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Imitation*

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Keywords

mimesis, copy, language, interaction, reflexivity, discourse

Abstract

“Imitation” in contemporary anthropology comprises numerous topics whose relations have seldom been explored. In surveying mimetic phenomena that range from television parodies to postural mirroring, I offer reflections designed to stimulate exploration of “mimetic practice.” The review encourages work at the nexus of sociocultural and linguistic anthropology, for without appreciating the communicative specificities of mimetic practice, one can neither narrate nor theorize adequately what mimesis does, and thus is. I chart directions in research by drawing out underappreciated findings from the ethnographic record, such as those that show that mimesis is not a matter of two-ness, as the original–copy binary suggests; that communicative dissonance often helps actors recognize when mimesis is in play and what action(s) it involves; that mimetic practice suffers (and sometimes benefits) from various instabilities (e.g., what is imitated, who imitates whom); and that reflexivity helps create, stabilize, and alter mimetic practices and projects.

INTRODUCTION

Few topics are as wild and panoramic as imitation, not the least because “anything is in some way like anything else,” as Nelson Goodman (1972, p. 440) once quipped. The problem of seemingly unbounded imitation is matched, fittingly, by a sprawl of literature that spans disciplines and stretches from the long legacy of mimesis in Western aesthetics (Auerbach 1968) to recent hypotheses about the role of mirror neurons in the evolution of human communication (Arbib 2011). For good and for ill, anthropology has not tried to tame this disorder because imitation has rarely been a central or well-established topic for much of the field.

In ethnographies, imitation appears in familiar guises: parodies, piracies, counterfeits, historical reenactments, pantomime, quotation, vocal mimicries. In stressing the local, strategic deformations introduced as actors draw on but invariably depart from globalizing discourses such as human rights, many anthropologists embrace analytic tropes that have mimetic dimensions, such as translation, appropriation, vernacularization, sampling, and dubbing. Relative to other social sciences, anthropology also prides itself on critically pluralizing concepts that purport to be the same across contexts, from nationalism(s) to neoliberalism(s), capitalism(s) to postsocialism(s). To twist Richard Rorty’s (1986) turn of phrase from his exchange with Clifford Geertz, anthropologists may be connoisseurs of the *not quite*.

Despite its prevalence, there has been little effort to think across imitation’s forms or even sort out what imitation is and isn’t. Compare with psychology, where imitation is narrow and neat. For more than a century, psychology has honed imitation through distinctions that expose forms of behavioral copying that look like imitation but aren’t. Thorndike’s (1898, p. 173) classic definition of imitation as “learning to do an act from seeing it done” made imitative skill transfer turn on observation. “Stimulus enhancement” was introduced to explain how a second behavior could resemble the first not because of observation but because stimuli in the environment simply increased the probability that others would act similarly. “Response facilitation” tagged behaviors that were hardwired in individuals and required only activation; because such behavior wasn’t new to the individual, it couldn’t be imitative learning *sensu stricto* (Byrne 2003). “Emulation” distinguished cases where one copied the ends, the environmental result of action (Tomasello 1998, Tomasello & Carpenter 2005) or perceived goal (Whiten & Ham 1992), but not the means (Nielsen & Tomaselli 2009; see Hurley & Chater 2005a,b).

A limitation with this literature for sociocultural and linguistic anthropology is its preoccupation with social learning as well as with cross-species comparison and the hunt for phylogenetic distinction. Anthropology may have suffered from imitation’s lack of institutionalization, but it has also benefited. It can accommodate diverse mimetic phenomena and allow for more kinds of actions, from play to resistance to perhaps even the “sincerest of flattery,” as Colton’s tired aphorism would have it.

This review focuses on “mimetic practice,” events of behavioral imitation in which such imitation is reflexively grasped and understood to count as social action. Rather than tease apart “imitation,” “mimesis,” and related notions—a definitional exercise that would tighten control over imitation’s metalanguage—I use these terms loosely to encourage close attention to distinctions used in different sites of study.

MIMETIC PRACTICE AND THE DIFFERENTIAL

As blinkered as psychology’s engagement with imitation may seem, we should admire the empirical care taken to hew closely to what actors do. To inspire careful but more expansive ethnographies of mimetic practice, let us inquire anew into how imitation is recognized.

Imitation is often recognized in social life through a sharp or creeping sense of incongruity. In urban Côte d'Ivoire, unemployed male *bluffeurs* wear impossibly expensive European fashion, and the gap between real and performed wealth is arresting (Newell 2012). In Lincoln's New Salem historical site, site workers feel the urge to remove an anachronistic gasoline can left in plain sight because it threatens the site's authenticity (Bruner 1994, p. 401). Uncanny brands stick out by being off by a fraction ("Bruberry," "Abidas"; Nakassis 2012). "Charade" democracies seem hollow, belied by nondemocratic practice (Apter 1999). Christian forenames adopted by recent converts startle interlocutors with their dissonance (Kuipers 1998). And so on.

Imitation seems to involve the comparison of two or more object signs (e.g., "original" and "copy") between which some "differential" is felt to exist (e.g., the incongruity), perhaps because the thing imitated seems poorly executed or awfully good or because there is something dissonant or uncanny about the scene. Grasping a differential implies some measure of reflexivity in which "communicative signs are used to typify other perceivable signs" (Agha 2007, p. 16; cf. Abrahams 1986, Bateson 1972). Reflexivity here does not require self-consciousness nor is it limited to explicit talk about communicative behavior; these are special cases, as we see below.

