



Speaking in the mirror of the other: Dialectics of intersubjectivity and temporality in Western Apache discourse



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ABSTRACT

We explicate a Western Apache oratorical idiom, reflected upon as *bá'hadziih*, 'speak for them' as a complex intersubjective strategy for the negotiation of varying figurations of otherness. *Bá'hadziih* operates, we will argue, by limiting the otherness of an opposed family or clan by means of appeals to a temporalizing sociality. By way of establishing the ethnographic context of *bá'hadziih* we will also show how its action entails and is loosely entailed by different ways of speaking associated with *bigóitzih*, or 'knowing' and the moral boundaries of families. We will conclude that *bá'hadziih* deploys and obviates otherness by recasting it within what we define as an emergent, subjunctive sociality.

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1. Introduction

Recent anthropological attention to intersubjectivity has complicated our notion of the social by grounding it within the positioning of subjects and the dialogic interaction of self and other (Duranti, 2010; Desjarlais and Throop, 2011). Intersubjectivity both assumes and is concerned with the apperception of humanity, which, as Husserl and others argue, arises from our capacity to infer in the actions of others intentionality, to recognize other beings as more than objective factors of experience, but as other "minds," states of awareness comparable with our own (Husserl, 1977 [1931]). Duranti (2010) opines that this recognition, and more specifically the potential of the knowing subject to imagine trading places with a subject recognized as similar to herself, presents a productive and open ended point-of-beginning for anthropological investigation. This turn to intersubjectivity allows for an ethnography that explores the phenomenological and temporal construction of social relatedness. In what follows we approach intersubjectivity via its constitution in dialog, suggesting an affinity between Husserl's concerns and anthropological discussions of relational personhood. Our avenue of approach is via what Bakhtin defines as the 'dialogic context,' placing subjects in responsive and anticipatory orientation to one another's utterances and stressing 'the active role of the other' (1986, p. 70) in acts of speaking and recognition.

We investigate relational intersubjectivity by exploring figurations of self and other in *bá'hadziih*, a oratorical idiom associated with the *Na'tees*, a coming-of-age ceremony for young women on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona.¹ We describe

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¹ The speeches described in this article took place in exchange events leading up to a *Na'tees* conducted by our host family in the summer of 1997.

bá'hadziih, which translates in this case as 'speak for her,'² as the rhetorical means through which speakers deploy the qualities of alterity or otherness suggested by the symbolically agonistic competition of the two families who participate in the performance of the *Na'íees* ceremony for the purpose of revealing a common past generative of a morally appropriate possible future. *Bá'hadziih* does this by successively superimposing upon images of a disruptive, alienating otherness figurations of family connectivity and knowing, thereby diminishing the threatening and unknowable actions of others by revealing them as motivated by familiar moral idioms. By relativizing the moral perspective of the subject *bá'hadziih* limits the otherness of non-family others and enables more expansive views of plausible moral relations and sociality. *Bá'hadziih* thereby establishes the potential of mutually beneficial and morally appropriate relations between those 'spoken for' within its various performances and communicates a sense of a positive forward motion in the perceived flow (Wagner, 1977) of what we will discuss below as a subjunctive, or anticipatory, sociality.

In our reading, Western Apache ways of speaking (Hymes, 1972, 1974), as described in ethnographies of Western Apache communication (such as Basso, 1979, 1990, 1996; M. Nevins, 2004, 2008; Samuels, 2004), call to mind anthropological discussions of relational, contingent personhood. Subjects are implicitly depicted as both permeable and expansive, with boundaries that can shift both socially and, as we will show below, temporally. The idea of a basic interchangeability of human subject positions, as well as the power of apparently private subjective intentional states to directly influence and bear upon the agency of others is also reflected in various forms of Western Apache storytelling (Basso, 1996). These and other ways of speaking suggest comparisons to Wagner's 'fractal person,' 'an entity with relationship integrally implied (1991),' as well as Strathern's 'dividual,' who is embedded and forged within a multiplicity of conceiving relations (1988). According to these writers, people come into being not as inherently separate subjectivities, but as persons whose subject positions emerge, a priori, as embedded in fields of defining (and inter-defining) relations. In the following sections we will argue that an assumption of relationality is reflected in Western Apache depictions of subject positions as plural qualities of pervasive knowing—understood as mutual inter-experience—characteristic of relations amongst close kin and people who interact frequently with one another.

