception of those geographies and their salience depend in great part on the kinds of labor imagined to take place within them, which in turn requires the perceptual production of laboring bodies. For example, as anthropologist Suzana Sawyer, historians Kris Lane and Allen Gerlach, and journalist Joe Kane have shown, some places within Ecuador’s borders have been constructed as frontiers, as devoid of people, which enables Ecuadorians and foreigners alike to perceive the extraction of resources as appropriate within that setting (Sawyer 2004; Lane 2003; Gerlach 2003; Kane 1996). Other spaces have been constructed within the national imaginary as spaces of urban whiteness or rural agricultural production, of Afro-Ecuadorian beaches or colorful indigenous markets, again as noted in the previous two chapters.

As I have presented above, the central coast of Ecuador is a social space long invisible in the general Ecuadorian imaginary, one more recently constructed as home to faceless mestizo laborers. If we consider the central coast as a set of social fields, we can begin to consider how the particular bodies of Agua Blancans and their peers might appropriately reflect these received histories or imaginaries. In doing so we might realize how, once Agua Blancans recognize precisely which practices construct that appropriateness, such a realization might make it possible for them to perform challenges to those understood histories. Where might performing bodies breach expected silences? Are those bodies still repositories of incorporated history even within those moments of performance and challenge?

Thinking about this differently, how are those bodies produced in the first place? That is, what kinds of practice must at one point have been enforced to produce suitable dispositions within the fields of rural coastal Ecuador? What I am asking, in the end, is how embodiment of externally determined ideals can be produced through the intervention of external actors: how do non-rural Ecuadorians help produce the embodied culture of rural Ecuadorians? How does their shared history inform each group’s bodily hexis? How have embodied understandings...
of and practices generated through that shared history limited rural Ecuadorians’ access to a variety of fields?

Although habitus may at times be an unintended result of certain practices (as in the case of socialization of infants), these questions reflect some of the ways that at other times the production of a particular desired habitus—a “suitable” embodied identity—may necessitate particular practices. Thus regulating behavior in accordance with embodied understandings of salient social categories (gender, ethnicity) can produce difference, rather than merely reflecting it. In essence this suggests that it is possible for human practice and discourse to create fields that in turn create specific kinds of players. This is very different from what “culture of poverty” studies usually imply—that the fields themselves create conditions that limit possible decisions. What I am suggesting is that agentive subjects—in this case, colonial Ecuadorian elites—may attempt to create those limitations through imposing perceptions of what is suitable in particular contexts. However, what this ethnography demonstrates, in part, is that the imposition of suitable habitus is never fully achieved. What is created effectively, however, is the stark reality of hierarchies and inequalities, as well as the gatekeepers that attend them.

The same questions also raise potentially productive possibilities, however. If fields are produced through practice, if dispositions are performed rather than merely held, if they are public and visible, how might the introduction of new players—and hence new fields—lead to the introduction of a new game, a new arena within which to develop new aspects of habitus, ones that might enable access to new or expanded forms of capital from which those rural Ecuadorians had previously been excluded—or forms which simply did not previously exist?

Furthermore, what is the role of interpretive drift, whether in producing received roles or in challenging them? Again, Luhrmann’s main point is that practice—especially actions performed collectively—can lead to changes in belief and worldview, even when people are originally skeptical of the belief system within which they start practicing. They may adopt new practices as a way of fitting into a community, but end up shifting their beliefs, internalizing the new way of looking at the world. What if, in performing, Agua Blancans can create interpracticors for whom their performance sets in motion interpretive drift? What if, through performing, they trigger their own interpretive drift? This is the sort of practice Sherry Ortner refers to as “serious games,” referring both to the ways humans play within cultural frameworks to achieve projects or goals and to how those projects themselves thereby gain agency (Ortner 2006, 129–30).

If the situated practice of racially, socially, economically, and politically different groups in the Andes is what produces those groups in the first place—if practice produces the racialized geography that enables categorizations of people, and if the category of Self is produced only indirectly through producing an Other who is spatially located and recognizable through his performance of suitable practice—then what happens if that Self is bypassed? What happens to an elite Ecuadorian Self that exists
in (geographical, practical, discursive) opposition to a rural indigenous Other—a Self produced through those practices and discourses—if the Other chooses to engage with other interlocutors or interpracticors? For regardless of the inequalities they reinforce, globalizing processes also include the introduction of new potential interlocutors with different agendas and dispositions, playing on different fields with different rules.

The rest of this chapter focuses on identity politics in coastal Ecuador, followed by an analysis of a particular performance of indigeneity by Agua Blancans. Consciously developed at a specific historic moment to meet clearly identified needs, the Festival de la Balsa Manteña (Manteño Balsa-Raft Festival) has shifted in both content and focus over time. Through the festival, I argue that Agua Blancans have accomplished several goals: creating new interlocutors, or as I will outline later in the chapter, interpracticors; identifying publicly the externally defined categories of identity which constrain them; destabilizing those received categories; and thereby destabilizing the accepted racialized geographies that sustain those categories. I find that they are effectively engaging different interlocutors, including international NGOs and members of the national (and sometimes international) press, as well as tourists. Furthermore, even though in most cases those interlocutors fail to comprehend the stakes of the serious game being played (Ortner 2006), the performances are effective precisely because Agua Blancans are supposed to be invisible, are not supposed to exist as indigenous people at all, but rather only as poor, rural, unintelligent laborers. Thus the fact that they are being engaged with as indigenous groups necessarily changes the fields of production.

**Agua Blancan History within Coastal Identity Politics**

With the exception of one family that migrated to the area from southern highland Colombia in the early 1900s, Agua Blancans appear to descend from the Manteño groups present during the Inca and European conquests of the Andean region, as well as from the groups who produced earlier material cultures. Within Agua Blanca’s territory, which has been continually occupied for over 4500 years, lie remains of the Valdivia (II–VII), Machalilla, Chorrera, a variation of Guangala, and Manteño material cultures and peoples associated with them.

Over the past century, however, its organization has changed dramatically. At the turn of the last century most families in the area worked as peons for local hacendados, growing cacao and coffee in the higher rainforest regions and corn in the lower areas, and collecting *tagua* (vegetable ivory) from palm trees in the rainforest. Economic and political crises of the 1930s destabilized state control and provoked the flight of many foreign hacendados, resulting in the 1937 *Ley de Organización y Régimen de las Comunas* (Law of Communes). Previous hacienda lands were legally returned to community ownership, but the resultant landholdings were clearly designated as comunidades campesinas (peasant communities) rather than indigenous ones. In the case of Agua Blanca, the change from hacienda peons to comuneros was
for decades a nominal one. Lands appropriated from hacendados passed from one Ecuadorian entrepreneur to another (and even back to German owners for a period). While most of these provided jobs for locals, who felled hardwood trees and collected tagua for export, locals were nonetheless not in charge of the lands, although they did for the first time receive minimal pay for their services. Due both to the intensity of anti-indigenous sentiment in Ecuador and to the tenuous nature of their land tenure, Agua Blancans, like others in similar situations, chose not to challenge the designation of campesino (peasant). Nonetheless, being documented as campesinos, a category which does not preclude indigenous origins but which on the coast is generally presumed to denote mestizos without personal landholdings or other status markers, has only exacerbated the problem of coastal indigenous invisibility—or perceptions of inauthenticity when the question of recognition has arisen.