A differential alone does not define mimesis. Rather than spell out what else is needed—a move that would assume we already know what mimesis is (à la Thorndike)—let us proceed delicately. I begin by surveying variation in mimetic practice, not as a step toward typology but as an exercise to open us empirically to qualities of mimetic practice, qualities we might miss when we assume we know what imitation means.

To begin, the differential may vary in terms of type and token [recalling Peirce's (1906) distinction]. With a type-token differential, the (in)congruence turns on the question of whether and to what degree some concrete, particular thing, a sign-token, is truly an instance of the abstract, socially recognizable type that we expect it to be or that others would have us take it to be. Is that uncanny being fully human or "male," that commodity or historical site "authentic," that adaptation of Shakespeare or Bach "faithful"?

With a token-token differential, the (in)congruence involves two or more concrete acts, artifacts, or agents, which may or may not be copresent. In conversation, for instance, why does my interlocutor echo my speech or mirror my posture?

A type-token or token-token differential may, or may not, be purposively communicated. When styled to be seen, the differential exhibits "recipient design" (Sacks et al. 1974, p. 727), or what Bakhtin (1986, p. 95) called "addressivity," the "quality of being directed to someone." [Compare with what Nakassis (2013), who adapts influential work by Derrida (1988) and others (especially Butler 1990), calls "citationality," the reflexive calling of attention to repetition and difference.] Anything so styled steers attention toward the differential, such that the differential may make one wonder what people are up to by means of it.

A differential may sometimes appear to lack recipient design. The literature on passing, which includes a small canon of fiction, from Twain to Roth, is too vast to discuss here, but we should recall how actors evading exposure merely presuppose a differential as they misdirect and flash shibboleths—verbal, bodily, sartorial emblems—to suggest unproblematic membership when membership risks being denied. [On the dramaturgy of passing and haunt of exposure, see Goffman's classic *Stigma* (1963); see also Goffman (1961)].

A differential may not exist until discovered. It may be hailed into existence by alter's wagging finger, as in lawsuits that litigate against uncanny likenesses between commodities, citing, say, trademark violations and suggesting that someone is hijacking one's more successful brand (Nakassis 2012). Racial profiling resolves criminalized subjects into parts, creating arresting differences: diacritics of identity that can and will be used against you, that hail you to a category with or without your cooperation (e.g., Heyman 2009, Reeves 2013). In conversation, chronic suspicions may prime one to ferret out "hidden" motives. These suspicions may be fueled by a

fiercely dramaturgical view of communication in which humans are expected to dissimulate, or by mistrust in language tout court (Bauman 1983, Bauman & Briggs 2003). Perhaps state surveillance fuels suspicions, and perhaps this suspicion is compounded for certain others, such as the Roma, infamous for their wiles and treacherous tongues (Lemon 2000).

Whether purposefully communicated or not, the specific perceived qualities of the differential matter insofar as they help cue mimetic action. These specificities have typically been sorted and scaled using a poetic framework of sameness and difference, convergence and divergence, etc. [e.g., Bucholtz & Hall's (2004) contrast between "adequation" and "distinction" or Merry's (2006) cline from "replication" to "hybridization" in her discussion of the vernacularization of transnational human rights discourse—to name just two from a long list]. Heuristics such as these spotlight how some mimetic projects aspire, in degrees and for different ends, toward tight if not perfect identity: mimesis without remainder. The inverse aesthetic seeks divergence, at times producing ironically parallel, mirror-image symmetries like coconstitutive pairs in which each seems a foil for the other. Langford (1999), for example, described how India's institutional Ayurvedic medicine ironically approximated biomedicine as it opposed it, culminating in a "parallel medicine, a parallel science" (p. 32; cf. Perrino 2011).

Whatever the poetics of sameness–difference may be in a given case, actors reflexively grasp qualities of the mimetic differential as a step toward inferring action. Spanish-origin US place names, for example, may be hyperanglicized until the pronunciation gap feels ideological, e.g., /'tuwsan/ not /tuk'son/, Arizona (Hill 2008; cf. Lempert & Silverstein 2012, p. 5). Compare this with the deracialization of African American Vernacular English (e.g., Bucholtz 2011, pp. 79–85; see also Coupland 2001). The pragmatics of weak divergence is familiar in everything from "the narcissism of minor differences" (Freud 1962, p. 61) to competitive emulation in which actors appropriate their statusful peers' small-but-coveted marks of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1984). A refrain in literature indicates that globalizing discourses are strategically distorted—"localized," "vernacularized." Perhaps in this way the appropriated discourse does not seem owned exclusively by the metropole, or perhaps the distortion expresses ambivalence or resistance toward the transnational institutions whom one feels obliged to engage.

