The Culture of Invention in the Americas takes the theoretical contribution of one of anthropology’s most radical thinkers, Roy Wagner, as a basis for conceptual improvisation. It uses Wagner’s most synthetic and complex insights—developed in Melanesia and captured in the title of his most famous book, The Invention of Culture—as a springboard for an exploration of other anthropological and societal imaginaries. What do the inherent reflexivity, recursiveness and limits of all and any peoples’ anthropologies render for us to write and think about, and live within? Who is doing anthropology about whom? Which are the best ways to convey our partial grasp of these conundrums: theory, poetry, jokes? No claim is made to resolve what should not be seen as a problem. Instead, inspired by Roy Wagner’s study and use of metaphor, this book explores analogical variations of these riddles.

The chapters bring together ethnographic regions rarely investigated together: indigenous peoples of Mexico and Lowland South America; and Afro-American peoples of Brazil and Cuba. The ‘partial connections’ highlighted by the authors’ analytic conjunctions—Ifá divination practices and Yamanami shamanism, Kísejé (Amazonia) and Huichol (Mexico) anthropology of Whites, and Meso-American and Afro-American practices of sacrifice—show the inspirational potential of such rapprochements.

As the first book to acknowledge the full range of Wagner’s anthropological contributions, and an initial joint exploration of Native American and Afro-American ethnographies, this experimental work honours Wagner’s vision of a multiplicity of peoples’ anthropologies through and of each other. It concludes with a remarkable dialogue created by Roy Wagner’s responses to each author’s work.

We don’t have to imagine what Wagner might have made of this inspired collection: his concluding commentary on each of these extraordinary chapters is in effect a collection in itself. The sparks they together ignite make this an editorial and publishing triumph.

Marilyn Strathern, University of Cambridge

If Roy Wagner famously ‘invented’ culture, the contributors to this volume ‘counter-invent’ Wagner, at once engaging comprehensively and didactically with his thought, and exteriorizing it onto novel conceptual and geographical territories. A book from ‘tomorrow’s yesterday’ (Wagner), The Culture of Invention in the Americas anticipates for us the anthropology to come—playful, experimental, and deeply ethnographic.

Alberto Corsín Jiménez, Spanish National Research Council
THE CULTURE OF INVENTION IN THE AMERICAS
The Culture of Invention in the Americas

Anthropological Experiments with Roy Wagner

Edited by Pedro Pitarch & José Antonio Kelly
This book is a celebration of Roy Wagner’s life work. We know he was very eager to see the final results, but unfortunately this was not meant to be. Roy passed away on the 10th of September 2018, a little before publication. Given the now posthumous character of this commemorative volume, we sincerely hope the chapters here collected serve as a tribute to Roy’s intellectual brilliance and stamina, and above all, generosity, which all of those who knew him found so special. Roy was one of our discipline’s most innovative and inspiring thinkers, and his combination of academic rigour with humour and poetic flare gave him a style all of his own. May the legacy of this anthropological shaman live on.
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**Roy Wagner** was a professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Virginia for the last forty years. His ethnographic work with Daribi and Barok peoples in Papua New Guinea and New Ireland, respectively, forms the base for his vast body of publications, comprising nine books, as well as many articles, on topics ranging from kinship and mythology to post-structural anthropology, ethnographic methodology and trickery, and fiction. Some of this work serves as the inspiration and guiding line of enquiry for this book.
This book honours the work of one of anthropology’s most innovative thinkers, Roy Wagner, by showing the potential of his wide-ranging oeuvre in the anthropology made in and about the Americas. The chapters collected in this book were originally presented at a seminar entitled ‘The Culture of Invention in the Americas’, held in Trujillo, Spain, in 2013. The seminar brought together a number of anthropologists, from young graduates students to established professors trained and active in very different anthropological schools: Britain, Mexico, Spain, the United States, Finland and Brazil.

This diversity renders no canonical or unified reading of Wagnerian anthropology, and it could not be otherwise lest we betray the spirit of Wagner’s work, which, in the manner of the mythical corpus of a people, offers a differentiating array of poignant commentary on social life, and an exploration in human imagination; less a creed or doctrine than a basis for improvisation – as Wagner himself characterized Daribi religion (Wagner 1972).

In different chapters, the book puts the full range of Wagner’s concepts in relation to ethnographies of indigenous American peoples (specifically peoples of Mexico and Lowland South America) and Afro-American peoples (of Brazil and Cuba). The connection between often hard-to-comprehend concepts and detailed ethnography brings new light, both to the understanding of ritual, kinship and myth among these peoples, and to Wagner’s theoretical contribution.

Our authors’ engagement with Wagner’s work ranges from his first monograph, The Curse of Souw (Wagner 1967), through to his most recent poetic-theoretical work, Coyote Anthropology (Wagner 2010). Even some
unpublished material is insightfully put to use. In this way, the chapters gathered here converse both with Wagner’s more systematic and sustained theoretical propositions such as the ‘dialectics of invention and convention’ (Wagner 1981), ‘figure–ground reversal’ (Wagner 1986a) and ‘symbolic obviation’ (Wagner 1978), as well as with his more recent ideas such as ‘anti-twinning’ (Wagner 2001) and ‘expersonation’ (Wagner 2010).

That Roy Wagner’s work was of seminal importance to innovations in the anthropology of Melanesia during the 1980s is well known – he is perhaps the key author to be credited with what came to be known as the ‘new Melanesian ethnography’ (Josephides 1991). Much less known is the extent to which Wagner’s ideas have been applied in the anthropology of the Americas. This is mainly because Wagner’s influence in this ethnographic region – itself not a unified study area – is a much more recent phenomena. This collection of essays is the first attempt to acknowledge the recovery of Wagnerian anthropology and to show its fertility in Americanist anthropology. As such, it is worth noting the ways in which this contributes to different regional studies.

To begin with, this is the first time that the potential of Wagnerian anthropology for Afro-American religious studies is explored. Two of the chapters (by Goldman, and Holbraad) engage with Wagner’s ideas to bring about original insights into the understanding of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban religious practice. This should not surprise us. So-called Afro-American studies have always been marked by an opposition between the first and second terms of the hyphenated expression – between the search for a traditional and always preserved ‘culture’, and the insistence on ‘invention’ of new forms and strategies. In this closed scenario, the Wagnerian dialectics between convention and variation could not but bring a breath of fresh air. Moreover, notions such as the ‘fractal person’ (Wagner 1991) and his hypotheses such as the creative character of cultures (Wagner 1981) could not leave unaltered the way in which the notion of the person and the constructivism of religions of African origin are understood.

Secondly, this is also the first time that Wagner’s influence on the study of indigenous peoples in Mexico is made so forcibly explicit. Six chapters (by Pitarch, Neurath, Magazine, Keisalo, Questa, and Rodríguez and López) apply

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1 Being ethnographically restricted to indigenous and Afro-American peoples in the Americas on the one hand, and exploring the full range of Wagner’s work on the other, this collection contrasts with, and expands on, the special issue of the journal Social Analysis organized by David Murray and Joel Robbins (2002) to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the original publication of Wagner’s The Invention of Culture.
different aspects of Wagner's work to ethnographic accounts of the Yaqui, Huichol, Nawa and Maya. Considering the traditionally particularistic and historicist character of Meso-American anthropology, applying Wagner's concepts to this area represents an ethnographic and conceptual experiment. The types of problems that emerge from Wagner's work on Melanesia illuminate aspects of Mexican indigenous cultures in an unexpected way, highlighting partial connections among Meso-American groups, as well as with regions such as Amazonia and Melanesia.

