Practically Invisible

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CONCLUSION

Invisible, Inc.

Many subaltern struggles can be seen today in terms of place-based yet transnationalized strategies—or, more succinctly, as forms of place-based globalism.

Arturo Escobar (2012, 15)

When I was in Agua Blanca for my first lengthy stay, co-leading an archaeological excavation with an Ecuadorian archaeologist and a team of community members, several times each week I would hear a knock on my door in the evening and open it to find someone from the community council, asking that I help with a new letter. I must have typed and printed dozens of letters during the months I was there, directed toward everyone from the Ecuadorian Minister of the Environment to the Minister of Culture to the Mayor of Portoviejo to heads of NGOs, people with whom it would never have occurred to me to correspond under normal circumstances. Some letters requested materials to build barbed wire fences around various archaeological areas; others expressed concern about recent Park activity. The majority that year, however, outlined the circumstances surrounding the fibra (a fiberglass boat with an outboard motor), more aptly described as a sort of beached whale in the center of Agua Blanca.

Prior to my introduction to the community, Agua Blancans had begun to complain to Park officials that they ran many tours but could never make ends meet, while the Park itself posted significant revenues. Perhaps to quell the incessant barrage of letters, Park officials had agreed to grant Agua Blancans permission to use the boat to run whale-watching tours and make more money that way; however, the community members were never given papers of ownership to the craft. Originally used by Park rangers for trips to the Isla de la Plata, where the Park maintained an interpretive center, the boat was old and barely working. Although designed to have two outboard motors, the vessel had somehow lost one, while the other was not functioning at the time of its presentation to the community. Using their own funds, tour guides in Agua Blanca paid mechanics to fix the motor. They patched holes in the boat, painted it, and rented a storage space for it in Puerto López. After a few trips, however, the motor gave out entirely; at this point, mechanics told Agua Blancans it was unfixable.

In essence, then, Agua Blancans ended up paying money to fix Park equipment to which they had not been ceded ownership; rather than earning more money from tourism, they had lost a significant sum. When I arrived they were in the midst of
negotiating with the head of the Instituto Ecuatoriano Forestal y de Areas Naturales y Vida Silvestre (INEFAN, the Ecuadorian Institute of Forestry, Natural Areas and Wildlife) for both money to fix the boat and the documents of ownership. To this day that case has not been resolved; the fibra is ensconced in weeds at the edge of Agua Blanca’s plaza, testament to the inequalities inherent in the distribution of Park resources. While the letters I typed on the community’s behalf proved fruitless, they did nonetheless give me some insight into the local modi operandi, suggesting that I pay attention to how both conflict and externally imposed limitations were handled at the local level.

**Official and Unofficial Justice**

Sovereignty implies “space,” and what is more it implies a space against which violence, whether latent or overt, is directed—a space established and constituted by violence.

_Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974], 280)_

French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s stance on sovereignty assumes that borders are neither neutral nor silent, but emerge as the result of contestations over territory, and that territory (as opposed to land) cannot be perceived as such in the absence of borders—so without violence, we would not have a sense of rights to a particular space. It makes sense, then, that in constructing a sense of communal territory, Agua Blancans would pay particular attention to how to deal with violence and to selecting appropriate parties to witness or otherwise acknowledge what are, in effect, their affirmations of sovereignty (see Erazo 2013, 5).

Agua Blanca’s territory, while communally held, officially lies within the jurisdiction of Machalilla parish. Additionally, of all the neighboring communities and towns, the fishing village of Machalilla maintains the closest connections to Agua Blanca, through marriage ties, collaborations on fiestas, political gestures, and other events. In theory any legal or public safety issue in Agua Blanca should be dealt with by the authorities in Machalilla. Nonetheless, I have never discovered a single case where Agua Blancans actually have appealed to the police or the justice system in Machalilla. Machalillans are, after all, extended family to Agua Blancans. As they are unlikely to commit violence against Agua Blanca territory or to challenge prevailing sovereignty, there is no reason to involve them in disputes. As with the letters to officials in national and regional governments described above, Agua Blancans tend to “jump scales” (see Ferguson 2006, 174) when addressing violence within their territory.