The differential's capacity to guide action may appear gradiently weak or strong. Consider parodies, which incite evaluation of the target imitated rather than the imitating self. Florid caricatures of "the white man" in Western Apache joking imitations (intrusive questioning, chummy back slaps, etc.) made it easy for Basso (1979) and his interlocutors to work backward and infer Western Apache etiquette. In parodies of lifestyle entrepreneur Martha Stewart, convicted for insider trading, Sclafani (2009) shows how the features mimicked cue the criticism (cf. Chun 2009). Stewart's onscreen persona of feminine refinement is recalled through exaggerated linguistic features (e.g., released and aspirated /t/, initial /h/ lengthening, high lexical register) and then undone with signs of crass man-lyness. An animated *South Park* Thanksgiving spoof has Stewart introduce "interorectogestion" ["making foods that can be easily inserted into the ass" (Sclafani 2009, p. 620)], which, like the gloss Stewart provides, mixes "refinement" [suggested via the faux high-register, polysyllabic Latinate term, such lexical refinement also being a stereotype of so-called "women's language"] with base desires of, literally, the lower stratum: *ass* (Sclafani 2009, p. 621). The (in)congruence of refinement and coarseness exposes the former as a front. The episode reaches its nadir, and climax, when Stewart sits on the turkey she prepared.

REFLEXIVITY

The variation surveyed above reveals how reflexivity in mimetic practice is not some mere scaling of the differential with metrics like "narrow" or "wide," "less" or "more," etc. Rather, these perceived

qualities serve as points of departure in processes of pragmatic and ideological typification and elaboration. A “narrow” type-token differential may in turn lead one to experience its fidelity or authenticity, but these are analytically distinct moments that should not be conflated. We should not collapse pragmatic and ideological construals of mimetic practice into the differential that was reflexively grasped as the proximate semiotic “cause” of these construals, even if this is what actors often do.

Reflexivity in mimesis comes in different forms and degrees as well. Rarely is it denotationally explicit, as in the terms and discourses that constitute mimetic metalanguages. These range from named, morally weighted categories of people (posers, frauds, phonies, etc.) to abstract nouns such as sincerity and authenticity, to descriptors for action that include the verbs for which the captioned problematic of “imitation” is named. And this is to say nothing of doctrines cobbled together with these discursive threads, such as religio-philosophical reflections on repetition, from notions of reincarnation and cyclical cosmogonies to meta-reflections such as Eliade’s (1959) *Myth of the Eternal Return*. These obviously matter, not the least because they can publicly frame events as mimetic and invest them with value, but we cannot expect such distinctions to exhaust or even accurately represent mimetic practice.

Let us consider how reflexivity varies in mimetic practice itself and dwell especially on the relatively unreflexive extreme. Yes, there are self-styled mimetic practices such as pantomime and impersonation, the very names for which declare these events strongly imitative, but what of the many quiet, unannounced mimicries in interaction, from speech repetitions to posture mirroring to contagious yawns? Are these equally mimetic, even if they do not seem grasped as such?

Take the poetics of interpersonal interaction. Linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics have shown how emergent “poetic” organization (Jakobson 1960) in discourse, such as felt repetitions and parallelisms within and across speaking turns, can help actors infer what actions are in play. Tannen (1987, 2007) was among the first to explore how conversationalists do things poetically [see also Keenan (Ochs) 1977, Silverstein 1984], from “getting or keeping the floor” and “showing listenership” to “humor and play” and “ratifying another’s contribution”; for a recent survey, see Fleming & Lempert (2014). Research on stance has shown how cross-turn parallelism can communicate interpersonal alignment. Consider, for instance, what conversation analysts term “upgraded” second-position assessments, where, say, someone evaluates a comestible as *delicious* and an interlocutor echoes with *really delicious*. The repetition of evaluative predicates (*delicious: really delicious*) helps invite one to read the second stance as an upgrade, which in turn may invite one to infer that the second assessor agrees. The result is a “stance differential” (Du Bois 2007, p. 166) because the cross-turn parallelism of propositional stances invites comparison, and comparison with respect to what speakers say then serves as a method for understanding what they do (see also Agha 2007, Lempert 2008).

Discourse poetics is but one species of imitation in interaction and is outnumbered by nonverbal mimicries. So-called motor mimicry has a long history, beginning at least with Adam Smith, whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* began with the spectator’s display of sympathetic pain as he witnesses a person being struck, as if he, too, suffered (Bavelas et al. 1987, Hatfield et al. 1994). Researchers such as Bavelas et al. (1987) have shown experimentally that nonconscious motor mimicries exhibit recipient design; they are more pronounced when others watch (Goffman 1978). Although “not necessarily expressive of any internal state,” such mimicry is “expressive to the other person in the situation” [Bavelas et al. 1987, p. 325, emphases in original; compare with arguments that such mimicries are automatic like a “chameleon effect” (Chartrand & Bargh 1999) and lack recipient design]. Some have argued that phenomena such as posture sharing and movement mirroring are communicative not merely owing to recipient design but also because they index stances and attitudes (LaFrance 1982, Schefflen 1964).

Temporally, “rhythmic integration” describes moments when prosodic prominences are heard as metricalized within and between interlocutors’ speech (Auer et al. 1999, Wennerstrom 2001), and such recurrent “beats” coincide with other signs such as manual gesture (Loehr 2004, McNeill 1992); a related literature on “interaction synchrony” stems from Condon & Ogston (1967). Multiparty interactions have been observed to exhibit multimodal rhythmic integration, as if people were reading from the same score (Erickson 2004; see also Auer et al. 1999, Lerner 2002). Rhythmic integration may be a function of nonconscious “entrainment,” “the process whereby our body is ‘captured’ (i.e., modified in periodicity and phase) by an external cycle with a rhythm near the one the body rhythm would have had, had it not been affected by any external force” (Bernieri & Rosenthal 1991, p. 410; cf. Collins 2004, Kinsbourne 2005) (think of how a tuning fork works).

