

PITARCH, PEDRO AND JOSÉ ANTONIO KELLY (eds). 2019. *The Culture of Invention in the Americas: Anthropological Experiments with Roy Wagner*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing. 288 pp. ISBN978-1912385027.

Although published after he passed away, Roy Wagner left his mark on this volume in a number of ways. In keeping with his figure/ground analytic, Wagner starts as the ground to the authors' figure, faintly present at the edges of their analyses. In the commentary at the end of the book, he shifts to being the figure and the contributing authors become the ground, as he explores the details of their chapters. The editors draw attention early on to the fact that Wagner does not systematically appear in European curricula as he does many Latin American departments, and as such has become somewhat of a forgotten figure amongst other well-known theoretical canons. Nonetheless, many of his ideas about culture, symbolism, social change, and self-reflexive anthropology are antecedent to more familiar theories, and foundational for anthropological knowledge more broadly. While not the first to energise recognition of Wagner's influence in the discipline (see *Social Analysis* 46:1), this volume applies his broad corpus of work to Americanist anthropology in particular. With this volume, then, the background is yet again being pushed into the fore.

Broadly speaking, Wagner's work explores how symbols make society, and the numerous interrelated concepts that make up this extensive approach later go on to influence post-structuralist theories of partible personhood, semiotics, ontology, and STS. Most of his ideas come down to the tension between contradictory yet interdependent principles:

consanguinity and exchange, change and consistency, structure and agency, soul and body. This relationship constitutes a dialectic: the act of creation through opposing forces. The individual chapters of this volume bring these ideas to life with rich ethnographic descriptions from different regions of the Americas. While each chapter draws out different and numerous aspects of his work, I will focus on the dominant Wagnerian themes that emerge in each in order to unpack three of his central ideas: convention and invention, impersonation and expersonation, and reverse anthropology.

Wagner's most foundational idea is the interplay between convention (that which is already established) and invention (the creation of new elements through metaphorical extension). This approach allows us to see how societies change and innovate, but also how aspects of culture can become innate. Using this approach, Marcio Goldman's chapter (Chapter 1) describes the interplay between the 'given' general divinities passed on by blood (convention) and the 'made' personal divinities obtained through initiation (differentiation) in Afro-Brazilian religion. Rather than being purely a dialectic between neat binaries or absolute entities, however, Goldman suggests that they make up a 'set of operations of continuous variation' (49). In Chapter 6, Marianna Keisalo explores the humorous performances of Chapayeka masked clowns in Mexico through Wagner's symbolic obviation (a

constellation of symbols that obviate convention by resembling and complementing one another). She shows that these performances, while ‘innovative’ at a glance, actually facilitate the recreation of convention. Focusing on shamanic performances among the Masewal people of Mexico, Alessandro Questa (Chapter 7) shows how coexisting cosmologies develop a dialectic of convention and invention. Through dance, Masewal ‘invent a total society’ (154), yet at the same time envision social change.

Moving to Lowland South America, the final three chapters of the book also utilise the convention/invention dialectic. In Chapter 9, Marcela Coelho de Souza describes in detail how rules of endogamy and exogamy among the Kisêdjê of Xingu, Brazil can be seen as a dialectic that serves to manage essential difference with whites. Marriage rules become ‘things that mutually presuppose and negate each other, by constituting the limits (...) of human kinship’ (203). Inspired by Wagner’s ethnography of the Daribi, Chloe Nahum-Claudiel (Chapter 10) explores kinship among the Enawenê-nawê of Mato Grosso. She considers how kinship needs to be unmade and re-made in settings of endogamy, which is achieved in this case through the ritual exchange of children, food, and drink, so that ‘the two lines comingle even as they perform their distinctiveness’ (215). In the final ethnographic chapter (Chapter 11), José Antonio Kelly employs Wagner’s dialectic of invention and convention to examine the narratives of continual metamorphosis that define mythological time, and the stabilization that characterises present time in Amazonian mythology (Yanomami, Yekuana and Piaroa).

Wagner builds on the intricate mechanism behind the convention/invention dialectic in his analogous concepts of impersonation and expersonation. In the former, an abstracted, more simplified version of a symbol is created, which

facilitates the creation of social conventions. Expersonation is its inverse: elements are added to make the entity more particular than the original, thus destabilising social forms. Perhaps the most thought-provoking chapters of the volume are the ones that venture into this abstract territory. Martin Holbraad (Chapter 2) utilises this approach in the context of Afro-Cuban religion, exploring the inventive aspects of Ifá divination through the process of ‘living one’s sign’ as a way to ‘obviate the elements of a conventional cosmology’ (66). An initiate of Ifá can be seen to “impersonate” himself (reducing his own contingency in particular ways) in order to better “expersonate” his *oddu*/sign (augmenting it into more than the conventional characteristics) (68). Pedro Pitarch’s (Chapter 3) ethnographic account of Tzeltal (Maya) personhood outlines the different and emerging components of the body and soul during a lifetime, a process that is mapped onto the theoretical frame of a dialectical impersonation and expersonation: from the abstract to the specific, and from subjective to objective. Pitarch ultimately uses this approach—and specifically the idea of de-subjectification—to understand the phenomenon of pre-Columbian human sacrifice.

Finally, Wagner’s ‘reverse anthropology’ is applied in a number of chapters. In this approach, he draws attention to the reflexive creativity of our interlocutors, who ask questions and analyse ‘others’ as much as anthropologists do of them. In Chapter 4, Johannes Neurath uses this approach to understand how the Mexican Huichol reflexively evaluate encroaching otherness and the resulting ‘ontological clashes’ with whites. Roger Magazine (Chapter 5) also draws on ethnography in Mexico to explore how the role of the Tepetlaoxtoc *mayordomo* (who collects funds for communal fiestas) incites a reflection on morality, and in turn of

urban whites' antithesis to acceptable collective practices. Scrutinising the anthropologist's tendency to impose categories on others (a reflection that was the impetus for 'reversing'), Lydia Rodríguez and Sergio López (Chapter 8) re-analyse the theme of time in the Mayan calendric system. Previously described by academics as cyclical, the authors instead argue that time is in fact based on complex junctions reflected in seasonal planting patterns. This analytical formulation is inspired by Wagner's 'intersectional time', where events occur at the intersections of calendar cycles.

One of the main challenges of this volume is the somewhat abstruse language and content, which is in part due to its theoretical weight, but is compounded by the frequent assumption of prior knowledge. Although the chapters can be read in isolation, readers unacquainted with Wagner's work may find the introduction a suitable prelude to his myriad and complex theories. One might also find that despite the anti-representational slant of Wagner's *oeuvre*, the volume leaves one feeling that his theories often end up distilling social life as permutations of resembling binaries. Some of the authors

recognise that social life is never quite so neat, yet the resulting models tend to repeatedly organise the underlying multiplicities, knots and entanglements. Having said that, this approach clearly has its creative benefits. Wagnerian analyses certainly thwart equilibrium, they remain motile and vibrant, concerned more with 'change and transformation than with stasis and reproduction' (6).

Ultimately, this is a volume that confounds and dizzies the mind in its abstract fractal layering, flipping figure-ground relationships, cascading fractals, scaled replications, dialectic binaries, iterations, bifurcations and retroversions. Indeed, Wagner's commentary at the end is an appropriate poetic—and at times enigmatic—culmination of these complex ideas. But perhaps this is what makes the book so stimulating, particularly for those looking for new ways of thinking about Amerindian ethnography, complex relationships, and social transformations.

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