Thirdly, three of the chapters (by Coelho de Souza, Nahum-Claudel, and Kelly) continue exploring the usefulness of several Wagnerian concepts for the study of Amazonian peoples in ways that extend and renew the already acknowledged kinship between Melanesianist and Amazonianist anthropology (see e.g. Kelly 2001; Strathern 1999; Gregor and Tuzin 2001). While there are a few important articles that draw on Wagnerian anthropology for the formulation of theoretical approaches to Amerindian ethnographic problems (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2001, 2013), individual ethnographies that put Wagnerian anthropology to use are harder to locate (see e.g. Kelly 2011; Pitarch 2010), its influence most present in a number of recent master's and doctoral dissertations written in Brazil.

Roy Wagner has become the object of a small cult of dedicated readers despite the fact that his anthropology seems to have little impact on current theoretical debates – with the exception of recent literature on the ontological turn in anthropology. Currently considered either an expression of a bygone 'phase' in symbolic anthropology or a bit of a freak, mainstream anthropology in places like the United States and England would consider his work outdated. But from the perspective of Brazil and Mexico, things look different. In Brazil, and in the particular case of Amazonianist anthropology, Wagner’s work was brought to our attention and made relevant to a series of issues by the influential anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Perhaps the most evident connection between the two authors’ work is to be found in Viveiros de Castro’s theory of Amerindian perspectivism, and Wagner’s theory of symbolism expounded in The Invention of Culture (Wagner 1981). Consequently, Wagner’s work is today studied in Brazil in most postgraduate programmes in the context of contemporary anthropological debates. As a consequence, The Invention of Culture was translated by Brazilian initiative into Portuguese in 2010.

In Mexico, there has been a recent but intense upsurge of interest in Wagner’s ideas, especially in the work of Pedro Pitarch, Johannes Neurath and Roger Magazine. Although Wagner’s books have yet to be translated into Spanish, his works are currently required texts in various programmes in anthropology, and a new generation of anthropologists who are now
writing their doctoral theses utilize Wagnerian concepts. Alongside his recent influence on the ethnography of Mexico, Wagner himself has recently written on Meso-American cultures, especially pre-Columbian civilizations (Wagner 2013). As a result, we have a handful of illuminating insights, such as a reinterpretation of the workings of the Mayan calendar (Rodríguez and López, this volume).

Some essential Wagnerian concepts

Any attempt to summarize Wagner’s theoretical import is a risky enterprise. Beginning with ethnographic descriptions and analysis of the Daribi people of Papua New Guinea, Wagner’s work seems to slide along a gradient, from explanation to metaphor, as communicative technique. A shift from ethnography to theory is also evident, as is the increasing role of humour, irony and poetry. The clarity of exposition of native categories relating to social organization and religion found in his books, from The Invention of Culture (Wagner 1981) onwards, is substituted by increasingly metaphorical means of making his points. To many this may seem purposeful obscurity, making things overly complex or just a matter of style. But it seems there is method to this madness, for the metaphoric means of pedagogy is rigour of a certain kind: that which seeks to communicate about other peoples in form as well as content.

This difficulty notwithstanding, and given that many of this volume’s authors take some basic elements of Wagnerian anthropology for granted, we now outline some of his most long-lasting concepts and methodological principles for the unacquainted reader. We begin with a brief account of what could be called the ‘early Wagner’, that is, his first works, and those where the main elements of his thought appear and develop. These are also the more conventionally pedagogic works of his oeuvre. Next we present some of Wagner’s most recent work, some of which remains unpublished, where the aforementioned shift in narrative style is most evident, as is the broadening of Wagner’s topics of interest, particularly in the area of Meso-American anthropology. This also includes Wagner’s long-lasting interest in the writings of Carlos Castaneda.

The Curse of Souw (Wagner 1967) is a monograph based on Wagner’s first field experience among the Daribi of mainland Papua New Guinea. It is a book about kinship and social organization, classic subjects of British social anthropology, written by someone raised in the American cultural tradition, a mixture that yields a fertile and fresh understanding of established topics. At least three of Wagner’s most durable ideas can be traced to this early book.

First, exchange of gendered wealth items are understood by Daribi not as connecting pre-existing clans, as standard alliance theory would suggest,
but rather as means to cancel or redeem claims made by maternal relatives over a sister’s offspring on the grounds of innate bonds of blood. This was perhaps the first clear statement of a socio-cosmological regime where people and many other agents in the world are presumed to be innately connected by shared similarity, and that human social action must then be devoted to cutting or countering these connections, or otherwise appropriately directing flows of similarity. That relations may be a matter of separating what is already connected is counter-intuitive for Euro-American kinship and sociology, which presumes persons are prior to the social connections they must actively make. In another famous article, Wagner (1974) showed how the complexity and ultimate failure of studies of social organization bent on finding corporate social groups in the New Guinea Highlands was, in essence, due to analysts remaining oblivious to this inversion between native and Western assumptions about persons and relations.

Second, Wagner tells us that in Daribi understanding it is only consanguinity that ‘relates’, and that it is exchange and reciprocity that ‘opposes relationships’. Consanguinity is a principle that extends relations, whilst exchange is the principle that restricts these same relations, and in doing so instantiates ‘groups’. Basically, cognatic relations are recast as interactions between lineally constituted groups. The interaction between these two principles, at the heart of kinship and wider social organization, is dialectical, for it involves contradictory yet interdependent principles; they are processes that work against each other but that are nonetheless complementary. In the long run, this interaction generates cycles of kin-making and unmaking, and of clan definition, dissolution and reconstitution, in a larger-scaled dialectical process. This kind of ‘dialectic without synthesis,’ with mutually negating principles or effects supporting each other, where each is what the other acts upon in recursive fashion, is at the heart of Wagner’s semiotic theory (see Wagner 1981) and the derivate method of ‘obviational’ analysis applicable to myth (see Wagner 1978), as well as kinship and historical change (see Wagner 1986a).

Third, Wagner concludes The Curse of Souw with a long comparative commentary on natives and anthropologists as both users of symbols and builders of models, the only difference being the ends to which such symbols and models are put. It could be said this is the first sketch of what Wagner would synthetically call ‘reverse anthropology’ (Wagner 1981) and of the methodological premise that dissolves any epistemological hierarchy between anthropologist and native where the latter can only provide ‘data’ for the former to do the explaining and the ‘theory’. In his second monograph, Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion (Wagner 1972), Wagner begins to lay out the semiotic theory that is later completed in The Invention of Culture
The focus here is on metaphor and innovation, stressing their necessity as means of keeping meaning meaningful, as it were. Here, one of the marks of Wagner’s semiotics becomes clear: the important opposition in his theory between metaphor, by which Wagner means any form of trope in which one thing or word stands for another, and lexical denotation. The latter can only signify tautologically, whilst the former is necessary for the creation of non-tautological meaning. Metaphor extends the symbols of a culture establishing new relations of both contrast and analogy between previously unconnected elements. The crux of this distinction is that, ‘[a] lexical “coding” signifies an isolated element, but a metaphor signifies a relation’ (Wagner 1972:5). Later, in *The Invention of Culture*, Wagner will call these metaphorical extensions ‘symbols that stand for themselves’ or ‘differentiating symbols’ precisely because, instead of pointing to a referent, a metaphor signifies only the new relation it has just struck. Introducing symbol and referent at the same time, it affects the collapse of the symbol/referent distinction with which we normally think of symbols.

As Wagner further develops his theory he will talk about how sets of metaphors in a culture will either be mutually complementary or contradictory, entering in a dialectical relation of innovation, which is how a culture keeps its symbols ‘charged’ and compelling. There are two corollaries of these propositions: first, thinking of culture as the process of extending analogies, and thus much more to do with change and transformation than with stasis and reproduction; and second, thinking of innovation as the expressive or differentiating aspect of any act, thought or phrase, however habitual or markedly novel.

*The Invention of Culture* (Wagner 1981) is Wagner’s most renowned book. More theoretical than ethnographic, it complements his theory of metaphor and lays out what could be called an ontology of symbols and the attendant consequences for the practice of anthropology. A series of additions to the ‘Habu model’ must be introduced in *The Invention of Culture* to reach a more comprehensive theory.