In 1964 just after the first Agrarian Reform was enacted, the comuna of Agua Blanca was finally able to gain legal recognition and elect its first cabildo (village council). From the 1970s on, however, there were several important shifts in Agua Blancans’ everyday reality. First, a lengthy and severe drought (fig. 3.1) gradually forced more and more people to the cities to look for work; in this period entire families relocated to Guayaquil and other distant cities. Agua Blanca had lost nearly sixty percent of its population by the early 1980s. Second, Scottish archaeologist Colin

![Figure 3.1](image-url)
McEwan arrived in 1978, providing for the next decade one of the few local sources of income through survey work and excavations. And third, the Ecuadorian government declared the area an important zone of cultural and natural patrimony, creating the Machalilla National Park in 1979. One of a series of parks envisioned by government officials interested in enhancing tourism in the country, and Ecuador’s only proposed coastal national park, Machalilla was to offer both maritime and inland attractions—pristine beaches, rocky coastlines, islets with fauna similar to that of the Galapagos Islands, prominent breeding and calving zones for humpback whales, tropical dry forest, tropical rainforest, sulfurous lagoons, and spectacular birding opportunities—and would give the state both incentive and resources to develop basic infrastructure in this previously isolated region.

Since the onset of a strong governmental focus on the tourism industry beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, government ministries and national media have emphasized villages, towns, and park areas with what they consider a high potential for ecotourism and cultural tourism. Official representations of the country by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of the Environment, both created in the 1990s to oversee Ecuador’s growing number of national parks and its tourism industry more generally, have changed frequently over the past two decades, highlighting different tourism venues and events. Agua Blanca’s museum and tours would seem ideal for this sort of promotion. Nonetheless, at no time has either ministry’s website mentioned Agua Blanca as an example of a cultural tourism site (something heavily promoted for tourists to Amazonian villages); in fact, neither ministry recognizes any indigenous presence in Manabí province whatsoever.

Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 2, official narratives about the Manteño-Huancavilca groups describe them as one of the most advanced civilizations in Ecuador, but as having disappeared in 1532. The Banco Central de Ecuador—the institution that over the past century has invested the most resources in researching, collecting, and displaying Ecuador’s pre-Hispanic remains—describes the group as follows on their website:

Manteño-Huancavilca (ca. 500–1532 AD). This group was made of independent kingdoms (*señoríos*), with the kingdom of Salangome being the most influential of the Manabí coast. Its capital was the monumental site of Agua Blanca, which was probably both a ceremonial and administrative center. . . . The Manteño-Huancavilcas were great navigators, traveling the seas to Central America and Peru. Their principal exports were spondylus shell, cotton cloth, objects of gold, silver, and copper, and obsidian mirrors. ([www.exploringecuador.com/espanol/museum_bce/mante.htm](http://www.exploringecuador.com/espanol/museum_bce/mante.htm); accessed March 15, 2006)

After the Machalilla National Park was created in 1979, the government moved quickly to attempt to clear the area of its inhabitants. Agua Blanca, located amidst the archaeological sites that were the Park’s cultural patrimony, was the focus of much of the pressure. Eventually comuneros asked for outside researchers’ help in defending
their position and their land. In addition to presenting themselves as *el corazón del Parque* (the heart of the Park), a position that required opening their community to cultural tourism, locals began to train themselves as tour guides.

Archaeologist Colin McEwan and his team took this initiative a step further, raising funds to build a site museum that opened in 1985. From the beginning, the site museum allowed Agua Blancans a social space within which to allude to an indigenous identity. Within the museum’s representations, the community of the present could be seen to be linked to the archaeological past, an image that could support the community in any future disputes over land claims, but one whose limited scope—reaching only the audience of archaeological or heritage tourists passing through the community—would not constrain Agua Blancans’ self-identification processes in other ways, a point to which I will return later in the chapter.

As external pressures from investors increased, Agua Blancans began to realize that the fluidity generated through limiting the audiences for the message publicized through their museum and tours did not offset the negative effects of a more generalized invisibility. Despite increases in government promotion of cultural tourism in conjunction with the creation of the new ministry, Agua Blanca was never mentioned in Ministry of Tourism literature (and is still not mentioned on Ministry websites). Tourists arriving to the community expected remote archaeological remains, not structures located within a vibrant community, and several still voice surprise at discovering indigenous people in Agua Blanca. Thus Agua Blancans began to discuss new possibilities for increasing their visibility in the national sphere as a conscious effort to protect their communal territory.

Even in the current political climate in Ecuador, the most recent iteration of the official position of the Ministry of the Environment on Agua Blanca is as follows:

The human settlements within the Park and its buffer zone (*zona de amortiguamiento*) present particular ethnic characteristics defined principally by a traditional peasant way of life. . . .

The *comunas* do not see themselves as invaders or illegal occupants [of Park lands] since they claim ancestral rights, which derive from a “redistribution” of the territory among said communities. This right comes from considering themselves natives of the area and from having fought the haciendas to take over the land. . . .

A high percentage of the population of the Machalilla National Park can consider itself native, if “native” can be understood to mean born in the same place where one lives. Nonetheless, many of the precincts and localities are composed of a population that has arrived from other places in earlier generations. With this we corroborate the fact that the communities of the zone cannot consider themselves to be ancestral settlements or direct descendants of the Valdivia, Machalilla or Chorrera cultures; that is, even if we could speak of some cultural manifestations specific to southern Manabí or even of some particular physical characteristics [reflective of indigenous ancestry],
these arguments are not sufficient to [lead us to] believe that they are direct inheritants of the ancient denizens of the area. (Ministerio del Ambiente 2007, 30–31; my translation)¹

Clearly, the Ministry of the Environment does not wish to consider the question of indigenous status for residents within Park borders; just as clearly, this stance renders the communal landholding tenuous at best. Given the potential repercussions of such identity politics, Agua Blancans have found it necessary at the very least to engage with broader discourses about authenticity and indigeneity. In other words, in order to be perceived as legitimate denizens of otherwise public lands, Agua Blancans—who do embody their indigenous past through practice in various unnoticed ways—have felt it necessary to perform more recognizable forms of embodied indigenous identity.² Doing so for the very actors who have historically refused to recognize them, however, would accomplish nothing. Over the past two decades, Agua Blancans have learned to select quite consciously the venues and audiences for particular public performances of indigeneity.

**Vessels of Legitimacy**

In July 2002 community president Paúl invited me to help brainstorm possible funding sources for an upcoming festival. October 12 is the Ecuadorian national holiday known as Día de la Raza—what we call Columbus Day—but had been renamed locally. The Festival de la Balsa Manteña was hugely important in Agua Blanca, but its costs were beyond the community’s means. I had to laugh when Paúl explained the greatest expense—transporting an enormous balsa raft from the inland community to the coast. During our conversation I had a number of questions for Paúl. Why had they chosen Columbus Day to hold a festival about local indigenous identity? Why were more aspects of the community’s culture and history not highlighted in the festival? And most importantly, why focus the entire celebration on a balsa raft constructed miles from the nearest navigable waters? As it turns out, I was in great part missing the point, assuming the festival was first and foremost about internal pride and history. What I have learned in the past few years is that nearly everything related to the balsa-raft festival is a strategic choice by the local community. The primary audience the festival is performed for is not community members, but outsiders.