Is entrained rhythmic integration and perhaps even posture- and movement-mirroring communicative in any sense approximating, say, the conspicuous citationality of reported speech or the histrionics of full-body narrative “reenactments” (Sidnell 2006)? In their microethnography of high school guidance-counselor interviews, Erickson & Shultz (1982) observed moments of interactional “arrhythmia,” some forms of which (e.g., each party insists on an incompatible rhythm, one “tugs” on the other’s rhythm by coming in early or late) were salient; participants felt uncomfortable. Dysfluencies such as these can prompt reflexivity, spurring people to wonder what this breakdown “means,” but we can’t assume that fluent, unproblematic entrainment does the same. Unproblematic entrainment may serve as affordances for higher-order communicative behaviors while lacking pragmatic significance of its own (see Fleming & Lempert 2014, p. 474).

If we call seemingly nonreflexive entrainment “imitation,” we would need to say that humans do imitation constantly, at least in interaction. This terminological practice would obscure variation in reflexivity, while neglecting the study of how less (or even non)reflexive forms of behavioral mimesis can become grasped as imitative under special conditions.

One such condition is ritualization, which can reflexively “source” and repurpose tacit forms of behavioral coordination and mimesis (Lempert 2013, pp. 382–87). In a Russian state theatrical academy, for example, entrainment exercises have actors hone skills of attunement, such as by learning to sense and react to others’ nonverbal cues (Lemon 2004). Although repetition and parallelism are ubiquitous in conversation, in certain relatively ritualized discourse genres—spells, taunts, verbal duels, political oratory—this poetics may be exaggerated for pragmatic effect. Cross-turn repetition and parallelism may be drawn out to enact “opposition” in verbal duels (Goodwin 1990) or “supportive,” nondirective inquiry in psychotherapy (Ferrara 1994). Conversational turn-taking is usually unremarkable, but ritual dialogues and debates often stylize it until it steals attention. Ceremonial South American dialogues, for example, feature exaggerated patterns of cross-turn repetition and embodied symmetry by which participants act out cultural ideologies of solidarity (Urban 1990, p. 106; cf. Graham 1993, Lempert 2012a, ch. 2).

Ritual semiosis in general is renowned for exploiting the poetic function to model what the event seeks to effectuate (Parmentier 1997, Silverstein 2004, Stasch 2011, Tambiah 1981), and the cases noted here are simply those that do this modeling by sourcing tacit, lower-order behavioral symmetries in interaction. A less common form of reflexive sourcing is that of mimetic “embedding,” where one recognizable, self-consciously mimetic practice is extracted and set “within” another such that the two contextualize each other. Some of the first gramophone recordings in colonial Madras, for example, featured *vikatam* performers—Tamil mimicry artists (Weidman 2010). The recordings helped define the gramophone itself, likening its “aura”-1 fidelity to the mimetic virtuosity of the performer, except, of course, that the gramophone did it better (cf. Bauman & Feaster 2005). In sum, although interaction may seem thoroughly mimetic,

only under special conditions involving reflexivity does this tacit mimesis become recognizably imitative let alone freighted with ideological significance.

BEYOND ORIGINAL AND COPY

An enduring claim about imitation is that it involves two things. The two-ness of the differential may be on full display during mimesis, but when we fall under its spell we miss the distributed ecology of behaviors that encompasses it. We are also primed to see two-ness from binaries such as “original” and “copy,” yet this two-ness is an ideological construal to be studied critically. We may know that stances toward originals can swing from deference to disrespect, and that the original–copy relationship (or however one may term it) has been imagined variously through different ideologies of authorship (Barthes 1977, Foucault 1984), citation (Derrida 1988, Nakassis 2013, Vološinov 1971), and circulation (Lee & LiPuma 2002, Urban 2001), yet seldom do we recall that imitation is rarely, if ever, dyadic. Baudrillard (1994), inspired by Benjamin (1985) among others, did much to stimulate reflection on copies, and even though he traced how the original–copy binary allegedly breaks down in postmodernity, with copies spinning off without concern for their originals (cf. Derrida 1988, Massumi 1987), the two-ness of the foundational original–copy binary remained central to his story. Although seldom used this way, the ethnographic record defies this two-ness presumption, a presumption familiar from binaries inherited from the Greeks.

There are many ways to dispel this binary, but let us consider a few—their differences notwithstanding. In trying to size up imitation by comparing just two things, we risk missing the true scope, effects, and even violence of mimetic projects. The violent policing of ethnic and racial purities and authenticities is familiar enough. So, too, perhaps is the power of intellectual property regimes, whose curbing of unauthorized copies often furthers first-world profiteering (Dent 2012). Forget effects; consider labor. If a living-history museum wants to offer visitors vicarious experience of an “authentic” past, it must (among other things) ritually segregate the museum space from the here-and-now surround and negotiate the threat of internal anachronisms (Handler & Gable 1997, Handler & Saxton 1988). In education worldwide, instructors use forms of “scaffolding” (Wood & Wood 1996) to assist learning, which means that they painstakingly widen the differential so that novices can better see how far they are missing the mark. In second-language instruction, for example, teachers often use “recasts”—repetitions that correct prior speech and cue error recognition (e.g., Loewen & Philp 2006, Mackey & Philp 1998). Dance instructors may mimic the acolyte’s bad dance moves to help him or her see the differential and narrow it (Keevallik 2010; cf. Downey 2008). The labor that cleaves and closes differentials will be overlooked if our gaze is transfixed by originals and copies.