This strategy becomes more obvious when considering it in contrast with Agua Blanca responses to internal strife. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, community members generally resolve conflicts involving fellow Agua Blancans either indirectly, through mechanisms for rendering indiscretions public such as making a monigote or
inventing a nickname, or directly, through confrontation in a town meeting or even, under unusual and more personal circumstances, a fight. On occasions when outsiders are involved, however, two distinct strategies may be employed.

In circumstances where time is of the essence, a community member who discovers something going on will raise an informal group of Agua Blancans who then address the situation. Membership in the informal group is based simply on who is present and available on short notice. For example, on a few occasions robbers from other areas have visited the Machalilla National Park to take advantage of tourists traveling in small groups. After any report of robbery on the road to Agua Blanca, community members track and confront the interlopers, after which they turn them over to the police in Portoviejo. On one occasion, the situation was more severe: in 2003, a man from Puerto López tried to rape a woman who (somewhat inexplicably) had decided to walk alone to the rainforest. She escaped and informed the museum members on duty, who proceeded to track him, capture him, and take him to the town meeting house, where they locked him in for two days before handing him over to the police.

The strategy of taking matters into their own hands first has several advantages. First, in practical terms, it ensures that the situation is dealt with while a capture is still possible; by the time police could be informed and could organize to address a situation, perpetrators could easily escape. Since Agua Blanca’s economy is now so reliant on tourism, it behooves them to ensure the safety of their visitors. Second, however, the strategy visibly underscores Agua Blancans’ autonomy, as well as their ability to protect their lands; by turning criminals over to authorities in Portoviejo or Puerto López, Agua Blancans are also able to remind those authorities of their presence and their bravura.

And yet at other moments Agua Blancans prefer not to jump scales, choosing instead to deal with a situation entirely on their own, whether through resolving it or through denying knowledge of it. In one example, in 2007, members of a different community within Park boundaries were felling old-growth trees on Agua Blanca lands, using clearly audible chainsaws. Agua Blancans walked to the community to deal with the parties involved directly, but never took the matter to authorities. In this case, maintaining relationships with their neighbors while still demonstrating their knowledge of the situation and their control over it—their response to potential violence that might disrupt their sovereignty—was paramount. On a far more visible occasion in 1992, the state-owned petroleum company, Petroecuador, was clear-cutting a line between La Libertad and Manta to transport refined petroleum. Due to geographic constraints, the line had to traverse Agua Blanca territory, a decision made without any local input. In response Agua Blancans blocked the road into their community and took control of some of the heavy machinery until the company would negotiate with them, demanding reforestation of the land to be clear cut. In the end, after several months of negotiations with Agua Blancans, the company paid for trees and water, not only for Agua
Blanca, but also for the neighboring communities of San Isidro and Machalilla, both linked by marriage to Agua Blanca.

In a third example—the most striking of the cases—a private plane crashed into the rainforest on Agua Blanca’s lands in the late 1970s, during the time when Agua Blanca’s land tenure was beginning to be threatened through the creation of the national park. Someone from the community of Las Piñas had been hunting in the forest, heard the crash, and went to investigate. When the man found the plane only its pilot was still alive, but was injured and trapped in the wreckage. The pilot begged the man to help him get to medical attention, offering him large sums of money for the service; fearing this would not be the case, the man killed the pilot and searched the plane for the money. The police later found the plane and the bodies, but were never able to identify or punish the perpetrator. Every Agua Blanca knows this story as well as the location of the crash (now known officially as El Avión Caído). Those living at the time also knew the perpetrator but, in a rejection of the jurisdiction of external authorities within Agua Blanca territory during that period of extreme vulnerability, refused to turn him in.

How do these strategic choices play into or affect the fluidity of Agua Blanca self-representation? Are these spectacles enacted to create particular arenas within which certain messages become visible or might be perceived as appropriate?