Changes in Ecuador’s state government always result in shifts in nearly every bureaucratic office in the country, including the Machalilla National Park. The 1992 elections brought in new Park officials who proved amenable to outside investors’ offers of support in exchange for the opportunity to negotiate directly with communities within Park boundaries. Indigenous communities began to be approached by representatives of international and local NGOs wanting anything from the chance to buy local crafts for resale, to permission to run excavations on indigenous land, to “rental” of land within Park boundaries for tourism-related services like hotels, restaurants, and, in one case, even an airstrip.
In the same year, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Tourism was created; national parks would henceforth be under its jurisdiction as well as that of the Ministry of the Environment. Tellingly, however, the legal background page on the Ministry’s website claims that “the new Ecuadorian Tourist Law is designed to develop one of the most prosperous industries in the world and protect the tourist as the consumer” (www.vivecuador.com/htm12/eng/ministry.htm; accessed March 10, 2006). Clearly, in the reorganization of the Ecuadorian state the needs of outside investors and tourists were primary, while those of local communities could be ignored.

Of course, 1992 also heralded the Columbian quincentennial and saw the rise of indigenous coalitions in the Sierra and Oriente. Despite state-sponsored attempts to erase indigenous groups from the national picture, indigenous groups were increasingly successful in making their interests heard. Taking advantage of the increased visibility of and sympathy for indigenous groups raised by the quincentennial celebrations, in 1992 Agua Blanca’s cabildo decided to invent a tradition: the Festival de la Balsa Manteña. As their inspiration they took chronicler Bartolomé Ruiz’s description of the trading rafts of central Ecuador (Szászdi 1978), as well as later archaeologists’ focus on the rafts as part of a local seafaring, trade-oriented kingdom centered at Agua Blanca (see, for example, Marcos 2005).

Over the next several weeks, Agua Blancans studied the chronicle drawings, as well as a replica in a Guayaquil museum, and began to design a raft and collect materials to build it. The fifteen or twenty people who agreed to participate also made costumes of various materials—cloth, leaves, dried banana leaves, and animal skins—but followed no particular model; each participant’s costume was different. The cabildo arranged for the loan of a boat trailer to haul the raft from the community, nine kilometers inland, to the Park headquarters at Puerto López, fourteen kilometers away by road. They also set the date of the event for October 12, a day CONAIE had called for groups to participate in various activities to highlight the five centuries of indigenous oppression.

The first iteration of the festival was a resounding failure. The paltry group marched through the streets of López to launch a vessel that proved not to be seaworthy. Some remember being jeered at, while others were spat upon; the few spectators present laughed at their costumes and made fun of the raft itself as it broke apart in the water. Performing a very specific indigeneity in a public space perceived as mestizo and within a nation with strong anti-indigenous sentiment was clearly backfiring. Given ongoing pressures to forsake ties to their lands, however, community members recognized the need to find some venue for generating visibility.

In an essay on taboo, anthropologist Mary Douglas noted (following Lord Chesterfield) that dirt is merely matter out of place, something polluting the boundaries we have painstakingly set up to give order to our society (2002 [1970]). Within Ecuador, as analyzed in Chapter 1, some of the most salient boundaries are those of race/class. Reinforcing those boundaries, racialized geography cuts through the Ecuadorian landscape, governing both visibilities and practice in many ways. The question that this performance clearly raised was how Agua Blancans might challenge racialized geography through practice without being perceived as pollutants.
In recent years the community has gained the full support of Park and municipal authorities; nearly every community member participates, and the audience includes not only the majority of Puerto López’s inhabitants and both national and international tourists, but also news media officials and visitors from towns as far away as Portoviejo, Manta, and La Libertad. Many more events have been added: regional universities and folkloric groups send dance troupes, officials make public speeches, and community members participate in public theater including ceremonial invocations and representations of local history. What led to the change in reception?

In the intervening years, Agua Blancans had made several visible changes in the way the festival was performed. While the balsa raft vessels, conveying their message of continuity with the local indigenous past, remained the primary focus of the celebration, other aspects of the festival became increasingly important. In particular the festival now presents a series of what I will argue are pan-indigenous elements. Among these are the incorporation of overt symbols of indigeneity into costumes, resulting in the display of what Beth Conklin has called “exotic native bodies” (1997, 716); the inclusion of representatives of recognized indigenous communities in some of the performances; the public performance of prayers and speeches directed to pan-American deities and to indigenous groups from North, Central, and South America; the central role of clay burial vessels; and the introduction within the public theater of a narrated, shaman-led Inca *capac hucha* (sacrifice) ceremony. Since the addition of these changes, most of the town participates.

The first and the most immediately obvious change is the inclusion of highly exoticized native bodies. One of the first decisions made by the cabildo after their early experience of rejection was to ensure that all the participants now dress similarly, clearly marking themselves in ways the public will immediately perceive as indigenous—through dress, body paint, headdresses, and beads (fig. 3.2). For the 1993 celebration community members carefully planned their costumes, taking inspiration from a number of different sources, including books from the Agua Blanca museum’s collection on Mexican and Native North American ceremonies and indigenous Ecuadorian art; photo essays from national newspapers and magazines on Amazonian lowland groups; and ideas from a traveling caravan of Mexicans, Argentines, Chileans, Paraguayans, and Peruvians promoting community theater throughout the Americas.

The costumes themselves generally include four elements, as mentioned above. The dress itself can vary somewhat from person to person, but each participant wears a skirt sewn from banana leaves. The choice of materials is interesting in that banana trees are an introduced crop rather than an autochthonous one; still, plantain and banana trees are abundant in the valley and present the easiest source of material for costuming. Women and girls also bind their breasts with brown cloth in a similar tone. Once garbed, Agua Blancans gather each year at the museum to add face and body paint to their costume. The colors are bright and the patterns generally quite simple, in striking contrast with the often intricate yet monotone homemade tattoos of pre-Columbian figures sported by some Agua Blancaen men. Women and girls add paint to their faces, arms, and bellies, while men also paint their chests if the
latter are otherwise uncovered. Some also add designs to their legs. While the collective decoration is taking place, it is possible, at close range, to distinguish particular designs (a sun or moon, a snake). From the audience’s perspective during the event, however, the effect of the paint is simply to draw attention to the expanses of naked skin. Headdresses made of found feathers and more banana leaves are added at the last minute, as are beads.

While most people don necklaces borrowed from local artisans who make them for sale to tourists, others’ choices of adornment highlight just how effective Agua Blancans are at appropriating suitable dispositions and thereby embodying cultural heritage. The individual pictured here, Plinio, acts as shaman throughout the various iterations of the festival; his garb appears to include a beaded chest plate, something familiar to students of coastal Andean archaeology (fig. 3.3). However, a closer look reveals that the garment is in fact a beaded seat cover of the type used by professional vehicle drivers. In all the years I have seen or heard about the festival, no one seems to have noticed; the man has been described to me as “very authentic.” Furthermore, while his original choice of dress had a mocking character, Plinio himself reports feeling a sense of confraternity with his forebears when enacting the rituals within this and various other performances.