First, Wagner defines a more clear distinction between conventional and differentiating modes of symbolization. The first mode is responsible for introducing the opposition between symbol and referent and of ‘bestowing order’ and ‘rational integration’ upon disparate elements of the latter. Differentiating symbolization collapses the previous distinction, undoes the separation between subject and object and has a particularizing or individuating effect. This is the innovatory symbolic mode described in *Habu* (Wagner 1972) and now linked to ‘invention’. Conventional symbols collectivize: all that aids in the recognition of something as an instance of a category pertains to, or is the result of, convention. Differentiating symbols
particularize: all that accounts for expressiveness and specificity of an action pertains to, or is the result of, invention.

Second, these modes of symbolization interact dialectically. Conventional and differentiating modes of symbolization are mobilized in any and all action, and are at the same time supportive of, and against, each other. Convention and invention work through each other's meshes, and in the process the conventional is particularized – think of a national constitution that in time becomes a myriad of laws, decrees and clauses; and the particular is conventionalized – think of the standardization of once novel linguistic expressions.

Third, it follows that there is no one-sided symbol that 'refers' or 'points to' a given external reality, only different symbolic modes mutually impinging on one another. The symbolizer, the one who acts, must 'mask' their active role in creating both what they see as a product of their action and what they consider their internal motivation, external necessity to act or that which they are acting upon. Something must be invented as what we are doing, and in doing so, something is 'counter-invented' as what is innate or given.

The core of any and every set of cultural conventions is a simple distinction as to what kind of contexts, the non-conventionalized ones or those of convention itself, are to be deliberately articulated in the course of human action, and what kind of contexts are to be counter-invented as 'motivation' under the conventional mask of 'the given' or 'the innate'. Of course, for any given set of conventions, be it that of a tribe, community, 'culture' or social class, there are only two possibilities: a people who deliberately differentiate as the form of their action will invariably counter-invent a motivating collectivity as 'innate', and a people who deliberately collectivize will counter-invent a motivating differentiation in this way. As contrasting modes of thought, perception, and action, there is all the difference in the world between these two.

Urban, middle classes socialized in the Euro-American tradition tend to think of the conventions of their culture as products of human action and correspondingly see the 'world of natural incident' as innate or given. This is pretty much how anthropology has traditionally thought of culture and nature, and it is the basis of a multicultural or social-constructivist world view. Tribal and peasant peoples like the Daribi assign their conventions to the innate and are motivated to differentiate or deliberately create the incidental and particular.

As this binarism might appear obsolete, it is worth noting that Wagner does not deploy these distinctions in either an absolute or an evolutionist manner, but rather in a sophisticated way that threads everyday symbolic action – common to all peoples – with more overarching meta-ideological
commitments distinguishing the ways of inhabiting the world of, say, Amerindians on the one hand, and the colonial and postcolonial agents of the encroaching societies they have historically related to on the other. Moreover, all cultures, be they predominantly collectivizing or differentiating, have specific people and moments that invert their conventional orientation as a necessary means of ‘recharging’ their symbols.

This semiotic theory has some serious implications for anthropological practice that are dealt with in the opening and closing chapters of the book. If at the semiotic level we can no longer speak of ‘symbol’ and ‘reality’, neither can we think of anthropological discourse as organizing or ‘imposing rational integration’ in the fashion of conventional symbolization, upon natives’ discourse, as if it were mere reference or raw data (see Viveiros de Castro 2013). Anthropology must then reflexively become aware that its reality (nature) is part of its invention, not just culture. Put otherwise, anthropological relativity is not a principle limited to things cultural. If we are to avoid describing other peoples’ creativity as mere replicas or variations of our own, relativity is pertinent to nature as well, and we must come to terms with the fact that people invent the whole of their realities not just a (cultural) part of it.

Reverse anthropology, another of Wagner’s concepts that recurs in several of the chapters in this volume, is not just a matter of adding an ‘ethno’ suffix to the categories we are familiar with, like science and history, for this simply reduces other peoples’ creativity to the form of answers to the questions that are important for us. Reverse anthropology cuts through our assumptions trying to uncover other peoples’ questions, and the result yields nothing like our anthropology. In Wagner’s own example, the Melanesian counterparts to our anthropology are their cargo cults: anthropology and cargo metaphorize the same relation in opposite directions. Reverse anthropology illuminates a relation between distinct forms of creativity as opposed to having one (the anthropologist’s) analyse the other (the native’s).

Wagner argues in The Invention of Culture and elsewhere (Wagner 1974) that these propositions do not just have theoretical implications, but also ethical and political ones – implied when Wagner talks of anthropologists, missionaries and colonial administration agents in the same breath. Goldman eloquently refers to these implications when he suggests that Wagner’s anthropology provides guidelines to the issue of ‘how to proceed so as to avoid the reproduction, on the plane of the production of anthropological knowledge, of the relations of domination that the peoples with which anthropologists work with are subjected to?’ (Goldman 2011:200).

Let us close this summary of Wagner’s early conceptual apparatus with obviation, another notion that abounds in this volume. Symbolic obviation is mentioned in The Invention of Culture but is developed more fully in Lethal
Speech (Wagner 1978). It is a return to a discussion of metaphor, as in Habu (Wagner 1972), though focused this time on Daribi myths and other narrative genres (see Holbraad, this volume). As Wagner himself says:

*Lethal Speech* is ‘about’ obviation, as indeed *Habu* is about metaphor, and *The Invention of Culture*, concerned as it is with the relation of these forms to convention, thus becomes the middle term of an unintended trilogy.

(Wagner 1981:xvi)

At the level of semiotics, obviation is the effect of differentiating symbolization, ‘supplanting a conventional semiotic relation with an innovative and self-contained relation’ (Wagner 1978:31). This we knew from *Habu*, as Wagner hints: ‘[o]bviation, then, is a metaphor for metaphor, “naming” it by substituting its effect’ (ibid.:32). Obviation turns on the two senses of the term: an analogy will always highlight some connection between distinct elements – making them apparent or ‘obvious’ – but at the cost of other possible connections, the conventional ones, being negated or ‘disposed of’ – hence also ‘obviated’. In this simplest sense, whenever a new metaphor is introduced in speech, obviation is what draws our attention to an unexpected connection, thereby overlooking conventional contexts. But in *Lethal Speech* Wagner takes this further, for obviation is also ‘the definitive paradigm of semiotic transformation’ (ibid.:31). These semiotic transformations occur in myths – understood as ‘expanded tropes’ – as sequences of successive obviations where the interaction between the two (conventionalizing and differentiating) semiotic modalities renders ‘a self-containing and self-closing dialectic – or better, perhaps, a dialectic that becomes something’ (ibid.:35). Dispelling any possible idea of his method being only adequate for the analysis of myth, Wagner later deploys it in a reanalysis of Daribi kinship (Wagner 1986a:34–57).2 Even if she does not cast her analysis in these terms, Nahum-Claudel’s analysis of Enawene-nawe kinship is a good example of an obviational sequence. In this case, a number of gendered exchanges of vital wealth propitiate the reconversion of kinship relations, initiated with the substitution of cognatic for lineal kin ties at betrothal, and followed by a series of relational reconfigurations spanning three generations, to finally reach the point where cognatic connections must be unmade again, beginning the sequence anew.

Over the past few years Wagner’s work seems to have taken a partially different tack. We are referring now to *Coyote Anthropology* (Wagner 2010), but also to some unpublished work that Wagner has very generously shared.

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2 For other possible applications, see also the chapters by Holbraad and Keisalo (this volume).
with us (Wagner 2012, 2014). One of these unpublished works is a synthesis of the undergraduate course on Castaneda and Don Juan that Wagner gives at the University of Virginia, based on the writings of Carlos Castaneda. The second is a reflection about shamanism as a ‘hyper-objective’ phenomenon, that is, a form of non-subjective presence that goes beyond the standards of objectivity.