**Iterative Accumulation Versus Spectacular Accumulation**

Heritage, of course, is culture named and projected into the past, and, simultaneously, the past congealed into culture (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 149). It is identity in tractable, alienable form, identity whose found objects and objectifications may be consumed by others and, therefore, be delivered to the market (cf. Howard 2003). Its alienation . . . has the curious capacity to conjure a collective imagining and to confer upon it social, political, and material currency—not to mention ‘authenticity,’ the specter that haunts the commodification of culture everywhere. If they have nothing distinctive to alienate, many rural 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.

*John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009, 10)*

In their recent *Ethnicity, Inc.*, anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff argue that the alienability of recognizable heritage, as well as its “capacity to conjure a collective imagining” of an exotic existence, renders ethnicity itself a valuable commodity for groups who can stake claims to it. If intangibles such as ethnicity, heritage, and culture represent the most valuable commodities within globalizing processes, however, what are the implications for groups not perceived as authentic and therefore unable to access those intangibles? Given the Comaroffs’ contention that perceptions
of authenticity result from the ability to alienate and commodify particular aspects of one’s heritage, we might expect the construction of fields where certain groups are unable to access those intangibles to be oppressive: groups “believe . . . they face collective extinction,” as noted in the epigraph above. What the Agua Blancan case suggests is that the construction of inauthenticity may indeed be oppressive, but may at the same time be productive of strategies that enable those communities to bypass their current fields of practice.

In analyzing the question of why some highland Bolivian groups are considered indigenous—while others who may live, dress, speak, and act similarly are not—Andrew Canessa argues for a model of iterative accumulation, in which a particular social location (identity) is “produced over time as a result of numerous small social interactions, rather than an exaggerated sense of agency that might be suggested by ‘performance’ . . . each iteration reinforces or undermines a particular identity, but any single act is unlikely to have a major effect” (2012, 27). While I find the concept of iterative accumulation compelling, this formulation raises two specific issues that, jointly, might themselves produce important insights that allow us to expand the model. First, I do believe that expressions of identity are performed, whether or not they constitute a conscious performance (see Butler 1988; Weismantel 2001). They are dispositions put into practice and, as Canessa’s description suggests, both dispositions and practice can shift over time, resulting in different external (and internal) readings of one’s identity.

Second, however, it seems to be possible for two individuals or groups to make the same choices, engage in the same “small social interactions,” yet never to be perceived similarly; conflicts over gender expression provide a relevant case in point. As Canessa argues, indigeneity or any other identity is produced through iterative accumulation. Still, just as not every human body can unproblematically produce external perceptions of itself as clearly fitting within one gender identity, neither can every human group access the possibility of indigeneity equally, regardless of the context, content, or quality of their social interactions.

The factors curtailing those possibilities seem to have to do with whether or not a group can produce an appropriate or suitable identity, whether it can practice on a field in specific and expected ways. In the Ecuadorian case, as we have seen, for the nation to exist—and specifically, for the nation to exist as mestizo—Agua Blancans and similar communities also need to exist, in the form of the laboring bodies that have long supported and enabled (racially, geographically, and through both the products and the process of the work itself) the “suitable bourgeois dispositions” of the Ecuadorian ruling classes.

If, on the other hand, we compare iterative accumulation—everyday practice that reaffirms or detracts from perceptions of particular identities—with what Tsing has called “spectacular accumulation,” new possibilities emerge. In discussing her concept of spectacular accumulation within the Indonesian economy, anthropologist Anna Tsing notes that “performance here is simultaneously economic
performance and dramatic performance. The ‘economy of appearances’ I describe depends on the relevance of this pun; the self-conscious making of a spectacle is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds. . . . In speculative economies, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured’ (2004, 57).

Her insight is not only relevant to the study of emergent economies, it also plays into the concept of appropriateness, of suitability. In order for something to become suitable, it must first be able to be imagined; thus imaginability is, perhaps, the essential prerequisite for the success of a venture, whether economic or cultural. Something becomes imaginable when we have adequately framed it through discourse; it becomes a spectacle when we render it tangible through performance. Spectacular accumulations are most relevant and most effective within economies where intangibles—knowledge, ethnicity, heritage, taste—accrue the greatest exchange values, because in the end those intangibles become tangible only through spectacle.