The second change concerns participation in the event. While community members hold all the speaking roles in the main performance, representatives of recognized
highland indigenous groups are also present, having been invited to participate, to help lead drumming and dancing, and to stand with Agua Blancans. Several iterations of the festival have included spontaneous moments of collaboration, such as a drum circle led by a member of a visiting community (fig. 3.4). The inclusion of these visiting groups is the first step toward a broad destabilization of identity that is achieved through the remaining changes.

The third change, the inclusion of public speeches and prayers invoking panindigenous deities and naming groups from throughout the Americas, sets the stage for all the rest. For this reason, I am here including a translation of the 2005 performance in its entirety as reference for the analysis to follow:

Doce de Octubre del 2005 (12 October 2005)

My dear brothers and sisters, it is wonderful to find ourselves together on this beautiful day, one more day, in order to remember joyfully what occurred in 1492, as is written in our history, and to begin, this twelfth of October is simply a way to remember one of the most extraordinary encounters in the history of our planet, considering that two distinct worlds,
two worlds with no knowledge of one another, came together in what was a renaissance on the one hand, the Europeans were well advanced in this renaissance, with thousands of years’ experience conquering one another, for power or for glory, and [who now came to] conquer our indigenous brothers—a well-mannered people, a calm people, a mysterious people to them [the Europeans], a people who lived in a state of purity at the time of the encounter. It was simply a massacre,—an imposition of values, the extermination of entire villages and cities with a rich culture carried on since the times of our ancestors for more than 5000 years. Changes came, changes we are still feeling today, changes left to us by the Spaniards, and today we see them as examples of laziness, of corruption, in their abandonment of those [conquered] peoples damned since those days, but behold this message, in this glorious day for us, let us rise like the phoenix, rise all together, brothers, with one fist raised like those brave indigenous brothers, and reclaim what by right and by justice is ours.

Some days ago a national paper published a story that a [Spanish] galleon ship full of more than 80 tons of gold was found off a Chilean island. That gold is not the Chileans,’ it is ours, gold of the indigenous people of Peru and Ecuador. What is it worth on the international market? More than a billion dollars. With just a little more we could pay off the national debt that our government leaders foist upon us even as they abandon us. Brothers, friends, more than a moment that happened 513 years ago, this is a reencounter, a

Figure 3.4. Drum circle at the 2001 Festival de la Balsa Manteña, including visiting members of highland indigenous communities. (Photo by Douglas Ventura A.)
harmonious encounter, a [chance to] understand that we are here, dressed like this, not because we are ignorant, we are here dressed as our brothers who lived so many years ago, defending, salvaging our own identity, which is this one, and we should feel content and proud and not feel ashamed of ourselves, never, not in any place. Long live the kingdom of Salangome, damn it, long live Tusco, long live Salango, long live Salangome until eternal victory, dear brothers.

PRESIDENT OF AGUA BLANCA (PRESIDENT). This is something that has continued in our villages. Agua Blanca stands here with the Kingdom of Salangome. At this time we are going to present a dance, and so a priest of the Manteño people is going to enter to hand over the heat of the fire which is a sign of the unity of the people. The priest enters now with the fire, light of the aboriginal groups who developed [here], uniting the society through the Inca and the Kingdom of Salangome. The fire has been placed here, and around it we are going to hold a ceremony to which we are inviting each of you and all the peoples important to the Manteño people, our black brothers and those from the Ecuadorian highlands. This dance is offered in tribute to the harvest, to the labor of the women, the men, and the children, to the slavery we endured back then, that we now perceive as freedom but that we continue to endure.

SHAMAN/CACIQUE. From this important center, this town of Sercapez, a very important town in the time of the Kingdom of Salangome, this ceremonial center, I want to send greetings to Father Sun, to the seven directions, I want my companions [here] to accompany me . . .

[Directs others with his hand toward the east, where the sun rises.]

To the villages of the rising sun, to the spring, to infancy, to the villages of the Oriente, to the children of the yellow corn, to all the cultures near and far, may our blessings reach your hearts.

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

Ajó metakiashe

In the same way, let us give greetings to the south, greetings to the lords of the underworld, to the winter, to the guardians of death . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

Ajó metakiashe

Let us keep turning, [points west] to the peoples of the setting sun, to the autumn, to the ripe crops at harvest, to the children of the red corn, the peoples of Tawantinsuyu, the Isla de las Tortugas, the Isla de la Plata, Aztlán, the Mayans, the red peoples of America . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

Ajó
Greetings to the fourth direction, to the peoples of the north, to the cold regions, to the lands of snow, the children of the white corn, greetings to the summer, to the youth with their enthusiasm and their innocence . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

Now we are going to bend down toward Mother Earth, greetings to the fifth direction, to the heart of the Pachamama, mother of us all, she who warms us and nurtures us, where we come from and where we will return one day, I ask [blessings] for her mountains, her rivers, her oceans, her animals, her sons and daughters, everyone, without divisions of color or worldview, may our blessings reach their crystal hearts, may they hear us, may they keep beating . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

Thank you, Mother Earth . . .

Now we will face the sixth direction, greetings to the sixth direction, to the heart of the heavens, greetings to Father Sun, to Grandmother Moon, to the beings from other worlds, other stars, other suns, greetings to those who have already left us but who left for us their heritage, their understandings, those who gave us knowledge and love, our grandparents, our teachers, our heroes, may our blessings reach the heart of the sky so that the light of the universe may keep warming us . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

And now I want you to place your hand on your chest, for that is where our life resides, greetings to the seventh direction, the point where all the winds cross in our hearts, and from my heart greetings to each one of you, I ask blessings for your health, for your families, your friends, your peoples, your nations, may there be peace in your hearts, may there be peace in these lands, between neighbors, between women and men, between parents and children, may peace nest in each of our hearts and may peace spill over onto everyone else, let it be thus . . .

[Blows strombus shell three times.]

PRESIDENT. This kind of presentation represents the cleansing ceremonies our ancestors performed, in some way we are trying to recreate that sort of healing, with very important, millenarian, tools such as palosanto and tobacco, things that were fundamental in the development of these peoples, and that represented the art of exchange among the cultures who resided in these places.

MC. Long live Salango! Long live Agua Blanca! My dear brothers and sisters, on this beautiful afternoon it is a pleasure to exalt themes of real importance to our history and our culture and our ancestry, for October 12 is not just any day, not just some famous person’s birthday, it is the day on which history was marked, a boundary stone in the history of the universe. The 12th of
October 1492, was the encounter, was the clash of two different worlds, of two cultures completely in opposition to one another. It was the encounter of the Europeans, the [onset of the] rule of those armed, bearded men pushing for the glory of conquest without considering, without remorse for anything they were doing, on the other hand our indigenous brothers were peaceful people, people who lived in community, in brotherhood, in solidarity, who lived under a top-notch organizational scheme, as history tells us. From that first impression when they saw our brothers they were astonished . . . to discover that we Indians, as they called us, lived almost in a pure state of nature, where there was no yours or mine, those magical, beautiful [ideas] that the Europeans lacked, but what happened was that all that rich culture our brothers had, passed down for thousands of years, practically disappeared over the next few centuries. The Europeans didn’t care if they destroyed it, if it disappeared, and that legacy has remained until today . . . things like laziness, corruption, lies, trickery, demagoguery, those are what they left us from what they called colonization, the conquest, or what we call the destruction from which we are still suffering. 513 years of that history, but we are not here to lament the past, to cry, to ask why all that had to happen—those are boundaries marking our history. We are here to get up again, brothers, here to show them that we do know our heritage, that we are here every day, struggling, fighting, and we are here to salvage what is ours, to rescue our heritage, our customs, and to feel proud and content to be sons of this people, to be the legacy of a kingdom called Salangome, an exemplary people of the coast of Ecuador and America. That is why the twelfth of October should be celebrated, but as an integration, a celebration where what happened in the past no longer matters, no yours-or-mine, just all of us together working together to bring our people up to where we need to be. There are chronicles which tell us the Spanish captain Bartolomé Ruiz was so surprised when he was on a trip to our continent and he ran across some semi-naked men traveling on a balsa raft, just like the one we have here in front of us. They were navigating [on the raft and] he was surprised because he supposedly came from an advanced world with first-class technology, as we might say, and still our brothers on just a balsa raft were able to dominate the oceans of the American continent, those were the ones we call the sailors of the southern seas, and precisely now, remembering one more day in our history, we also recall the bravura of our brothers on the sea, the great navigators of the past who even now exist in these towns and who will forever be part of us. Brothers, long live the twelfth of October! Long live Salangome, until victory, brothers!