That imitation is not inherently dyadic is evident from the interdiscursivity of imitation, where signs construed as token-copies are felt to point to or resemble some source-token(s) or type(s) (Agha & Wortham 2005, Bauman 2004, Silverstein 2005). A copy may feel like a copy of a copy of a copy, for example. . . with degrees of perceived spatiotemporal remove or interdiscursive reach along some vector or “speech-chain” of citation (Agha 2007). Proverbs, for example, feel old, “distressed,” as they echo back into a cavernous past rather than point back like a typical quotation to one original source-utterance (Stewart 1991, pp. 17–19; Abrahams 1986).

That imitation is not inherently dyadic is evident from the sources of (in)congruity. This felt incongruity need not stem from the comparison of two things in the roles of, say, original and copy. A type-token imitation, for instance, may be disrupted by many things—by anything—“outside” the foregrounded twofold relationship. A copy may be judged faithful, but this dyadic type-token fidelity is disrupted when produced by the “wrong” person or at the wrong time, place,

or situation. A commodity may be deemed counterfeit not because it differs materially but because it was produced after hours or by unauthorized personnel (Nakassis 2012). An unremarkable “white” human is undone by the discovery of “one drop,” as in infamous extremes of hypodescent.

That imitation is not inherently dyadic is evident when we cannot figure out what people are doing mimetically just by focusing on the differential. In the post-1960s Soviet Union, the underground dissident industry of *samizdat* trafficked in self-published political works (Oushakine 2001). A comparison of discourse alone won’t reveal the action here because this “resistance expressed itself in amplification of the discourse of the dominant, rather than in reversal of it” (p. 203). What gave this mimesis its teeth was an incongruity stemming from the dissidents’ position. Who were *they* to voice dominant state discourses? It was “the incommensurability of the *locus* of enunciation and the enunciated *text*” (p. 204, emphases in original) that made their mimesis subversive. Or consider the unemployed young male Ivoirian *bluffeurs*, whom everyone knows can’t afford their costly European clothes (Newell 2012). That this incongruence is plain as *bluffeurs* strut about and compete in histrionic brand-offs does not rob this mimesis of its efficacy; it intensifies it, ratcheting up the “performative illusion” of success in a manner akin to the dramaturgy of masking rituals. Why doesn’t this incongruence ruin the performativity? The question is misguided because the performativity here doesn’t come from just two things called original and copy, but rather from a highly distributed assemblage of signs in which some parts feel incongruent.

Viewed more expansively, ethnographers of mimetic practice face, as the actors they study do, the troubled cohesiveness of a multiplicity—of many signs, not just two. How tightly are signs felt to cohere when actors pause and assess their fit? A concern with coherence—what linguistic anthropologists have often studied under “text and textuality” (Agha 2007, Bauman & Briggs 1990, Hanks 1989, Silverstein & Urban 1996)—invites us to examine how actors manage the (in)congruence central to mimesis. [How a multiplicity comes to feel partially incongruent (or congruent, for that matter; Lempert 2012b) has been understudied, but see, for example, Agha 2007.] Given the multimodal and highly configurational (or “textual”) nature of communicative action—where it is not speech alone but a dense mesh of verbal and nonverbal signs that makes something meaningful and effective (Enfield 2009, Streeck et al. 2011)—mimesis seems vulnerable to all sorts of potentially dissonant and renegade elements. The more parts, the more things to break down, so how is this vulnerability managed, or exploited? Given the plasticity of resemblance (anything can be felt to be like something else; see below), how are likenesses stabilized? How do actors and institutions ensure that others recognize the object imitated with any consistency, assuming such consistency is sought? Like pantomime, it often takes concerted communicative labor to get others to see what one intends, and, like intellectual property law, it often takes a well-orchestrated regime of interpretation, adjudication, and enforcement to stabilize what counts as real and ersatz “copies” across time and space.

MIMETIC INSTABILITIES

Mimesis is notoriously unstable and requires labor to stabilize. A sensitivity to its instabilities—many of which characterize discursive practice generally—can help us develop nuanced, processual approaches to mimetic practice.

Consider what it takes to recognize what is copied. A differential involves likeness or “iconicity”—a sign-object relation in which qualities of the sign are felt to reveal qualities of the object (Peirce 1955 [1902]). Iconicity has a “characteristic openness” that “in principle resembles nothing in particular but only possible objects” (Keane 2003, p. 417). Unless materially embodied and teamed with indexicality (a sign-object relation based on contiguity, in which a

sign is felt to point to or indicate its object, like clouds to rain), iconicity remains as unstable as the shapes of clouds as they morph and file across the sky. Even when regimented, it can be difficult to stabilize indexical-iconicity so that it is clear what (or even *that* something) is being copied (Taussig 1993, p. 51), especially when dissonant elements overwhelm. For Tibetan monks in India who reform disciplinary practices such as corporal punishment in light of liberal ideals like individual autonomy and rights, it takes serious guidance to get others to “see” these modern virtues through the thick atavism of monastic ritual (Lempert 2012a).

