

21A.506 Section IV Module 2

Summary of *The Chicken and the Quetzal: Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest*, Chapter 4 (From Measurement to Meaning: Standardizing and Certifying Homes and their Inhabitation)

Chapter 4 of Paul Kockelman's book *The Chicken and the Quetzal*, "From Measurement to Meaning," chronicles the paradox of villagers in Chicacnab who have high-quality but uninhabitable homes. Kockelman describes how tourist-taking villagers began to "drop out of the local system of replacement—giving up labor pooling in favor of cash payment, and constructing houses with no local equivalent." He argues the NGO Proyecto Eco-Quetzal's interventions pressured villagers to move from "equivalency" to "commensurability," producing "irreplaceable" persons as well as signs of their irreplaceability.

Kockelman opens the chapter with a story about Don Mauricio and Doña Rosa's new home. The roof of their house was made with sheet metal rather than thatch. Additionally, the walls were made with precisely cut wooden boards rather than roughly cut logs. Despite all these glamorous improvements, "the smoke—unable to escape through the roof and walls—had proved unbearable." This house, built to accommodate the needs of the ecotourists that the villagers would host, was extremely bad for the villagers' health.

These metal-roofed houses came about in Chicacnab because villagers had been encouraged by the NGO to "change the architecture and inhabitation of their homes in order to be better hosts." Villagers were stressed the pressing needs and demands of their guests, including a clean place to sleep, their own bed, space without animals, candles, water, and a blanket. Women were taught how to prepare food hygienically. Men were taught how to guide tourists, which included such things as where to pick up tourists, how to answer their questions, and what to point out as interesting. As Kockelman summarizes, villagers were required to "have material objects and engage in linguistic practices that would ensure the comfort, interest, and safety of tourists."

The new training and specifications brought about a system of standardization and certification that made certain villagers nonsubstitutable. Villagers who had all of the required items in their homes, such as a private room, a large bed, and a clean toilet, in the right quantities and with the right dimensions, were authorized to charge ten quetzals for lodging (double the previous price). Certificates were given to villagers who had been capacitated in certain skills, such as having completed the kitchen examination. Thus, the "private space of a family's home became a public site for demonstrating the family's success in meeting the NGO's standards." Furthermore, tourist-taking villagers became "nonsubstitutable" with non-tourist-taking villagers.

Contests were held each year during which tourist-taking villagers competed for prizes. For example, one contest was held to determine the best house for hosting ecotourists, and winners received cash prizes as well as a certificate. Houses were ranked for having all of the possessions necessary for hosting an ecotourist, even though these possessions had no value for the villagers, and none of these objects would be found in a local home. Certificates were also given to villagers who showed that they were qualified to fill certain roles, for example men who were able to guide ecotourists or women who knew how to host and feed ecotourists in their home. These certificates were "externally authorized emblems of standardized difference," signs of a persons' nonreplaceability.

Similarly, houses built in the new style were public signs of one's nonreplaceability. The irony is that these houses were unliveable and posed serious risks to health, especially to women and young children. These houses existed nonetheless because "nonreplaceability had become a value in itself," at the expense of previous values such as health and safety.

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