PRESIDENT. This is part of our history; so began the first concentrations or congregations of societies, the hunters and gatherers, the fishing villages, the artisans, all these cultures existed in great settlements where they developed
knowledge about the solstices and from place to place they followed the cycles of nature. That is how the great caciques, the lords, the governors, the warriors, the merchants, the navigators, the artists, the artisans, the peasants who work the earth, the astronomers, the priests and priestesses, each of them fulfilled a mission until the last day of their existence in the kingdom of Tuzco. [The cacique of Tuzco comes out.3]

Agriculture and hunting were insignificant in the development of these settlements; they developed their arts of pottery, jewelry making, architecture, and thus were able to shelter 500 to 600 people at that time.

COMMUNITY MEMBER 1. [Gives a spondylus shell to the SHAMAN/CACIQUE]. I am the fisherman, your vassal; day after day I pull the huayaipe, the bonito, the swordfish from the ocean; that is to say, I feed my brothers, my family, and there is no lack of fish, but I ask, what will become of my science when these beings arrive to our lands?

PRINCESS OF SERCAPEZ.4 Oblivion, ignorance, danger, acculturation, all those things, we all survived them, we will survive and we will be reborn upon remembering them.

COMMUNITY MEMBER 2. I am the farmer who guards the seeds of our mother earth and of our father, the water of the streams, the golden cornfields, and the other plants. I care for life to feed more life. I ask you, what will become of my science when these beings arrive?

COMMUNITY MEMBER 3. I am the hunter and woodsman, I care for our forest and maintain it, I keep it the same for our children and our families. Being the hunter, I open possibilities for the people, I maintain the forest because that way it stays for our families. We give much of what we have to others. What will become of our men and our families when these beings arrive to this place?

COMMUNITY MEMBER 4. I am the artisan and I carry here the sacred conch shell and the jaguar [hide]. I ask you, what will become of us when these beings arrive?

PRIESTESS OF TUZCO. Do not fear these men who vomit the fire of death, they attack and hide, hide and attack. Although they may lie to us each time we will fight, like the chameleon who takes on the colors of the hills. I hear also the cries of the gods, I hear the thunder of their selfsame cannons, the gallop of their very horses, but now we shall fire, now we shall ride across the plains, trying to raise a banner in flight, inviting our people, new but changed, to
renew ourselves, to reconstruct ourselves, to reunite and look for ourselves in the mountain, in the valley, in the beaches, and thus we will have a name, a land, and a face. Now we know we are not alone in the world. Now begins another history, in the world, with the world, and against the world.

COMMUNITY MEMBER 5. I am the navigator, the merchant, key to our society. I market our spondylus shells, sign of our brotherhood. I ask myself, what will become of me and of my science when these beings arrive?

COMMUNITY MEMBER 6. I am the defender of our customs, of what has been passed down to us, we know we will grow and we will never return. I ask what will become of our customs when these beings arrive to our home? In the end, we will change, but we will not die, and we will remember myths, stories, legends, and much more.

PRESIDENT. The priests were in charge of regulating civil and religious life and the people, based on their knowledge of the movements of the stars, the sun and moon. In this way they led the great ceremonies in the temples built for that purpose, on dates such as the changing of seasons, the start of the rains, the summer, the harvests, the eclipses, the full moons, the comets, the equinoxes and solstices. The dominion of the Inca empire stretched from 1450 to 1532, from the north of what today is Colombia and much of Ecuador and Peru, down the coast, to parts of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The Inca Huascar governed from 1425 to 1532 [sic]. For the solstice ceremonias, the custom was for the Inca emperor to send a messenger to all the regions of the empire to exact a tribute of noble children to celebrate the ceremony of the capac hucha, the ultimate sacrifice. Here comes the Inca messenger.

COMMUNITY MEMBER 7 (as Inca representative/chaski). Lord of Salangome, I come running from the capital of the world, Cusco. I come in the name of the son of the Inti, our Father Sun. I come in the name of all the kingdoms of the Inca Huascar. I have come to remind you that the time of the capac hucha ceremony has arrived. It is time to prepare the best children of your best kingdoms to be taken to the city of the Sun, the heart of Tawantinsuyo, to be presented to the Inca Huascar.

PRESIDENT. They chose pairs of young children, performing a symbolic marriage for each pair, and the lord of Salangome bid farewell to the children of his people who would travel to the Inca kingdom. These children were chosen from within the kingdom of Salangome to be taken to the Inca palace to celebrate the ceremony of the capac hucha. In this way the lord of Salangome was able to meet his sacrificial obligation and the noble children were received
by the Inca ruler, who later gave them chicha in abundance to intoxicate them and be able to perform the capac hucha ceremony. This kind of ceremony maintained the union between the kingdoms and the Inca empire.

The entirety of the community theatre piece, written by its participants, displays both a performative and a discursive positioning of the community within history, within the local landscape, and within the broader negotiations over identity and debates over authenticity and patrimony that are central to constructions of value more generally. The messages couched within the various levels of rhetoric are positioned to achieve very specific ends.

In the introduction to the presentation, the MC begins by welcoming the audience, which includes tourists, both national and international; representatives of various media outlets—television, radio, and newspaper—both local and national; residents of Puerto López, which is home both to the headquarters of the Machalilla National Park and to a number of expatriates from the United States, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Colombia, and the United Kingdom; and representatives from traditional communities—both indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian—from other provinces, who have been invited by the cabildo of Agua Blanca to participate in the broader celebration.

The opening of the speech is positive in tone: “it is wonderful to find ourselves together on this beautiful day . . . to remember joyfully what occurred in 1492 . . .” (emphasis mine). However, the MC, who introduces the events of the past positively as an “extraordinary encounter” and a “renaissance,” quickly shifts to a more structural presentation of those events as the “massacre” of a “calm” and “well-mannered” people who “lived in a state of purity,” framing the events as an “imposition of values” leaving a legacy of “laziness” and “corruption.” Despite the rapid shift to a negative tone, however, the MC’s decision to preface the entire presentation by welcoming the audience as “my dear brothers and sisters” renders the divisions between Us and Them fuzzy at best. This is more than a discursive ploy to keep an audience engaged; it provides the framework for a broad destabilization of identities that the actors build upon throughout the performance. This destabilization is reinforced throughout this part of the presentation, as the MC repeatedly engages the entire audience through inclusive language: “Let us rise like the phoenix, rise all together, brothers”; “that gold is not the Chileans’, it is ours.”