In these works, the basic concepts are, in essence, the same that appear in earlier texts, with the exception of the impersonation/expersonation pair and the idea of ‘hyper-objectivity’.3 The subjects about which Wagner writes have, on the other hand, become more diverse: anti-twins, classical and jazz music – as in Wagner’s discussion about syncopation in his chapter in this volume – physics and cosmology, shamanism, pre-Columbian Meso-American civilizations, poetry, the work of Carlos Castaneda, tonal/nagual, science-fiction. No doubt some or all of these themes were present in his previous books, but there they functioned as a background, whilst now they seem to have come to the fore; they have become figure (to use one of Wagner’s preferred images). However, as we said earlier, the more noticeable change is in Wagner’s expositional style. Academic argument gives way to a form of expression based on allegorical tales, sonnets of Wagner’s own authorship (there are twenty-one in his latest manuscript), autobiographical details, incidents of his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, hallucinogenic experiences and, above all, humour. What is Coyote Anthropology if not a long dialogue between one Roy Wagner and his ‘anti-twin’, a coyote that is a trickster? Taken altogether, these texts present arguments without an apparent subject or perceivable order, and for reasons we shall see below, without a cause–effect relation binding them (post hoc ergo propter hoc). The commentaries Wagner offers to the chapters of this volume are a good example of this style of discussion.

To think of this form of writing merely as a textual strategy would unnecessarily limit its implications. One has the impression of being faced with an effort to produce another form of anthropology, one built on radically different foundations from those that have sustained it as a scientific discipline since the nineteenth century. A short reference to the unpublished work on the hyper-objectivity of shamanism (Wagner 2014) is helpful to understand how Wagner sees anthropology. Here he opposes shamanism to science (and religion). The scientist manipulates the chains of cause and effect reasoning, ‘like tracing the whole matter and energy event patterning of our universe back in time to an apocryphal Bing Bang’ (ibid.:8). By contrast, the shaman

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3 For ethnographic interpretations of impersonation and expersonation, see the chapters by Holbraad and Pitarch (this volume).
manipulates coincidences, ‘things that just happen to happen that way, with the shamans themselves as their catalyst’ (ibid.:8). Our science, Wagner observes,

uses analogies based on human attributes and actions such as ‘force’ or ‘attraction’ ... and calls them 'heuristics,' in other words things that are only pretended to be that way to make them more understandable to us.

(ibid.:10)

‘Shamanic peoples,’ by contrast:

drop the pretense, and identify the analogies directly with their natural sources. Thus, instead of objectifying mountain ranges or moving air as geological or meteorological phenomena, Navajo speak of ‘mountain people’ or ‘wind people’ (self-inclusive heuristics of thought and action alike). If they had to deal with Albert Einstein’s physics, they would probably talk about ‘Mass Man, ‘Gravity Woman, ‘ and the ‘Matter/Energy Twins.’

(ibid.:10)

It is in this sense that shamanism (Wagner speaks of shamanic people, shamanic civilizations and so forth) is hyper-objective. In Wagner’s words, a hyper-object is:

one that cannot be experienced altogether and at once because it is your participation in it – your internalization of its rhythms and images – that makes up the part that remains invisible throughout. You don’t merely ‘understand’ it, you live it as it lives you.

(ibid.:14)

Hence the usefulness of the sonnet as a means of explanation, for it is both what is being studied and the means to do so, that is, the sonnet participates in its own explanation.

Shamanism and anthropology – that is, anthropology in Wagner’s understanding – coincide. In both cases their adepts are not satisfied with formulaic recipes or abstract idealizations; instead, they try to apprehend their subject as something concrete. However, both the shaman that identifies himself/herself completely with his/her ‘helpers’ and the anthropologist that does the same with the people s/he studies end up sterile, for both lack the critical distance between two perspectives so as to perceive the hyper-objective dimension of the encounter. This is, for instance, the essence of transference, ‘the agency of the active subject that turned Freud into a shaman
of the subconscious, and his analogical model of the repressed libido into a shamanic ally’ (ibid.:63).

At this point we must refer to the presence of Castaneda in Wagner’s work. His particular interpretation and use of Carlos Castaneda’s books merit, at least, a long and complex essay, but a brief comment on this subject is inescapable in a volume dedicated to Wagner’s influence in Americanist anthropology, particularly one inclusive of the indigenous cultures of Mexico. As far as we know, Castaneda is cited by Wagner for the first time – marginally in the introduction – in *The Invention of Culture* (1981:xvii–xviii), and later, in similar terms, in *An Anthropology of the Subject* (Wagner 2001). Contrastingly, Castaneda is a central figure in *Coyote Anthropology* (Wagner 2010), and even more relevant in the above mentioned unpublished manuscripts. If we also consider that Wagner has taught his course on Castaneda in the University of Virginia since 1982, it is clear that Castaneda’s influence has been long-lasting, if only becoming explicit recently.

Castaneda’s books have received some attention among non-Meso-Americanist anthropologists. Wagner is undoubtedly the most notable case, but we may also recall Mary Douglas’s praise-filled review of his first books (Douglas 1975). On the other hand, any attempt to take these books seriously – that is, as an ethnography of an indigenous people, as the author always intended – is, to say the least, disconcerting for the ethnographer working in Mexico. For example, the meanings of ‘tonal’ and ‘nagual’, terms taken from the ethnographic literature, have no conceptual relation to indigenous ideas as they have been described in the anthropology of the region. As can be seen in this volume, none of the chapters dedicated to the ethnography of indigenous peoples of Mexico cite the work of Castaneda. All in all, within the anthropology of Meso-America there is no doubt that, however one chooses to interpret them, Castaneda’s books have nothing to do with the indigenous people of Mexico.

How can we explain this difference in perception? The answer partly lies in that in the teachings of Don Juan and his friends it is not only that one cannot identify specifically Meso-American ideas or preoccupations, but above all one cannot hear in the supposedly indigenous words the echo of anything minimally familiar or recognizable. Christopher Crocker (1992:245–6) mentions how ethnographers of a specific cultural area – Amazonia, the Andes or Meso-America, for example – spontaneously recognize certain characteristic ‘expressive incidents,’ a detail or a fragment, that speaks louder than the words themselves, as it were. Crocker cites Lévi-Strauss on how he could tell if a myth was Amerindian even if only listening to a few phrases, but how he, nonetheless, remained perplexed as to how he could do it. A good ethnographer, Crocker concludes, channels the comprehension of their
own texts through this type of expressive incident. This is why the characters in Castaneda’s books appear so unlikely: in their words, in their expressivity, there is nothing that a minimally knowledgeable reader could immediately recognize as resonating with those of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Guatemala. The words of Don Juan in this respect are totally foreign.

It is hard to say to what degree Wagner takes Castaneda’s work as ethnography – however unconventional, at least the result of a real field experience – or as allegory. It often seems closer to the latter, even if Wagner sometimes appears to take Don Juan as a character in flesh and blood, however difficult it may be to believe we are dealing with a Yaqui Indian, as Castaneda presents him. This is not the place to discuss (once again) the improbability of Castaneda’s fieldwork among an indigenous group, although we know that at some point he attempted to work among the Huichol, without success.4 Several authors have pointed to other written sources of inspiration for Castaneda’s books. Rodney Needham (1985:195–204), for example, has suggested Zen Buddhism as a probable inspiration for the first two books of the Don Juan saga.

However it may be, what Wagner seems to find in Castaneda’s writings is a certain heuristic. As Wagner puts it:

The whole success of Castaneda’s work, either in the books or in teaching, depends exclusively on one thing, however else it may be illuminated or obscured by examples: the technique of drawing the sharpest possible contrasts among people, events or phenomena so that the world as we normally perceive it is thrown into sharp relief, caught on a play of light and shadow between one extreme and another.

(Wagner 2010:ix)

It is precisely this kind of contrast – reminiscent of conceptual pairs such as convention and invention, figure–ground reversal – that allows the object of anthropology to come to the fore.