Consider, too, what actors do in and by mimetic action. Inspired by Ryle’s “thick description,” Geertz (1973, p. 7) wrote of the capacity to distinguish a wink from a blink, and, more, a sincere wink from a fake wink that parodies that wink, and that parodic wink from a wink that rehearses the burlesque wink so that it won’t be mistaken as sincere. Analogously, Geertz argued, an interpretive anthropology should tease apart these meanings and appreciate what makes them more than the same rapid contraction of an eyelid.

Yet the sense of what actors are doing is often not easily settled, not only for analysts but for subjects themselves. It is a commonplace in interaction research that the “definition of the situation” is precarious and must be reflexively framed, regimented, and negotiated over turns-of-talk, if it is to be stable (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974, Gumperz 1982, Silverstein 1992). Anthropology appreciates that mimesis can do different things, but it has not always appreciated the instabilities of mimetic action.

This problem is evident in Ferguson’s (2002) intervention in debates over what mimetic practice does in (post)colonial contexts. In Taussig’s (1993) influential *Mimesis and Alterity*, and in work such as Stoller’s (1995, 1996) on the Hauka movement in Niger—where Africans mimicked white colonial officials in events like possession rituals—imitation was made to sound self-conscious and critical. Like the “sympathetic magic” of old (Frazer 1963, Tylor 1913; see Taussig 1993, p. 250 et passim), these mimicries were methods to manipulate the source, “to get hold of something by means of its likeness” (Taussig 1993, p. 21). Mimicries expressed cultural resistance. In a different light, Friedman (1995) wrote of Brazzaville consumers who sport high European fashion and use skin-lightening creams, but this copying was not resistance and was not even “copying.” It wasn’t copying, argued Friedman, because these signs were adventitious; beneath them lurked the same old African cultural categories. When Ferguson looked at these interpretive extremes—resistance here, cultural authenticity there—he saw displaced anthropological reactions to the same underlying predicament. “What does one do with the cultural other who wants ‘to become like you?’” (Ferguson 2002, p. 553)—particularly when this imitation seems to confirm assumptions of native inferiority against which anthropologists had positioned themselves as stalwart critics. Ferguson proposed that imitations here were better viewed as bids for inclusion, for membership. Africans have been “pressing, by their conduct, claims to the political and social rights of full membership in a wider society” (Ferguson 2002, p. 555).

Ferguson substituted rather than supplemented functions, as if one could pin actions to practices in one-to-one fashion and settle what mimetic practice does. This move deprocessualizes mimesis and invites a monofunctionalism in which practices do one thing at a time. It neglects both the (meta)communicative labor used to define what action is in play—before, during, and after the fact—and the indeterminacy that haunts such definitions. That we should encounter debates about mimetic practice at all reminds us that this pragmatics is often contested and should remain an ethnographic problem. In Bucholtz’s (2011) study of high school youth language, white hip-hop enthusiasts don hip-hop gear and pepper their speech with African American Vernacular English (Bucholtz 1999; see also Alim et al. 2009). Was this viewed, perhaps, as an appropriation of black cultural patrimony, or was this, as the white kids would often protest, just “style”—a mash-up of design elements that aren’t the exclusive property of anyone [cf. style-“crossing” in

schools (Rampton 2005)]? For Bucholtz's hip-hop enthusiasts, this was a live question and, not surprisingly, a fraught one involving ideas about racial authenticity (Appiah 1994, Fanon 1982, Jackson 2005).

Consider other sources of pragmatic instability. In direct reported speech constructions, the reporting frame may allow a speaker to deny responsibility, as if the quote were not one's own, but sometimes the frame "leaks" (e.g., Goffman 1974, Goffman 1981, Hill & Irvine 1993, Irvine 2011). Perhaps one suspects that the messenger of some salacious gossip is more committed to it than the quotative disavowal suggests (e.g., Goodwin 1990). Perhaps the quoter arouses suspicion by overdoing the impression of the quoted voice (Couper-Kuhlen 1996, Goffman 1974). Framing something as parodic is no guarantee the frame will hold. For Bakhtin (1984), parody involves "varidirectional double voicing." Double-voiced discourse involves "the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 324), and whereas what he called "stylization" harmonizes the two, parody sets the second against the first "in order to discredit it" [Morson 1989, p. 66; compare with the noncritical varidirectional stance of pastiche (Jameson 1989)]. This parodic stance must be cued to be recognized, though, and one can miss the cue; or the parody may be grasped but undermined by the irony that "a true parody cannot help paying one compliment to its original, namely, that the original is important enough to be worth discrediting" (Morson 1989, p. 73).

Then there is uncertainty not of mimetic action but actant structure, where it is unclear who is copying whom (see Taussig 1993, ch. 6). In her essay on colonial portrait exchange in late-eighteenth-century Anglo-Indian diplomacy, Eaton (2004, p. 819) chronicles how Governor-General Warren Hastings and Mughal rulers emulated each other almost to the point of confusion. Hastings adapted the metropolitan practice of gifting portraits to approximate Mughal traditions, just as "indigenous rulers wanted to 'copy' the British by incorporating British art into their collections" (p. 819). (This exchange and emulation was neither innocent nor neatly reciprocal, as Eaton details.)