The transcribed text of the event does not adequately reflect the adeptness with which the MC gauges the audience’s response and shifts his tone accordingly. On the one hand, his speech is quite incendiary, calling for people to “rise . . . with one fist raised like those brave indigenous brothers, and reclaim what by right and by justice is ours”—language that, in other Ecuadorian settings or spoken by representatives of other groups, might result in the immediate and forceful curtailing of the event. The setting itself is ambiguous in many ways, however. The presentation is not a political rally, but a staged performance; the MC shifts back and forth between a welcoming tone and a far more strident one; the location is neither a major political center nor
the home of the performers, but a tourist locale; many of the audience may not even speak Spanish. Furthermore, while all the other performers are dressed to evoke a sense of generic indigeneity located in the past, the MC is dressed in Western/global street clothes, again highlighting the ambiguities of how indigeneity might be defined, where the line between Us and Them might be drawn.

Following the introductory remarks by the MC the community members enter, guided by the president of the cabildo (who also sports street dress—with the notable addition of an iconic montubio hat). By referring both to the Kingdom of Salangome (which highlights the past-ness of the event) and the Inca, by welcoming “our black brothers” and the highland indigenous groups who have been invited to participate in other aspects of the festival, the president’s speech serves as a subtle reminder of the absurdities inherent in defining indigeneity in terms clearly demarcated in space and time.

At this point, the man acting as shaman enters, quite theatrically. His opening statement reinforces the idea that the presentation is located in the past: “from this . . . very important town in the time of the Kingdom of Salangome,” further calming the potentially incendiary rhetoric of the MC and enhancing the ambiguities raised by the performance. For the next ten minutes or so, the shaman/cacique leads the entire crowd in prayers to the seven directions, prayers that name the “peoples of the Amazon,” “sons of Tawantinsuyu,” “Aztlán,” the “Mayas” and the “red peoples of America” as well as the “peoples of the north . . . the youth with their enthusiasm and innocence,” intended as a reference to the tourists from the United States and Europe. Gods invoked include “Pachamama” and “Padre Sol,” both Inca deities. Toward the end of this part of the performance, the shaman also requests the blessing of Pachamama on “all her daughters and sons, all of them, regardless of their color or their ways of thinking.” This section of the festival in its entirety—the blessings and cleansings—revolves around a theme of pan-indigenous identity; the final phrases reiterate the idea that those present are all brothers.

Immediately following this, cabildo president Paúl returns as a sort of narrator, explaining briefly for the audience what is going on. By describing the “cleansing ceremonies our ancestors performed,” Paúl alludes to a more specific heritage, a direct lineage from the ancestral groups in the area to the current inhabitants of Agua Blanca, but the immediate shift back to the MC does not give the audience time to process the shift in tone.

The MC then revisits the idea of the encounter of the Spaniards and locals as a “boundary stone in the history of the universe,” reinforcing the idea that the groups were distinct historically and geographically, but also ideologically. This segment of the performance again ends with a masterful balancing of revolutionary speech (“we are here to rise up again, brothers”) with a more calming representation of the event as “a celebration where what happened in the past no longer matters.”

Here the MC introduces the narrative of the balsa raft, central to the festival, and the one symbolic element clearly linked to a very local past. He concludes by
emphasizing that through the event “we recall the bravura of our brothers on the sea, the great navigators of the past who even now exist in these towns and who will forever be part of us.” Paúl’s narrative immediately following this reinforces the claiming of a heritage—“This is part of our history”—but follows with an introduction of the next part of the performance, clearly located chronologically in the past: “each of them fulfilling a mission until the last day of their existence in the kingdom of Tuzco.” At this point, several of the community members who had been standing quietly toward the back of the performance area come alive, moving toward the central figure of the shaman/cacique. Each of them describes his duties within the kingdom—fisherman, farmer, hunter, artisan, navigator, kamayoq (custom-keeper)—and each laments the passing of his craft with the arrival of the Spaniards.

This is both the most subtle and the most powerful rhetorical moment of the performance. Each of the actors is dressed generically and very differently from how he would present himself in Agua Blanca. Each names a technology (a “science”) and an occupation that will perish under the domination of the Spaniards. Although the performance is located in the past, each actor names an activity that is clearly still part of the present reality of Agua Blanca, but not of the daily life of the majority of the audience members. Cognitive dissonance is introduced, both for the audience and, perhaps equally importantly, for Agua Blancans. What the performance accomplishes is to heighten the sense of destabilization of identity. Who is indigenous? How is indigeneity defined? What does heritage mean, and how might it play out? Where is indigeneity located, and by extension, can racialized geography exist?

Part of the power of the performance lies in its insistence on shifting constantly between an overt representation of the past and commentary in the present, between clear-cut identities and cognitive dissonance, between positive and negative emotions, between recognition of current perceptions and challenges to those perceptions. The priestess’s speech in the middle of this segment is the most poetic moment of the entire event:

Do not fear these men who vomit the fire of death, they attack and hide, hide and attack. Although they may lie to us each time we will fight, like the chameleon who takes on the colors of the hills. I hear also the cries of the gods, I hear the thunder of their selfsame cannons, the gallop of their very horses, but now we shall fire, now we shall ride across the plains, trying to raise a banner in flight, inviting our people, new but changed, to renew ourselves, to reconstruct ourselves, to reunite and look for ourselves in the mountain, in the valley, in the beaches, and thus we will have a name, a land, and a face. Now we know we are not alone in the world. Now begins another history, in the world, with the world, and against the world.

Through this performance the actress emphasizes not only the emotional turmoil of battle, the contrast between the two groups engaging in conflict, but also the real outcome of that encounter that the performance is meant to challenge—the loss of place
and therefore of existence as a recognized group: “inviting our people, new but changed, to renew ourselves, to reconstruct ourselves, to . . . look for ourselves in the mountain, in the valley, in the beaches, and thus we will have a name, a land, and a face.” In doing so, again, she is able to destabilize racialized geography and introduce cognitive dissonance into the audience’s perceptions of Agua Blancans, the “chameleon[s] who [take] on the colors of the hills.” She also reiterates that change is coming: “Now begins another history, in the world, with the world, and against the world.”

At this point the fourth and fifth elements added to the festivities are incorporated and intertwined: clay burial vessels (vasijas de barro) and an Incan capac hucha ceremony.