We [anthropologists] imitate the language, thoughts and lifestyles of other people, copying them as a version of ‘culture’, and this is how the anthropologist is inclined to explain his or her work to the uninitiated. Still this is a highly problematic approach, even when fully understood (which is rare). Using one culture, if that is the term, to copy or imitate another, or even copying a culture within itself, almost always leads to a sterile and useless tautology – a comparison of comparison of itself. But you see, there

4 Johannes Neurath (personal communication, 2013).
is another way, best evidenced in what Castaneda’s Don Juan (whoever he may be) calls seeing, and William Shakespeare’s play of Hamlet addressed in a more traditional way. I call that other way expersonation (Don Juan calls it ‘not-doing’), and in many ways it is the true opposite of anthropology. It works like this: humor (or anthropology) takes the person out of its perspective, but seeing (expersonation) takes the perspective out of the person.

(ibid.:2)

The contrast between ‘taking the person out of its perspective’ of conventional anthropology and ‘taking the perspective out of the person’ characteristic, among others, of Castaneda’s books is what, according to Wagner, allows us to envision the meaning of anthropology. In the first case, heuristics help us to understand facts; in the second, the ‘shaman’ (or anthropologist) impersonates heuristics himself/herself. Holbraad (this volume) offers another way to understand the impersonation/expersonation contrast. To impersonate is to obviate in favour of convention, subtracting much particularity whilst augmenting a few elements of an original, whereas to expersonate is to add more particularity than is present in the original. This is why Holbraad suggests Wagner has, with the impersonation/expersonation pair, offered a quantified version of the unequal effects of conventionalizing and differentiating symbolization.

Fortunately for Americanists, his reading of Castaneda’s oeuvre has lead Wagner to take an interest in pre-Columbian Meso-American civilizations. This interest is manifest in his latest works. ‘What if the key to our own civilization’, Wagner asks, ‘were the inside-out understanding of another?’ (Wagner 2014:6). In these texts, the cultures of Meso-American cities prior to the conquest represent a maximum contrast with Western modern culture. In fact, ancient Meso-Americans (‘a totally shamanic civilization’) are in opposition to modern civilization as shamanism is to science. ‘For modern science coincidence belongs to the “private-sector” and metaphor and insight serve as hypotheses to understand the hard data’ (ibid.:35). For the Meso-Americans, on the other hand:

the Cosmos was not made up of spatial relations and intervals, but coincidences, moments in time or what we like to call ‘specific events’. For them the calendar was dictionary, encyclopaedia, almanac and Bible, all rolled into one.

(ibid.:33)
If we ‘use facts, observations, and experiments to prove the way things always were, and always will be,’ they ‘used omens to divine (not define) future events and happenings’ (ibid.:38).

This kind of understanding occasionally allows for radical insights into Meso-American cosmology. Take for instance, the notion of time. The Maya, Wagner says, subordinate spatial extension to temporal omnipresence; ‘there’ is ‘before’ and ‘here’ is ‘now’. That is, they temporalize space (as we spatialize time). The key to the Maya Long Count calendar is to acknowledge that time exists only in the intersections of cycles, and not otherwise in the cycles themselves. This means we are dealing with a non-spatial (non-cyclical, non-linear and so on) notion of time and, as Lydia Rodríguez and Sergio López (this volume) observe, this offers a sophisticated alternative to the ‘innocent geometrical metaphors’ which have been commonly used to describe the Maya notion of time.

**Wagner’s work in the wider anthropological context**

Let us now situate, however partially, in both senses of the term, Wagner’s work in relation to other trends of anthropological thought. This will not only dispel ideas about the excessive idiosyncrasy of Wagner’s work but also illustrate the kind of theoretical connections that have kept Wagnerian anthropology provocative throughout time.

In the preface to *The Invention of Culture*, Wagner acknowledges the influence of Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1966) on his semiotics, even when in the closing chapter of the book he critiques Lévi-Strauss for having ‘fought shy of completely relativistic conclusions’ (Wagner 1981:150). Whilst it is true that the universality and innate quality of nature, on the one hand, and the particular and artificial character of culture, on the other, remains an unchallenged premise in *The Savage Mind* – which could be the basis of Wagner’s critique – it is also the case that the distance Wagner charts between himself and Lévi-Strauss is reduced if we concentrate on the Lévi-Strauss of the *Mythologiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1969–1981). The ternary character of apparently binary oppositions (that is, their quality of ‘perpetual disequilibrium’); the cascading, fractal-like bifurcations of mythical thought; the renowned double twist transformations elicited by the canonical formula for myth – all these ‘post-structural’ aspects of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism (Viveiros de Castro 2008) have more than just an air of familiarity and affinity with Wagner’s semiotics, in particular with symbolic obviation (see Kelly 2010).

As has been pointed out before (Robbins 2002), Wagner’s work, in particular *The Invention of Culture*, can easily lead people to situate Wagner within the postmodern current. But it is fair to say that Wagner is both ‘pre’
postmodern, and if not completely ‘anti’, at least ‘alter’, postmodern.5 ‘Pre’ postmodern because The Invention of Culture and Wagner’s previous works (see Wagner 1974) anticipate many of the themes of Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and of the wave of reflexive and critical anthropology that followed. And in a sense Wagner is ‘alter’ postmodern too, for his focus on ‘reflexivity’ is far more Batesonian than postmodern.6 The reflexivity The Invention of Culture tackles is the inescapability of self-referentiality and recursivity in the production of anthropological knowledge – a consequence of the reflexive and recursive nature of the semiotic process itself – and the need to acknowledge this as a condition to be dealt with as opposed to a problem to be solved or avoided. What are the implications of ‘culture’ being a cultural outcome? How – technically – can we express another form of creativity through the medium of our own (see Strathern 1987)? How does reverse anthropology, in uncovering our implicit assumptions, affect the anthropology we do? What are the consequences of a radical relativism that includes shaking our own hold on nature, science and reality? These are altogether different preoccupations from those that sanctioned the ‘crisis of representation’; some are perhaps closer to the issues science and technology studies would subsequently raise.

Wagner’s particular and thorough theory of symbolism also stands out from other important trends of American cultural-symbolic anthropology, like Clifford Geertz’s interpretivism and Marshall Sahlins’s structurally inflected historical analysis (see Goldman 2011). One distinguishing mark is that Wagner subjects symbolic processes to a critical re-examination when viewed from beyond the Euro-American tradition – the distinction between conventionalizing and differentiating traditions – whereas Geertz’s ‘interpretation’ and Sahlins’s ‘cultural categories’ and their relations to the world of referents remain constant whether in Bali or Hawaii. When considering temporal change, on the other hand, there is a partial overlap between the contrast Wagner draws between dialectical/historical societies and Sahlins’s distinction between performative/prescriptive structures (Sahlins 1985). Indeed, in this connection, a triangle of conceptual resonance would be complete were we to add Lévi-Strauss’s opposition between hot and cold societies (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

The affinity between Wagner’s and Strathern’s theoretical stances, analytical language and, to a degree, literary styles, reflects a true intellectual kindred. Strathern’s focus on the relating and separating character of

5 Wagner’s own perspective on postmodernism can be glimpsed in his review of the Clifford and Marcus volume Writing Culture (Wagner 1986b).

6 See, for example, the epilogues in Bateson’s Naven (Bateson 1958:280–307).
relationships recalls Wagner’s insights in *The Curse of Souw*; Wagner’s analysis of Daribi kinship in terms of gendered exchanges of perspectives (Wagner 1977) anticipates themes that Strathern would later exploit and make more complex in *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988); the notion of fractality seems analytically important, even if implicit, in the same book (see Gell 1999), as it was, in a more perceivable manner, in *Partial Connections* (Strathern 2004); Strathern’s ‘eclipsing’ resounds with Wagner’s ‘obviation’ and the analytical substitution of the concept of ‘society’ for ‘sociality’ is reminiscent of Wagner’s early questions about ‘social groups’ in the New Guinea highlands (Wagner 1974). Other Melanesianists of different generations have also been inspired by Wagner’s concepts. For example, James Weiner (1988) relies extensively on the method of symbolic obviation in his Foi ethnography, whilst Stuart Kirsch (2006) makes ‘reverse anthropology’ the title of his book on Yonggom modes of social and environmental analysis.