How, though, does spectacle help make the invisible visible, and how does this process inform constructions of belonging? In an analysis of Derek Walcott’s post-colonial play *Pantomime*, Megan Ahern notes that

subversive mimicry . . . troubles not only the hierarchical arrangement of identity categories by the colonizer, but also the very dependence of colonialism upon these categories in the first place. . . . Mimicry’s complex dynamics involve both the desire of the colonizer ‘for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite’ ([Bhabha 1984], 126), and the agency of the colonized to reflect and subvert that desire. . . . In other words, mimicry disrupts the colonizer’s monopoly on representation. . . . The actual presentation of subordination is displaced by a mirror image of the problematic imperialist desire for it. (2007, 8, 11, 12, 19)

Similarly, in his ethnography of the experience of globalizing processes in the Dominican Republic, Steven Gregory relates how Dominicans relegated to working in the informal economy use what he calls “spectacles of transgression” to draw attention to the problematic imperialist desire for subordination (2006, 48). In both these cases, as well as in Agua Blancon spectacular performances, groups are jumping scales, creating spaces for their own appropriate utterances by calling attention to the doxic structures that exclude them.

Perhaps it is precisely the combination of imaginability and spectacle that can shift the ways we perceive appropriateness, that which embodies a suitable disposition in an appropriate field: in other words, it is that very combination that may be capable of producing the kind of interpretive drift described by Luhmann. This suggests that Agua Blancon self-representation neither is, nor is likely ever to be, stable or coherent. Through both iteration and spectacle, Agua Blancans are creating spaces
where they are able simultaneously to destabilize doxic discourses and structures and to revalorize their own appropriateness within a particular landscape.

**Private Practice**

Given racialized geography and the structural and systemic inequalities it has facilitated for centuries, one would expect Agua Blancans to enter periodically into panic upon realization of the relative weakness of their position: they are first constructed as indios, lowest of the national categories because mestizo is recast as blanco in class terms, then denied even access to that visibility. Essentially Agua Blancans were until recently members of an unrecognized indigenous group, campesinos whose land lay in a remote, infrastructurally disconnected area that was not part of the national imaginary. Once the Machalilla National Park was created, they were then positioned both spatially, within an area under national jurisdiction, and legally, within restrictions capable of denying them even the ways they have constituted their own appropriate identities as laborers. Ultimately Agua Blancans should, structurally speaking, have a great deal of fear.

What has always struck me about Agua Blancans, however, is that they do not have fear—or at least not about these things. Outsiders who care about Agua Blanca and its people panic on their behalf, but they themselves do not. They keep going about their everyday activities, and it is through those activities that they do create our perceptions and embodied understandings, our gut responses or feelings or senses of their appropriateness as autóctonos. This is an appropriateness that does not necessarily rely on genetic arguments: it does not seem to matter, in the end, whether Agua Blancans are or are not indigenous. They are autochthonous in terms of sense of place: they are perceived literally as of the land, as belonging with, to, and on the land. We cannot imagine the place without Agua Blanca people, nor the people without the place—the very definition of appropriateness.

How do they accomplish this? In the past dozen years during which I have lived in Agua Blanca for a total of thirty-two months, I have attended over two dozen day-long community meetings, many of which involved presentations by outsiders interested in initiating research, development projects, or volunteer work in the community. In every case—even when those of us with longstanding ties to the community return with a new project—we are required to present our proposals formally to the council and an assembly of interested Agua Blancans in the town meeting hall. In every case the minutiae of our presence in the community must be hammered out, negotiated, and agreed upon before any work can begin.

