To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike.

—Franz Kafka, “A Report to An Academy”

So what is this tickling at the heels to which Kafka’s all too human ape would refer us all too apish humans to? I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. In an older language, this is “sympathetic magic,” and I believe it is as necessary to the very process of knowing as it is to the construction and subsequent naturaliza-
tion of identities. But if it is a faculty, it is also a history, and just as histories enter into the functioning of the mimetic faculty, so the mimetic faculty enters into those histories. No understanding of mimesis is worthwhile if it lacks the mobility to traverse this two-way street, especially pertinent to which is Euro-American colonialism, the felt relation of the civilizing process to savagery, to aping.

My way of traversing this two-way street takes me into an eccentric history which begins with the curious and striking recharging of the mimetic faculty caused by the invention of mimetically capacious machines such as the camera, in the second half of the nineteenth century. This history then somersaults backward in time so as to explore a foundational moment in the equation of savagery with mimesis—namely, the experience of young Charles Darwin, in 1832 on the beach at Tierra del Fuego, full of wonder at the mimetic prowess of primitives, especially as it concerns their mimicking him. This history then fans forwards in the form of other sailors setting sail from northern climes, as they appear carved in the shape of wooden curing figurines in the early twentieth-century Swedish ethnography of certain Indians of the Darién Peninsula between the Panama Canal and Colombia. Wondering about the magical possibilities in this image-making of Europeans makes me in turn speculate first about what it might be to live Darién-like in mimetic worlds where spirits copy physical reality, and second, what it means for me as a white man to trace a history in which an image of the white man is used by Indian men to access magical power emergent from the womb of the Great Mother. This somersaults me forward into myself from First Contact time with Darwin on
the beach, through the invention of mimetic machines, to late twentieth-century Reverse Contact now-time, when the Western study of the Third and Fourth World Other gives way to the unsettling confrontation of the West with itself as portrayed in the eyes and handiwork of its Others. Such an encounter disorients the earlier occidental sympathies which kept the magical economy of mimesis and alterity in some sort of imperial balance. History wrecks its revenge on representational security as essentialism and constructionism oscillate wildly in a death-struggle over the claims of mimesis to be the nature that culture uses to create a now-beleaguered second nature. And this brings me to the end of (my) history, wondering if the surge of mimetic sensitivity accompanying this death-struggle might indicate other ways of being identical, other ways of being alter. And this brings me to the vexing subject of “constructionism,” of making things up.

For in this history I am often caught musing as to whether the wonder of the magic in mimesis could reinvigorate the once-unsettling observation that most of what seems important in life is made up and is neither more (nor less) than, as a certain turn of phrase would have it, “a social construction.” It seems to me that the question of the mimetic faculty tickles the heels of this upright posture and makes it interesting once again. With good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice yet, so it seems to me, not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending—thanks to the mimetic faculty—that we live facts, not fictions. Custom, that obscure crossroads where the constructed and the habitual coalesce, is indeed mysterious. Some force im-
pels us to keep the show on the road. We cannot, so it would
seem, easily slow the thing down, stop and inquire into this
tremendously braced field of the artificial. When it was enthusiasm-
tically pointed out within memory of our present Academy that
race or gender or nation . . . were so many social constructions,
inventions, and representations, a window was opened, an invi-
tation to begin the critical project of analysis and cultural recon-
struction was offered. And one still feels its power even though
what was nothing more than an invitation, a preamble to investi-
gation has, by and large, been converted instead into a conclu-
sion—eg. “sex is a social construction,” “race is a social con-
struction,” “the nation is an invention,” and so forth, the
tradition of invention. The brilliance of the pronouncement was
blinding. Nobody was asking what’s the next step? What do we
do with this old insight? If life is constructed, how come it
appears so immutable? How come culture appears so natural?
If things coarse and subtle are constructed, then surely they
can be reconstrued as well? To adopt Hegel, the beginnings of
knowledge were made to pass for actual knowing.

I think construction deserves more respect; it cannot be name-
called out of (or into) existence, ridiculed and shamed into yield-
ing up its powers. And if its very nature seems to prevent us—
for are we not also socially constructed?—from peering deeply
therein, that very same nature also cries out for something other
than analysis as this is usually practiced in reports to our Acad-
emy. For in construction’s place—what? No more invention, or
more invention? And if the latter, as is assuredly the case, why
don’t we start inventing? Is it because at this point the critic
fumbles the pass and the “literary turn” in the social sciences
and historical studies yields naught else but more meta-commentary in place of poesis, little by way of making anew?

But just as we might garner courage to reinvent a new world and live new fictions—what a sociology that would be!—so a devouring force comes at us from another direction, seducing us by playing on our yearning for the true real. Would that it would, would that it could, come clean, this true real. I so badly want that wink of recognition, that complicity with the nature of nature. But the more I want it, the more I realize it’s not for me. Nor for you either . . . which leaves us is this silly and often desperate place wanting the impossible so badly that while we believe it’s our rightful destiny and so act as accomplices of the real, we also know in our heart of hearts that the way we picture and talk is bound to a dense set of representational gimmicks which, to coin a phrase, have but an arbitrary relation to the slippery referent easing its way out of graspable sight.

Now the strange thing about this silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made-up is that it appears to be where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially created, and occasionally creative beings. We dissimulate. We act and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm. That is what the public secret, the facticity of the social fact, being a social being, is all about. No matter how sophisticated we may be as to the constructed and arbitrary character of our practices, including our practices of representation, our practice of practices is one of actively forgetting such mischief each time
we open our mouths to ask for something or to make a statement. Try to imagine what would happen if we didn’t in daily practice thus conspire to actively forget what Saussure called “the arbitrariness of the sign”? Or try the opposite experiment. Try to imagine living in a world whose signs were indeed “natural.”

Something nauseating looms here, and we are advised to beat a retreat to the unmentionable world of active forgetting where, pressed into mighty service by society, the mimetic faculty carries out its honest labor suturing nature to artifice and bringing sensuousness to sense by means of what was once called sympathetic magic, granting the copy the character and power of the original, the representation the power of the represented.

Yet this mimetic faculty itself is not without its own histories and own ways of being thought about. Surely Kafka’s tickling at the heels, brought to our attention by the ape aping humanity’s aping, is sensateness caught in the net of passionful images spun for several centuries by the colonial trade with wildness that ensures civilization its savagery? To witness mimesis, to marvel at its wonder or fume at its duplicity, is to sentiently invoke just that history and register its profound influence on everyday practices of representation. Thus the history of mimesis flows into the mimesis of history, Kafka’s ape standing at the turbulence where these forces coalesce. And if I am correct in invoking a certain magic of the signifier and what Walter Benjamin took the mimetic faculty to be—namely, the compulsion to become the Other—and if, thanks to new social conditions and new techniques of reproduction (such as cinema and mass production
of imagery), modernity has ushered in a veritable rebirth, a recharging and retooling the mimetic faculty, then it seems to me that we are forthwith invited if not forced into the inner sanctum of mimetic mysteries where, in imitating, we will find distance from the imitated and hence gain some release from the suffocating hold of "constructionism" no less than the dreadfully passive view of nature it upholds.