Viveiros de Castro (2007) has written on the ‘partial connections’ between Wagner, Strathern and Latour, on the one (anthropological) hand, and Deleuze, on the other (philosophical) one. It is clear from that account that the distance – perhaps more topological than metric – between Wagner and Deleuze is less than one might think given the former’s dedication to metaphor and dialectics, and the latter’s stern rejection of these same categories. Viveiros de Castro calls attention to how a ‘reciprocal asymmetrical implication’ is germane both to the interaction between Deleuzian dualities and that between Wagner’s two modes of symbolization (ibid.:105). Neither is it hard to see parallels between Wagner’s symbolic obviation and the Deleuzian notion of becoming. Goldman (2011:201) also points to how Wagner’s misleadingly simple term ‘invention’ is closer to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘creation’, than to the common-sense understandings of the term associated as it is with discovery, the imposition of form over matter, or the transformation of raw material in the process of production.

Additional theoretical resemblances can be found between Wagner’s anthropological propositions and those of Bruno Latour, whose well-known calls for a symmetrical anthropology (Latour 1993) are very reminiscent of Wagner’s own call for a more radical relativity of natures and cultures in *The Invention of Culture*. From opposite ends – the anthropology of science and that of Melanesia – both authors contribute to shake and shatter the unitary quality of nature and the epistemological privilege of Western science to access it. Looking closer at each other’s theories, there is a high degree of familiarity between Latour’s description of moderns’ dissemination of nature–culture hybrids via mutually masked processes of mediation and purification (Latour 1993), and Wagner’s theory of symbolism, in which actors’ ‘conventional masking’ and unintended ‘counter-inventions’ play such crucial roles. Latour’s,
anti-Durkheimian anthropological approach of tracing associations instead of appealing to an assumed – and always already constructed – ‘society’ (Latour 2005) is partly the essence of Wagner’s equally anti-Durkheimian call to avoid the assumption of the existence of ‘social groups’ in the study of Melanesian social organizations (Wagner 1974).

Considering the methodological and conceptual resonances among the above authors, Viveiros de Castro and Goldman have written on the possible directions anthropology could take with the ‘collision’ of concepts such as ‘actor–network’, ‘reversibility’, ‘convention/invention’, ‘partial connection’ and ‘multiplicity’ in what they have called ‘post-social anthropology’ (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman 2012:422). On a similar theoretical tack, Wagner’s world-making semiotics and the anthropology he designs consistent with it has influenced, alongside other ‘post-social’ authors, the more recently discussed ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. The substitution of ‘reality’ with the differentiating symbol and the equalization of anthropologists’ and natives’ creative capacities, for example, are attuned with a number of things: Viveiros de Castro’s calls to supplant epistemological questions in anthropology with ontological ones (Viveiros de Castro 2012); the methodological principles of an anthropology informed by multi-natural perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2004); and the elimination of the asymmetry involved in using (our) nature as the pivot to compare (our and other’s) world views (see Henare et al. 2007). These are just some of the instances where we can detect the impress of Wagner’s anthropology on some – though definitely not all – of the ontological turn’s key figures.

Chapter outlines
We close this introduction with a short summary of the volume’s contributions and a commentary on a number of links that the editors have found amongst them; connections that serve to illuminate interesting possibilities for future comparative exercises.

Marcio Goldman (Chapter 1) engages one of Wagner’s most structuring dichotomies: the distinction between what people consider given or innate and what is considered artificial, available to human action. The theoretical discussion is woven into an exploration of Afro-Brazilian ethnographic issues but is centred on a ‘quadrangular symmetry’: facts and theories about these religions, and the distinction between the given and the made, are the object of both indigenous and anthropological reflection and debate. How does one deal with native discourse and debate about some people having a spiritual gift that dispenses with initiation, people that claim they were paradoxically ‘born (innate) made (artificial)? Goldman’s piece offers an ethnographic theory that connects blood, ritual and conviviality with the mana-like notion of aché.
(common to Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban religions; see Holbraad, this volume) that approximates Wagner’s binary to the more rhizomatic Deleuzian dynamic between virtual multiplicities and their actualizations. Goldman’s chapter is also a good example of Wagnerian pre-postmodern reflexivity, where the analysis of ethnographic ‘data’ forces a discussion on the status of ‘fact’ and ‘theory’, and how a self-referential discipline like anthropology (a human phenomenon studying another human phenomenon) can deal with it.

Martin Holbraad (Chapter 2) links with Goldman’s contribution both in its ethnographic context (Afro-Cuban religion) and in offering a commentary on Wagner’s concepts beyond their simple ‘application’ in the treatment of ethnographic data. Holbraad tackles the asymmetry between the absolute or definitive character of Ifá mythology and the inventive (metaphorical) processes involved in Ifá divination: how can definite myths always inform the imponderables of people’s lives without the myths themselves changing? On the one hand myths are the basis of the interpretations of babalawos (Ifá ritual specialists) of their client’s predicaments, and on the other, they provide the ‘sign’ that should guide babalawos’ own life-long character transformation. Holbraad’s analysis is interesting not only for elucidating an ethnographic problem but also for connecting, let us say, ‘old’ and ‘new’ Wagnerian concepts. The two inventive processes of Ifá are first compared to Daribi mythological narrative genres – an informative reference to Wagner (1978); next, Holbraad offers a pedagogic reading of Wagner’s (2010) recent conceptual pair of impersonation/expersonation.

Pedro Pitarch (Chapter 3) opens the series of Meso-American ethnographic accounts. Pitarch dwells at length on the Tzeltal (Maya) notion of personhood in search of some insights into wider contemporary and pre-Columbian Meso-American notions of personhood. Pitarch takes his previous work on the subject (Pitarch 2010) further with the aid of Wagner’s impersonation/expersonation pairing. Where Holbraad connects this recent Wagnerian binary with convention and invention, Pitarch in a way connects it with Wagner’s sequences of obviation, for what he details at length is how the life-long process of person constitution among the Tzeltal is a ‘sequence of progressive expersonation’. Pitarch offers first a description of the person’s double body components (‘flesh’ and ‘presence’ bodies) and double soul components (‘human’ and ‘spirit’ souls). Relations among these four components establish a typically Meso-American hierarchy of predatory capabilities and affectability. Pitarch’s point is that from prior to birth to death the person unfolds from the most abstract and unstable elements of the cosmos to the more objective and concrete. In that process, the relation between the different components of body and soul is cast in terms of reciprocal impersonation and expersonation: ‘the presence-body is the expersonation of the human-soul, while the human-
soul is the impersonation of the presence-body. A double conceptual chiasmus (a criss-crossing structure) is what seems to better describe the dynamic that holds between a person’s components and perhaps this is why Wagner’s chiasmus-laden theoretical repertoire comes in so handy. Pitarch ends his chapter with a suggestion of how contemporary Tzeltal understanding of flesh-body and spirit-soul may inform the analysis of pre-Columbian human sacrifice.