The meetings themselves always focused overtly on short-term utility. For a long time I misunderstood, thinking they really were about seeing what benefits Agua Blancans could extract from the interactions. I could not have been more mistaken. What matters, ultimately, is never really the number of people employed, the wages
negotiated, or the material objects to be left behind. What matters is the ongoing relationships. No matter what else is negotiated, everyone coming in has to work with Agua Blancon people and live in the village. In other words, we all end up bearing witness to everyday life in Agua Blanca.

In the end we are useful, not only as witnesses, but also as practitioners. While the possibility of long-term advantages per stated project goals exists, those long-term goals are always secondary for Agua Blancon. In their eyes the primary long-term utility of projects is that they create a space for visitors to become interpracticors. Through projects and our own practice, visitors validate external perceptions of Agua Blancon appropriateness and, in the process, undergo our own interpretive drift. Even when people create projects without really considering Agua Blanca at all—when, for example, biologists choose to work there because it provides a convenient location within the Park, tourism students are stationed there because of the Park’s connections with the Ministry of Tourism, ecotourists decide to stay on as volunteers out of a desire for spaces of natural beauty, or archaeologists perceive it to hold sites of a disassociated past—Agua Blancon get us to shift, via discourse and practice, and ultimately to perceive them as belonging there regardless of labels.

In other words the projects are all successful, just not in the ways their proposers might have intended (see Rivera 2003). No one I know of who has ever gone into Agua Blanca with a project has left without caring about Agua Blanca. Those who enter the community take with them memories, often solidified via photographs, of traditional chozas in the fields, Agua Blancon women washing clothes in the river, children rounding up goats, and men dragging bamboo or hauling tagua through the village—but also of people on motorcycles, women playing cards as they sell crafts, and tour guides sitting at the entrance to the museum. All leave with an experience of a particular place, one they cannot imagine devoid of Agua Blancon people. Thus we visitors, we researchers, we purveyors of projects, end up serving as interpracticors, collaborators in the production of suitabilities that benefit Agua Blancon, people with a vested interest in the continuation of the community. Visitors end up holding the burden of fear that Agua Blanca will cease to exist; meanwhile, Agua Blancon’s primary objectives of protecting their lands and their rights to live on them are achieved without any visible effort on their part.

Performing Dispositions

Be a hair in the flour,” he explains. . . . A hair in the flour is a disturbance of everyday subservience and routine.
A hair in the flour ruins the legitimacy of power.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2004, 206)

Very few effective strategies of protesting the ongoing production of inequality are available to indigenous communities. Those communities that are internationally
recognized often end up trapped by the very markers of identity that grant them such recognition in the first place, as I argue in greater detail in Chapter 3 (see Conklin 1997). For communities such as Agua Blanca, however, that are not always recognized either within the state or beyond its borders—communities which therefore have less to lose, as it were—perhaps the most effective strategy is the one Agua Blancans have chosen: to expose the constructed nature of the hierarchy itself, and to do so not through discourse, but through practice.4

We tend to approach practice theory as if habitus were very similar to Durkheim’s collective consciousness, in the sense that it is necessarily an unconscious process of production. What the evidence in the first section of the book suggests is that the framework for the production of particular habiti can be selected or imposed and that, through interpretive drift, the practices resulting in their production can become naturalized, taken for granted. Since the Spanish colonial period, as we have seen, elites within Ecuador have both espoused discourses and embodied dispositions that have delimited the appropriate fields of production for indigenous groups (and thereby for themselves).

Something we perhaps do not tend to realize about Bourdieusian dispositions, however, is that they are performed, not merely held—they are put into practice. They are public and visible; it is precisely through that visibility that we can perceive them and respond to them accordingly. The interactions of socially situated actors disposed toward particular goals are what constitute a field. While we may act (that is, practice) without articulating our goals, and perhaps even without being able to articulate them, we still have those goals. Some goals are inherited or imposed; these are in most cases oriented toward the constitution of an appropriate habitus for a given group.