Yo quiero que a mi me entierren
Como a mis antepasados
En el vientre oscuro y fresco
De una vasija de barro.
—O. Guayasamín, “Vasija de barro,” 1950

I want to be buried
As were my forebears,
In the cool dark belly
Of a vessel of clay. (my translation)

These lyrics are from a song often called the unofficial anthem of Ecuador. It was written by a group of artists and musicians on the night of November 7, 1950, in the house of famous Ecuadorian indigenista artist Oswaldo Guayasamín (www.hoy.com.ec/suplemen/blan107/byn.htm; accessed March 20, 2006). As with many other invented traditions, this repurposed element of patrimony gives multicultural Ecuador a sense of a shared past and a thread of continuity with which to bind the many strands of its present. Clay burial vessels are an important part of the archaeological tours through Agua Blanca; comuneros thus chose to incorporate this potent symbol not only of the indigenous past, but also of a nostalgic Ecuadorianess more generally, into their public performance in several ways, as I will detail in following description.6

The final segment of the public theatre involves the inclusion of a specific ceremony—an Inca capac hucha, or “great sin” (Elizabeth Benson translates it as “solemn sacrifice” [2001, 15]) ritual. According to several scholars, the capac hucha was one of the methods whereby Inca leaders integrated outlying, previously autonomous, kingdoms into the Inca Empire. Several of the groups incorporated into the Inca Empire sent pairs of children to Cuzco or other religious sites to be sacrificed to various local deities; in this way, local communities were integrated into the wider empire and showed their loyalty to the Inca, receiving elevated positions or other favors in return:

Various scholars have examined the capac hucha as a rite defining the sacred and political geography of the Inca empire and linking newer communities with
Cuzco and the old Inca realm (McEwan and Silva 1989, 181–82; Dransart 1995, 20–24). Duviols (1976, 29) views it as a system of social control and integration of the empire, and sees Cuzco as the sacred heart of the Inca empire, with a circulatory system of veins and arteries, through which blood flowed, metaphorically and literally. One link of the cultural whole was this sacrifice, which was thought to irrigate the land and nourish the realm. Earlier peoples had used child sacrifice to dedicate and ensure the sanctity and security of a building; the Incas used child sacrifice to ensure the stability of an empire. (Benson 2001, 17–18)

This is similar to the more detailed explanation the community president/narrator gives in the Agua Blanca ceremony:

They chose pairs of young children, performing a symbolic marriage for each pair . . . children were chosen from within the kingdom of Salangome to be taken to the Inca palace to celebrate the ceremony of the capac hucha. In this way the lord of Salangome was able to meet his sacrificial obligation and the noble children were received by the Inca ruler, who later gave them chicha in abundance to intoxicate them and be able to perform the capac hucha ceremony. This kind of ceremony maintained the union between the kingdoms and the Inca empire.

In the performance, this narrative description follows a speech by a chaski, a messenger of the Inca Empire. The individual playing the chaski's role is Agua Blanca, notably, and in dress, ornamentation, and speech is indistinguishable from his co-actors, despite Agua Blancans' familiarity with the images of the Inca easily found in their own museum's library. Furthermore, importantly, he sacrifices the children by placing them into a vasija de barro that has been buried in the sand along the Pacific shore (fig. 3.5). While this is occurring the comuneros who are not direct participants in the drama sing the song written by Guayasamín.

With the increasing success of the festival in terms of both reception and effect, as I will discuss below, a sixth element has been added recently: the continuation of the festival in Agua Blanca. Once the parade, public theatre, and launching of the balsa raft have concluded in Puerto López, community members jump on trucks and lead a procession back to Agua Blanca, where the town center has been transformed for the celebration. Tourists now follow the community home and, once they arrive, a series of presentations commences, primarily involving local children and teens performing folkloric dance. Some of the dances are staged to highlight indigenous elements—dress (as above), music (from the Quichua-speaking highlands), and movement (fig. 3.6); others are based on colonial period dances and costumes (fig. 3.7). After the public performances have ended, women and children return briefly to their homes to change clothes, returning to the central plaza to dance in dressier
Figure 3.5. Children being carried to the capac hucha ceremony. (Photo by Douglas Ventura A.)

Figure 3.6. Agua Blancan children performing a highland indigenous folkloric dance. (Photo by Emily Hecker)
Performing Indigeneity

In their recent work on ethnicity as a commodifiable product that “seems to resist ordinary economic rationality,” John and Jean Comaroff posit that “its ‘raw material’ is not depleted by mass circulation. To the contrary, mass circulation reaffirms ethnicity . . . and, with it, the status of the embodied ethnic subject as a source and means of identity” (2009, 20; emphasis in original). Nonetheless, as their own interlocutors point out, “if they have nothing distinctive to alienate, many rural black South Africans have come to believe, they face collective extinction; identity, from this vantage, resides in recognition from significant others, but the kind of recognition, specifically, expressed in consumer desire” (10). Agua Blancans find themselves facing a similar dilemma: long invisible as indigenous peoples, they would generally find it difficult to perform a public indigeneity either generative or reflective of authenticity. Furthermore, as analyzed in the first section of the book, they are loath to allow themselves to be trapped within the fixity of state-controlled definitions of ethnicity.
Distancing themselves entirely from indigeneity would also prove counterproductive, however. Situated as they are within a national park, Agua Blancans must also be able to position themselves as appropriate denizens of an otherwise public space.

Anthropologists currently debate the potential risks of the kinds of well-documented public theatricality performed by various Amazonian groups as a strategy for maintaining external interest in and support for their rights—or as Beth Conklin describes it, a “master[y] of the art of translating their struggles against state and corporate powers into . . . [Western] conceptual frameworks” (1997, 726). One concern is that, by playing into Western notions of what constitutes an authentic indigenous person, these groups will lose the ability to act publicly in any other (“non-authentic”) way. Similarly, Steven Gregory notes that the “overemphasis of performative repetition can risk dehistoricizing the contexts of performance and privileging the visual (often, the commodifiable) over other registers of practice and experience” (2006, 157). Another concern is that groups who do use visual indices of indigeneity close doors to other groups who choose not to adorn themselves authentically, for whatever reasons.

By contrast, the Agua Blancan example displays fundamental differences. Unlike those who travel to international colloquia, courts of law, and press conferences in native dress, Agua Blancans clearly demarcate these costumed performances from their daily lives, not only by hosting a public festival on one day of the year—Columbus Day—but also by self-reflexively stating within that festival what their motives are. Participants in the festival are not pretending that this is an accurate representation of their everyday life in the present. They are performing public theater with reflexive commentary. That representation has two goals: to reaffirm the specific past from which they came and to strengthen their ties to the broader past to which they are clearly linked, official state narratives and racialized geographies notwithstanding. The focus on the balsa raft achieves the first goal of resituating themselves within the local landscape. But perhaps more importantly, the vasijas de barro and pan-indigenous motifs go beyond a mere statement of local belonging.

For the duration of their performance, Agua Blancans are publicly inhabiting roles that expose the narrow ways racialized categories have been defined and mapped onto the landscape. The wide-ranging sources of the symbols used in this openly theatrical event only heighten the degree of instability Agua Blancans are introducing into the official geographies of race. Although all the symbols are clearly recognizable as indexing “indigenous,” none of them can be readily mapped onto the available geographic space of the Manabí coast, or even onto imagined Ecuador more generally. Temporal and spatial boundaries painstakingly set up through national narratives are complicated through this seemingly straightforward public presentation. Agua Blancan representations of expected categories of indigeneity in spaces officially constructed as mestizo effectively destabilize Ecuador’s racialized geography. Agua Blancans are attempting to transform the ways in which being indigenous is possible in Ecuador.
The Ecuadorian state, like many others, tends to link the idea of indigenous to narratives of glorious civilizations, predecessors to the modern nation but firmly lodged in the past—a shared patrimony turned into consumable objects, such as archaeological sites and museums, for the touristic gaze. Audiences tend to consume that message while also being aware of and able to recognize particular markers of indigenous identity, the “exotic native bodies” described by Conklin. By utilizing both of those discourses—and by contrasting public performances of those discourses with their own everyday life—Agua Blancans are able to highlight the ways in which those discourses are constructed, revealing the weak underpinnings of Ecuador’s racialized geographies and, in turn, of the static definitions of and careful boundaries around indigeneity.