Johannes Neurath (Chapter 4) focuses on fragments of Huichol cosmology as seen in shamanic ritual and artistic expression (yarn paintings and ritual music). His chapter introduces the Wagnerian notion ‘reverse anthropology’, as it dwells on Huichol anthropology of mestizos and non-indigenous folk in general. Neurath suggests that Huichol ‘opennes to the other’ (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1995:xvii) and multi-natural ontology (Viveiros de Castro 1998) are fully equipped to deal with the challenges of articulating Huichol life and culture with encroaching modernity, at least a lot more than our usual anthropological predispositions would suggest. In different ways mythical events and the make-up of the different levels of the cosmos reveal how Huichol thought articulates the relation between Indians and whites. This discussion includes a long commentary on peyote ritual, where Neurath is at pains to illustrate how Huichol live ‘simultaneously according to more than one ontological principle and permanently transiting between them’. This quasi paradoxical situation, where people live out in so many ways an articulation of contradictory and yet necessary and complementary principles in ritual (see Keisalo, Questa, this volume) or kinship processes (see Coelho de Souza, Nahum-Claudel, this volume), brings out Wagner’s focus on taking paradox head on instead of (scientifically) avoiding it. Neurath associates the irreconcilable yet mutually implicated ontological principles present in peyote rituals and yarn painting with a more longstanding anthropological opposition between ritual reciprocity (linked to controlling or managing the worlds powers: convention) and the free gift and self-sacrifice (linked with transformation: invention), a move that opens his analysis to dialogue with the wider anthropological tradition.

Roger Magazine (Chapter 5) retains Neurath’s focus on ‘reverse anthropology’, providing an analysis of a rural population’s anthropology of urban, non-peasants, outsiders. His ethnography centres on the village of Tepetlaoxtoc but draws on material from other similarly rural towns in highland Mexico. Magazine initially dwells on whites’ difficulties in dealing with community fiestas: missionaries and government personnel frequently question the usefulness of expenditure among peasants they are supposed to be helping emerge from poverty and propelling into modern prosperity. Anthropologists tend to fair little better. They may side with the indigenous
folk, but their commitment to the individual/society dichotomy seems to miss the peasants’ motivation, less to have the fiesta itself but rather to engage in the arduous work of organizing it. Paying close attention to peasant discourse and practice, Magazine draws on Strathern’s theory of Melanesian agency (Strathern 1988) to account for the motivation behind peasants’ organizing practices. What the *mayordomo* (the person in charge of collecting the funds for holding a fiesta) has to do in his endless visits to village people is compel them, ever so slightly, into reverting their initial reluctance and instilling in them an ‘active subjective state’ of willingness to participate and collaborate with the fiesta. The point Magazine stresses is that this is not a matter of one man’s sacrifice for the communal good, nor a gesture that earns the *mayordomo* prestige, but an exercise that manifests people’s interdependence. The fiesta is ‘made by all,’ and yet this requires people to instigate each other actions. Agents depend on others for the causes of their actions. This delicate play of mutual elicitation, of cause–action interdependence among fellow villagers, is what native anthropology finds lacking in urban whites’ individualistic nature and, Magazine argues, is at the heart of the reverse anthropology that fills the peasant landscape with grotesque figures of child-snatchers and head-choppers, white engineers and bridge-builders who bury children alive or use the bodies of decapitated adults to sustain the structures they build.

Marianna Keisalo (Chapter 6) presents an analysis of the place of *Chapayeka* masked clowns within the Yaqui Easter ritual in Sonora, Mexico. Previous analyses of these and other trickster figures, Keisalo argues, have explained the humour away, by either revealing a serious message under the humour, or suggesting that the ambiguity and improvisation humour depends on is a pointer to the multiple possibilities of meaning construction and transformation. Steering clear of these approaches, Keisalo focuses more on what the humour of the *Chapayeka* does and less on what they mean. This might sound closer to Gell’s thoroughly anti-semiotic stance on the anthropology of art (Gell 1998) than to a Wagnerian semiotic analysis, and yet, Keisalo finds precisely in Wagner’s theory of symbolic obviation the key that points to the masked clowns’ role in the ritual. Keisalo must be commended for being the only contributor that has taken on Wagner’s challenging – when not mind-boggling – obviation sequences (see Wagner 1986a). The chapter is also the only one to exhibit some of the complex and mainly graphic or visual concepts Wagner is fond of: the obviational sequence is a cycle of ‘dialectics with no synthesis’ in the form of a Serpinski gasket! So what do the clowns do? Part of Keisalo’s answer takes us back to the conceptual scheme of *The Invention of Culture*, for the clowns, she says, ‘guard against the relativization’ of separate realms of Yaqui life: ‘the combination of extremes of convention and invention [the clowning] is what makes it possible to recreate the
conventions of Yaqui culture as powerful and compelling in various, changing contexts.

Alessandro Questa (Chapter 7) explores the – very Wagnerian – contradiction and complementarity that holds between Nawa shamanism and ritual dancing. Through a detailed ethnographic description of both these practices in the town of Tepetzintla, Questa shows how ‘gifted’ shamans and the ‘non-gifted’ dancers effect a ‘change of vision’ (kixpatla is the Nawa verb). In effect, dancers incarnate and play out for all to see, as it were, that which the gifted shamanic eye is exclusively privileged with seeing. Dancers, through the mediation of their ritual masks, and informed by shamanic discourse, become what shamans see, in what Questa calls an ‘anti-shamanic manifesto’. Anti-shamanic as it is – such public revelations are definitely at odds with the secrecy and obscurity, or at least the complexity, that shamanism is often imbued in – Nawa shamanism and ritual dancing ‘co-invent’ themselves innovating each other. Questa’s analysis touches on a similar contrast drawn out by Neurath, one that finds shamanism’s ‘veiled spiritual hunt’ opposed to the collective dances that are ‘observable interactions, predominantly of exchange and reciprocity, between different people’.

The chapter ends with a most Wagnerian analogy when Questa puts Nawa dancing and anthropology alongside each other as equivalent yet disparate practices for dealing with alterity: ‘One affirms itself by an epistemology of concept generation, where the stabilization of meanings is the ultimate goal (Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007). The other, fills the conceptual gaps between cosmic power [which only shamans have access to] and routine undertakings through embodiment, visualization and performance.’

The contribution of Lydia Rodríguez and Sergio López (Chapter 8) stands out as being the only one that focuses on Wagner’s very recent investigations into contemporary and pre-Columbian Meso-American cultures. Rodríguez and López provide a master class on the anthropology of time in general, taking us through the main authors on the subject (including Evans-Pritchard, Leach and Bourdieu), and a synthesis of the main anthropological analyses of Maya time conceptualization and reckoning. Given the complexity of the several interlocking Maya calendric systems, it is no surprise the issue of time has drawn so much attention within and beyond anthropology. Critical of the linear/cyclical opposition that has framed the contrast between Western and Maya notions of time, the authors pick up on Wagner’s (2013) observation that what matters in the combination of Maya calendars is less the cycles each constitute but how they intersect with each other. Wagner argues for a concept of ‘intersectional time’, an event-based system, where happenings occur at the intersection of calendar cycles like ‘lines which meet at a corner’. The chapter closes by asking whether the contemporary Chol Maya, descendants of the
Maya but no longer users of the Maya calendric system, can provide any evidence with which to assess the validity of Wagner’s notion of ‘intersectional time’. The authors find in Chol planting patterns an image attuned to the notion of ‘intersectional time’, and they further argue that current agricultural and ceremonial calendars do seem to mark the passage of time as a ‘succession of intersections’.