Every habitus likely to be perceived as appropriate is situated within a field that helps define that habitus. Most of the time our fields of practice are invisible to us precisely because, even though different actors may hold different positions with different resources on those fields, all the actors on a given field at a given moment understand the overall rules of the game and play according both to those rules and to their appropriate habitus. One implication of this is that our habitus is constructed through interactions with others: we are never alone in our practice. Dispositions presuppose the presence of others who will both perceive them and respond to them, whether positively or negatively.

Because they are the arenas where we practice within our appropriate habiti on a daily basis, our habitual fields—our appropriate spaces of social belonging—tend to shape our goals. Occasionally, however, our habitual fields do become visible; we experience cognitive dissonance and we shift our dispositions, in a sense creating new goals for ourselves, thereby changing the fields. In other words, we enter a new space within which our usual rules do not apply and, not only we, but also the others on our shared fields of practice—our interpracticors—have to shift practice accordingly. Once individuals become aware of their own agency, once they recognize the connections between practice and fields, they can choose to act in new ways, producing
new fields and therefore new habitus through practice. Furthermore, it only takes a few consciously aware people to do this; the rest can occur through interpretive drift.

Thus dispositions are not necessarily passive or a given; they can convey agency. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout the ethnography, dispositional agency can be couched both in spectacle and in iteration. In public spaces like the Manteño Raft described in Chapter 3, Agua Blancans are performing spectacular challenges to their own dispositions, jumping scales and thereby disrupting the field: their audience as interpracticors no longer know quite how to interact with them (see Weisman 2001, 112, 126). In private spaces—in the more intimate everyday interactions with others within the space of Agua Blanca—their iterative practice also creates interpracticors, displacing Agua Blancans’ fear and ensuring that they are indeed perceived as utterly appropriate within this particular space.

**Can the Subaltern Act? Globalization and Methodologies of Decolonization**

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.
They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

*Audre Lorde (1984)*

Racialized geography and its related constructions of subalternity are central to understanding why globalizing processes become so important within the Agua Blanca methodology of decolonization. All Ecuadorian audiences—from the socially white elite to the mestizo majority to indigenous and black subalterns—have been socialized to read rural coastal landscapes as predominantly empty, home only to uncultured mestizo laborers. Precisely because those landscapes have effectively been rendered invisible—unimagined in the Andersonian sense—they are able to be reinscribed with meaning for external audiences, those who visit them without preconceived notions of who might be appropriate within those landscapes. The expectations and grand narratives of these new global audiences are different; it is the longstanding romantic expectation of finding traditional peoples, peoples whose narratives are violently fractured by modernity, that provides the perceptual space for the Agua Blanca methodology.

The emphasis on blatant markers of a generic indigeneity within spectacular performances creates a mental space within which the more quotidian displays of actions that can be perceived as traditional practice are sufficient to reinforce audience suspicions that “Yes, real Indians do still exist, but their existence is threatened by encroaching modernity.” In this context, rather than creating a space of cognitive dissonance, the presence in Agua Blanca of markers of modernity—cell phones, computers, televisions, motorcycles—may be perceived as symptoms of that spreading disease. Thus external audiences are persuaded to fight to preserve what they perceive as a disappearing authenticity, but what might more accurately be described as their own
nostalgic trope of the noble savage untainted by modernity. This recognition of signifiers from their own tropes entices global audiences to engage with Agua Blancans, at which point interpracticality can commence.

This is precisely why Agua Blancan tactics of interpracticality are so effective. While drawing on existing colonial discourses to set the scene for performances, because it shifts to and even more fundamentally relies on embodied, shared practice, interpracticality as a methodology of decolonization represents a new set of tools that, within a context of globalization, enables unrecognized groups to bypass the master’s house entirely. Rather than dismantling existing oppressive structures with the master’s own tools, Agua Blancans are engaging directly with their audiences to co-construct their own fluid, antiessentialist terms of existence. Through both spectacle and iteration, Agua Blancans are able to effect interpretive drift for their interpracticors as well as for themselves. As a result they push us to question and thereby to destabilize received notions of racialized geography. Collectively, we reimagine what indigeneity, authenticity, and belonging might be able to mean; collectively, we take the first steps toward a paradigm shift.