An implication of an assumed pre-existent relationality is the idea that any one person or relationship can, as Wagner might put it, "stand for" another within the family. Qualities of interdependence and mutuality constitute the interpretive (and as we shall see below, temporally primordial) frame for the experience of family, and the meaning of each and every familial relation is understood from within it. Mother–child, father–child, sibling–sibling as well as other familial relations are all similar in that they are based on an assumption of mutual care. The problem, so to speak, presented by this assumption of primordial relationality is that of distinguishing these relations from one another. Thus, according to Wagner, a relational and analogic model of the person presents the idea that overt social actions ought to be read as constructing or "inventing" social boundaries—as Wagner puts it, if human beings and their relations are analogs to one another, then 'it is a human responsibility to differentiate them' (1977, p. 623). The Western Apache family is discursively idealized in terms that depict it as a field of potentially interchangeable subject positions, and the framework of this family is 'invented,' in part, through various forms of differentiation and avoidance. Teasing (M. Nevins, 2004), nicknames, sardonic 'wise words' (Basso, 1990: 53–79) and uses of stories associated with place names, all are used to mark little ruptures among familiar persons (T. Nevins, 2010) in which perspectives among them were temporarily out of sympathy and reflected upon as such in new moments of joking or invited realization. These and similar ways of speaking facilitate, as Wagner might put it, the "invention" of related but distinct moral persons.

While difference is necessary to the cultivation of morally distinct subjects, there are contexts of social differentiation that, at least in an abstract sense, threaten the viability of the family. By the same token, not all subjects, and not all forms of embodied social performance, are judged as similar or as appropriate analogs to the self. The opposite but necessary counterpart to the familial person is non-familial person, or what we will refer to below as the non-familial other. An unknown person can, by appearing from outside some context of social relations, confound and disrupt the usual direction of meaningful associations and therefore be understood to introduce the possibility of radical disjuncture, difference and the unknown. Association with others is sometimes seen as alienating the subject from the network of familial relations and knowing (at least temporarily). But, as we will demonstrate below, it is the very alienating power of otherness, and the quality of 'unknowing' that it introduces, that both *bá'hadziih* and *Na'íees* seize upon. The *Na'íees* ceremony and the oratorical forms that accompany it leverage the power of difference and unknowing. Below we will argue that the ceremony elevates young women to the status of adults by placing them in association with non-family—constructing imagery we will discuss as otherness—thereby distancing them from their prior statuses as children.

Insofar as its qualities of alterity and difference are potentially disruptive, otherness punctuates, and therefore lends a kind of temporality to relations between subjects (Stasch, 2009, pp. 17–18). To apprehend the new, one must, at least for a moment, leave what is familiar behind. One returns to the familiar from a new vantage point, and another episode in one's life that sets it apart from the lives of others. This shift leaves as an after-image a positive flow (a renewed reflection upon given analogic relations) or, in other terms, sets newly into relief a network of human relations in which the subject is embedded.³ This articulation takes the form of an account, so to speak, 'a concrete history' (Husserl, 1970; Carr, 1974, pp. 196–198) of how the person arrived at the moment of contact with another.

² The beneficiary of the speech is unspecified for gender in the Apache 3rd person prefix *bi-*. We opted for "her" in this case because the focal person spoken for in the *bá'hadziih* that accompany the *Na'íees* is either the girl undergoing the ceremony or her god-mother.

³ Our use of after-image draws on Wagner's discussion of 'figure-ground reversals (Wagner, 1987).'

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