Pragmatic infelicities jeopardize mimetic action: overzealous use of shibboleths, blustery assertions of belonging, hypercorrection, overgeneralization. When mimetic effort itself registers as "effort"-ful—"contrived," "dysfluent"—this can, against a backdrop of expected authenticity and in contrast to more statusful subjects distinguished by their effortlessness, by their "casualness and ease" (Bourdieu 1977, p. 659), result in one's undoing. Even fluency qua "fluency" may arouse suspicions. The unnerving ease with which Jews could purportedly mimic their way into "whiteness" in early-twentieth-century America heightened, for some, fear of their "unclear yet threatening difference" (Itzkovitz 2001, p. 48).

Mimesis may seem broadly reproductive insofar as it involves replicating, partially or wholly, something else. But even when only a sliver of daylight between things is allowed, this gap, like all gaps, can be destabilizing and yield unanticipated effects. About colonial mimics, Bhabha (1994) gestured toward unintended consequences of Britain's ambivalence toward colonial mimesis in India. Were they to have offered the real thing—freedom, civilization—what was to stop subjects from agitating for more? The Empire's compromised copies ["*almost the same, but not quite*" (p. 86)] left room for difference, even insurgent identities. Imperfect copies could even reflect poorly on the prototype, on its "power to be a model" (Bhabha 1994, p. 88), for might this flawed mimesis not erode the authority of colonial modernity, forcing it to eat its own universalist words for having failed to encompass the colony's particularity?

Besides unpredictable effects, mimesis has sometimes been said to erode or even exhaust the foundational authority of its source. Butler (1990, p. 175) suggested that the seeming repetition of heterosexual distinctions in nonheterosexual practice (e.g., butch/femme) could unsettle the "original" and that gender parodies like drag may be parodic "*of the very notion of an original,*" eroding

the foundational distinctions they emulate (cf. Newton 1979, Halberstam 1998). The strain of mimesis can also stress and warp mimesis. In drawing attention to mimetic performance, this strain can create a feedback loop that intensifies suspicions, that makes actors mimic harder, that makes their strain more apparent, that ratchets up suspicions; and so on. In recent US presidential campaigns, the performance of “im-mediation,” the sense that nothing separates politician from public—no handlers, no pollsters, no marketers—has become so acute that its realist pretensions can seem histrionic, if not burlesque (Lempert & Silverstein 2012).

The real may seem to retreat entirely. Benjamin (1985) famously suggested that new modes of mechanically reproduced art (photography, film) erode the unique, historically specific “aura” of a work, such that a concern with originals may fall away, and in his writings on hyperreality, Baudrillard (1994) suggested that the proliferation of simulations—Disney World, Las Vegas, America itself—could erode the very binary of original and copy. It bears repeating that these accounts reinscribe the binaries that they say are unraveling. In addition, we learn little about mimetic practice and the labor required to stabilize what such practice does. Given the work needed to secure recognition of an act or artifact as mimetic and to guide interpretation of what is done through mimesis, and given the instabilities that make this labor precarious, what could it even mean to speak of a “culture of the copy” (Schwartz 1996) or mimesis as a hallmark of a period or regime or imaginary, as writers from Benjamin (1985) to Baudrillard (1994) have suggested?

CONCLUSION

With all the tacit mimesis lurking in interaction, with the striking feats of imitation that mark human ontogenesis, and with the weight of institutionalized mimesis in sites of sociocultural reproduction such as schools, is it any surprise that some analysts should feel inclined to reflexively source and consolidate some or all of this mimesis and speak of a single mimetic “faculty” or “process” or “law”? Imitation, so thematized, has had a troubled career, having been promoted, and demoted, many times. A term of evolutionist derision, imitation was and sometimes still is pinned to primitives, as with the young Charles Darwin who, as Taussig (1993, ch. 6) recounts, by turns marveled and jeered at the vestigial capacity for mimicry in the “savages” he encountered. Compare with the contemporary mix of wonder and condemnation leveled at ethnoracialized nations—infamously, China—for being backward, and immoral, in faking so well (Pang 2008). Once thought to be a common capacity, imitation is now considered by comparative psychologists to be phylogenetically rare, perhaps even distinctly human. So much for imitation’s primitivism.

The vagaries of imitation in social theory are equally striking. Imitation was dear to the once influential sociologist and psychologist Gabriel Tarde (1903), whose *Laws of Imitation* Durkheim dismissed. Durkheim got Tarde wrong, we would now say, but his principal charge, recounts Karsenti (2010), was that Tarde’s attention to the relay-like copying of behaviors from one discrete individual to the next could never explain “social facts” that transcend and constrain individuals. For Durkheim, Tarde neglected the whole-to-part logic and method that had become defining for sociology since Comte (Karsenti 2010). Tarde’s work inspired research in group and crowd psychology as well as work on cultural diffusion. One can always find intellectual-historical continuity and coherence in imitation by roping together, say, old concerns with “diffusion” with current preoccupations with circulation and global and transnational flows, or by corraling sociological work on crowd psychology, from Le Bon (1977) to the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s to recent writings on group entrainment (Collins 2004), such that we end up with a genealogy of at least crypto-mimeticists and fellow travelers. A more pressing need than intellectual-historical consolidation is to explore mimetic practice with more care and not privilege thematized imitation.