Agua Blancans are, in effect, taking the silences in the intersections of those narratives of nationhood, patrimony, and authenticity, as well as of racialized geography, and using performance to draw attention to the cognitive dissonances therein. But while performances such as those in Jean Rouch’s infamous film *Les maîtres fous* (1955) display a mimicry that is merely the frustrated result of incomplete mimesis, of not-quite/not-White, Agua Blanca mimesis more consciously calls that colonial impossibility into question, while also commenting on the simultaneous impossibility of bounding indigeneity within the constraints of colonial definitions. In this case Agua Blancans are mimicking the category of indigenous—a category from which they have been excluded, one supposedly no longer existing in their geography. What they accomplish is to initiate the process of interpretive drift, both for their audience and for themselves.

In reproducing broader conceptions of patrimony through practice, Agua Blancans are staking claims to their own authenticity as an indigenous community, as well as asserting their own authority in determining when such iterations should become relevant and be put into practice in the first place. More importantly, by choosing to perform these challenges publicly they are creating a space for interpracticality.

Through the performance, Agua Blancans create a field on which to access new interpracticors, bypassing the state whose static definitions constrain or exclude them and engaging with representatives of international NGOs, members of the press, and tourists. The performances are effective precisely because Agua Blancans are not supposed to exist as indigenous people at all, but rather only as poor, rural, unintelligent laborers. The audience is transformed through the performance into interpracticors, witnesses to the existence of a group that, if not typically indigenous, is perceived as at least Indian enough to perform in the way that they do—Indian enough to mock the construction of indigeneity in the first place, and to invite other, more visible indigenous groups to perform with them. This means that Agua Blancans are shifting the fields of practice in particular ways that do call into question previous systems of value and evaluation. If racialized geography has been destabilized—if, in fact, anyone in any place might now be indigenous—then authenticity and, by extension, patrimony and the national imaginary are also destabilized.
For communities like Agua Blanca which are not always recognized either within the state or beyond its borders, one effective tactic seems to be to expose the constructed nature of the hierarchy itself, and to do so not through discourse, but through practice. Importantly, dispositions are performed, not merely held: they are put into practice. They are public and visible; dispositions presuppose the presence of others who will both perceive them and respond to them, whether positively or negatively.

By shifting their own dispositions, Agua Blancans enter a new space within which the accustomed rules no longer apply. Thus not only they but also the others on their shared fields of practice—their interpracticors—have to shift practice accordingly. In other words dispositions are not necessarily passive or a given; they can contain agency. In public spaces such as the Balsa Raft Festival, Agua Blancans are performing spectacular challenges to their own dispositions, bypassing the state to engage with global interpracticors, thereby disrupting the field: their audience no longer knows quite how to interact with them (see Weismantel 2001, 112, 126).

Through practice, then, the community members are producing their own interpretive drift; they are gradually becoming more aware of how they produce their own realities. While, like us, many of them are unable to articulate this process (because articulation involves directly confronting the cognitive dissonance that our practice enables us to side-step, as Luhrmann suggests), they are nonetheless shifting their dispositions and perceptions of suitability. If the rules of the game have changed, the field itself is different.

**Appropriations and Interpretive Drift**

Here I want to return briefly to the analytical framework outlined toward the beginning of this chapter and to outline one more concept from Pierre Bourdieu in his work on language, again paraphrased by Thompson: “the efficacy of performative utterances is inseparable from the existence of an institution which defines the conditions (such as the place, the time, the agent) that must be fulfilled in order for the utterance to be effective” (1999, 8). In other words, the efficacy—the productive reception—of performative utterances, whether linguistic or cultural, depends greatly on whether those utterances are perceived to be appropriate.

Cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris has analyzed Gregory Bateson’s description of the blind man’s stick as an example of a material object through which the blind man extends his cognition to the point where it becomes difficult to pinpoint exactly where cognition occurs—is it in the brain? The stick? The arm holding the stick? Malafouris uses this analogy to examine the ways we might extend our cognition—our ways of understanding and interacting with the world around us—through material objects, which, he believes, not only serve as extensions of our body, but also influence our perceptions such that the world as we experience it through a particular object cannot be experienced in that way in the absence of the object (2008). If we can consider material objects as an extension of our selves and of our
ways of knowing the world around us, then we can begin to consider how appropriating different dress can open new fields of practice. In other words, successful appropriation of an object entails the ability to extend one’s cognition of the world through that object.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that we repress certain identities precisely by talking about them: by carefully outlining through discourse, through collective discussion and constant linguistic reinforcement of categories, precisely what is not normal, what is taboo. If discourse results in the reinforcement of oppression—if the question is really not “why are we repressed?” but ‘why do we constantly say we are repressed?’” (1984, 297)—then what does it mean to put an appropriated identity into practice without talking about the repressions involved? What does that do to our perceptions of normativities? If Agua Blancans were to adopt indigenous dress, but continually talk about how they are not really able to do so, what would be highlighted would be the inappropriateness of the dress and thus of themselves, of their practice. By not talking about it but still adopting it in a mimetic fashion, however tongue-in-cheek, they render the specific material objects a sort of blind man’s stick through which they can extend their cognition and know the world in ways previously off limits to them.

In this sense, appropriation does not imply that just anyone can take up just any material object, adornment, or item of clothing and wear it successfully. For an individual to appropriate a form of dress, as opposed to simply donning a costume, he or she must be able to successfully manipulate perceptions of existing institutions, as Bourdieu’s position affirms. In a sense, then, successful appropriation creates a perceptive space that enables the appropriator to remain relatively invisible (in the Foucauldian sense) as an *individual* while simultaneously rendering visible (and hence negotiable) a *category* of being.

Agua Blancans’ appropriation of indigenous dress in this setting provides a particular scaffolding that enables individuals to experience the world differently, to practice differently, and thus to participate in the creation of new performative fields in which different kinds of practice come to be perceived as appropriate or suitable, enabling interpretive drift to occur both for performers and for their audiences or interpracticors (see Miller 2010).

Knowing individuals within the community as well as I do, one of the most immediately striking aspects of the festival for me was witnessing their transformation from private individuals loath to speak publicly to consummate performers. Watching Agua Blancans participate in the festival highlighted the ways specific individuals were able to perform—acting, speaking publicly, dancing under the eyes of a large public—that they simply would not consider when not dressed in this way. Were they not appropriating this dress, and thereby extending their cognition in particular ways, their general discomfort with practicing in visible ways would otherwise render the performance ineffective. Talking to them after the performance confirmed this difference. Several community members expressed to me their feelings that since others
perceive them differently when they are costumed, they feel authorized to speak and act in certain ways that their everyday dress does not authorize.

Effects of performance and interpretive drift have extended well beyond the festival itself. By appropriating indigenous dress they are able to practice differently, which produces different perceptions of them as a group, the fields in which they can appropriately practice, and racialized geography more broadly. Furthermore, Agua Blancans have managed to effect these shifts without compromising their goal of maintaining fluidity in self-identification.