To be sure, the most immediate evidence of imitation's significance comes from what people say about it, such as moralizing discourses on copies, copying, and copiers, and on the many cultural "sincerities" and "authenticities" and "realisms" that inform mimetic practice. This metalanguage of mimesis is but a congeries of conventionalized, publicly available resources for reflexivity; these bits of language can cast behavior as mimetic and give it value. This metalanguage is also often easily studied because it is easily reportable by actors themselves. It matters, again, because it can help specify and elaborate mimetic behavior and because it may also be strongly institutionalized such that it structures mimetic practice and effects. Nevertheless, these resources for reflexivity neither subsume nor serve as a substitute for the analysis of mimetic practice itself. Rather than privilege metalanguages of imitation—including our theories of it—we would do well to disaggregate our seemingly solid mimetic imaginaries into their more and less reflexive moments. Perhaps it is in the tangle (or dialectic, some might say) between these moments that we can appreciate how imitation can come to matter, and how something called imitation can sometimes become a power, a faculty, a law, or even an object of disciplinary inquiry.

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Contents

Perspectives

Looking Back, Looking Ahead
Jane H. Hill 1

A Conversation with Paul Friedrich
Paul Friedrich and Dale Pesmen 15

Archaeology

The Archaeology of Crafts Learning: Becoming a Potter in the
Puebloan Southwest
Patricia L. Crown 71

Networks of Power in Archaeology
Edward M. Schortman 167

Monastic and Church Archaeology
Roberta Gilchrist 235

The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis
T.M. Weik 291

The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes
Monica L. Smith 307

The Archaeology of Death: Mortuary Archaeology in the United
States and Europe 1990–2013
Bettina Arnold and Robert J. Jeske 325

Biological Anthropology

Primate Taxonomy: Inflation or Real?
Colin P. Groves 27

The Importance of Development for Comparative Primatology
Kim A. Bard and David A. Leavens 183

Adaptation to High Altitude: Phenotypes and Genotypes
Cynthia M. Beall 251

Stable Isotope Analyses and the Evolution of Human Diets <i>Margaret J. Schoeninger</i>	413
Linguistics and Communicative Practices	
Anthropology and Voice <i>Amanda Weidman</i>	37
Imitation <i>Michael Lempert</i>	379
Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity <i>Eitan Wilf</i>	397
Citational Practices: Knowledge, Personhood, and Subjectivity <i>Jane E. Goodman, Matt Tomlinson, and Justin B. Ricland</i>	449
Interviewing: Practice, Ideology, Genre, and Intertextuality <i>Michèle Koven</i>	499
International Anthropology and Regional Studies	
Anthropology, China, and the Chinese Century <i>Frank N. Pieke</i>	123
World Anthropologies: Anthropological Cosmopolitanisms and Cosmopolitics <i>Gustavo Lins Ribeiro</i>	483
Sociocultural Anthropology	
Secrecy <i>Graham M. Jones</i>	53
Neoliberalism <i>Tejaswini Ganti</i>	89
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability <i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105
Sexual Violence and Its Discontents <i>Pratiksba Baxi</i>	139
Native American DNA: Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications of an Evolving Concept <i>Jessica Bardill</i>	155
Selective Reproductive Technologies <i>Tine M. Gammeltoft and Ayo Wahlberg</i>	201
The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement <i>Manuela Cunha</i>	217

Transnational Humanitarianism	
<i>Miriam Ticktin</i>	273
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics	
<i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Ethnographies of Encounter	
<i>Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel</i>	363
Health, Risk, and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Concepts and Applications	
<i>Catherine Panter-Brick</i>	431
The Anthropology of Money and Finance: Between Ethnography and World History	
<i>Keith Hart and Horacio Ortiz</i>	465
Theme 1: Risk	
Secrecy	
<i>Graham M. Jones</i>	53
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability	
<i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105
Sexual Violence and Its Discontents	
<i>Pratiksha Baxi</i>	139
The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement	
<i>Manuela Cunha</i>	217
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics	
<i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Imitation	
<i>Michael Lempert</i>	379
Health, Risk, and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Concepts and Applications	
<i>Catherine Panter-Brick</i>	431
Theme 2: Knowledge	
Primate Taxonomy: Inflation or Real?	
<i>Colin P. Groves</i>	27
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability	
<i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105

Networks of Power in Archaeology <i>Edward M. Schortman</i>	167
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics <i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity <i>Eitan Wilf</i>	397
World Anthropologies: Anthropological Cosmopolitanisms and Cosmopolitics <i>Gustavo Lins Ribeiro</i>	483

Indexes

Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 34–43	521
Cumulative Index of Article Titles, Volumes 34–43	525

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TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR VOLUME 1:

- *Advances in Dialectometry*, Martijn Wieling, John Nerbonne
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- *Semantics and Pragmatics of Argument Alternations*, Beth Levin
- *Sign Language Typology: The Contribution of Rural Sign Languages*, Connie de Vos, Roland Pfau
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- *Taking the Laboratory into the Field*, D.H. Whalen, Joyce McDonough
- *The Indo-European Homeland from Linguistic and Archaeological Perspectives*, David W. Anthony, Don Ringe
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