Marcela Coelho de Souza (Chapter 9) begins by reflecting on a novel resolution established by the Kĩsêdjê (a Gê-speaking people of the Xingu, Brazil), when a chief decreed that any Kĩsêdjê that married a white man or woman would effectively face eviction from the community. Coelho de Souza tries to make sense of this ‘eviction rule’ in a context where Kĩsêdjê people are at the same time engaging thoroughly with the culture of whites and investing in the revitalization of their own culture. The author finds her path not in the – perhaps more predictable – terrain of identity or cultural politics, but rather in the realm of kinship, approaching one of the more common predicaments of Amazonian kinship-making: the fact that indigenous notions of humanity and kin are co-extensive. If the category ‘real humans’ frequently applies only to ego’s kin, then all marriage involves a flirting with incest and with marriage with non-humans. The Wagnerian ring of interdependent contradictory principles appears again in another guise: ‘What seems to me to be important is to emphasize how much what we (with Lévi-Strauss) call the incest taboo, on the one hand, and true endogamy (or the outcest taboo), on the other, refer to things that mutually presuppose and negate each other, by constituting the limits – incest (non-relation with humans) and true exogamy (pure relation with non-humans) – of human kinship.’ And furthermore: ‘I do not mean that human kinship or marriage happens in a “space” between these “extremes”, at an “optimum distance” from both. The two taboos function jointly but also against each other, each as the condition for the realization/obviation of that which is interdicted by the other.’ In a further analytical twist, Coelho de Souza next draws on Wagner’s notion of ‘anti-twins’ (Wagner 2001) and details the ways in which Kĩsêdjê may come to know their humanity through the two forms of shamanism known to them. One type of shaman is described as a half-person because his soul is kin to animal sprits – this is one form of anti-twin; the other is a double person for he is occupied or accompanied by another non-human subjectivity – the other anti-twin of proper humans. Within this discussion the chapter opens its Wagnerian conceptual framework to fertile relations with Lévi-Strauss’s notion of incest and ‘true endogamy’, as well as relevant aspects of Viveiros de Castro’s synthesis of Amazonian kinship systems and processes. The chapter closes returning to the ‘eviction rule’ which set up the initial analytic intrigue, with the author reaching a conclusion reminiscent of that which Keisalo suggests for the role of humour in the Yaqui
ritual: the eviction ruling is at least partly due to the need to reinstall the difference between Kisèdjè and whites; it is an effort to avoid the dissolution of this crucial distinction ‘by making marriage with whites equal to kinship with [non-human] “others”’. 

Chloe Nahum-Claudel (Chapter 10) follows Coelho de Souza’s focus on kinship, but among another Amazonian people, the Enawene-nawe, an Arawak-speaking people of Mato Grosso, Brazil. The two chapters complement each other instructively, for both approach the dialectical necessity of unmaking kinship in order to make it anew; but whereas Coelho de Souza’s resources come from Wagner’s more recent work, Nahum-Claudel draws inspiration from The Curse of Souw (Wagner 1967). In fact the chapter is a systematic comparison of the author’s ethnography with the Daribi facts presented by Wagner, and the similarities are striking. As Nahum-Claudel traces the evolution of the relations struck at the betrothal of a pair of children between their respective parents (betrothal partners), the importance of gendered exchanges of food, drinks, cooked food and fire wood (external substances) for transforming diffuse cognatic relatedness into two lineal flows of internal substance is made evident. The need to cut or unmake previous kinship in order to remake it is met by these gendered exchanges of vital wealth very much in the way such exchanges define groups among the Daribi. The chapter closes with a description of the Yankwa ritual, which occupies much of Enawene-nawe life. Here it is argued that the exchanges that produce kinship are also at the heart of communal – inter-clan – life. This scaling in the analysis that sees inter-clan relations as gendered kin relations writ large reminds the reader of Wagner’s attention to the fractal dimension of Melanesian sociality (Wagner 1991). Even if at different scales, kinship and communal life are also sequentially interlocked: ‘Exchanges of gendered vital wealth move kinship just as they move communal life … [E]very year at Yankwa, manioc is harvested to call forth the fish harvest, which in turn propitiates new manioc gardens. Yankwa ensures an ever-renewed abundance of manioc and fish, which generates the possibility for more kinship. Among Enawene the compulsion to exchange not only children, manioc and fish but positions and perspectives, capacities and energies, work and rest, becomes a consistent social philosophy … By means of a thoroughgoing principle of surrogacy, clans let their identities be continually taken hostage by one another, and compel one another to constant reciprocity’. There are echoes here of the indigenous peasants of Tepetlaoxtoc prompting each other into action (Magazine, this volume).

The contribution of José Antonio Kelly (Chapter 11) is the last of the Amazonian chapters. It threads together Wagner’s discussions of figure–ground reversal (Wagner 1986a) and metaphor (Wagner 1972) in an exploration of
mythical narratives and shamanic practices among three Amerindian peoples of Brazil and Venezuela: the Yanomami, the Yekuana and the Piaroa. Kelly calls attention to how some myths tell of a passage from a period when people were unwillingly subject to infinite transformations – that is, a period of constant differentiation – to a more stable, post-mythical period, when the visible (body) and the invisible (soul) aspects of beings, on the one hand, and the animal and human aspects of beings, on the other, became more fixed and stand in a figure–ground relationship to each other. This passage is cast as one from pure invention (myth) to the dialectics of convention and invention (post-mythical time). In tandem with the installation of an invention/convention dialectic, some myths concomitantly narrate the separation of earth, sky, underworlds, spirits’ abodes and so on, establishing the major spatial coordinates of the cosmos. Next, an examination of fragments of shamanic discourse in curing and other contexts evokes a temporal metaphoric relation between mythical and ‘today time’. As the argument unfolds, different aspects of Wagnerian semiotics are used to link the convention/invention dialectic and the figure–ground relations between the visible and invisible with the creation of spatial and temporal coordinates, the latter two understood as having an additional semiotic dimension.

Connections
Having provided an overview of the book’s chapters, let us now comment on a series of connections between chapters, highlighting some unexpected ethnographic connections and the different ways the authors engage with Wagner’s oeuvre. What follows are a number of suggestions of what to look out for – or, in a manner similar to that of Julio Cortázar’s ‘counter-novel’ *Hopscotch* (1966) – an invitation to read the book following different paths.

Given the three anthropological territories the book covers (Meso-America, Lowland South America and Afro-Cuban/Brazilian), one alternative is to read these as independent blocks. Those interested in expanding their ethnographic knowledge in these sub-disciplines will benefit from this strategy, but that would limit the insight-provoking potential the volume aspires to.

Confining the ethnographic fields of our enquiries to the Americas has yielded a much-needed rapprochement between anthropological traditions that have developed with little if any communication, despite the logical and historical relations between the peoples themselves. There has been, for example, more talk about similarities and contrasts between Amazonian and Melanesian peoples than between the latter and Meso-American ones, and despite centuries of inter-ethnic contact, the anthropology of relations between Latin America’s black population and its indigenous one is scant (see Goldman...
Our chapters do not deal with this issue directly, but reading across the book certainly throws up some interesting and sometimes unexpected ethnographic connections that become clearer thanks to the maintenance of a constant analytical language (Wagner’s concepts). We can highlight the clear presence of perspectival relations and multi-natural ontologies in the Meso-American ethnography: Tzeltal bodies function as ‘bundles of affects’ in a perspectivist manner, and their ‘presence-bodies’ exchange affects only within a given species, equating, in a very Amazonian fashion, ethnic and species boundaries. A certain multi-natural character is also evident in indigenous cosmological notions among the Nawa and in the community of Tepetlaaxtoc. In the latter’s reverse anthropology, and that of the Kĩsêdjê, we find whites similarly problematic on the grounds of their incapacity for proper sociality. Huichol anthropology of whites could not be in more agreement with that of many Amazonians, for they state that mestizos are technologically advanced but socially ‘underdeveloped’ – in Viveiros de Castro’s terms, super-cultural but infra-social (Viveiros de Castro 2000:51).

Different chapters also indicate the important role played by sacrificial practices in both Afro-American and Meso-American religions. The concept and practice of sacrifice seems to approximate these culture areas; at the same time they contrast them with Amazonian peoples, where sacrifice is very rare, if not completely absent. This connection suggests a fertile avenue of comparative analysis. Furthermore, the inventive metaphorical connections established by *babalawos* in Ifá divination, between mythical events ‘somewhere in Africa’ and clients’ lives in Cuba, strongly resonates with the also twisted connections Amazonian shamans thread between myth and present-day events. The definitive and absolute character of myth in comparison to the contingency of present-day events also seems to be a shared understanding.

The different contributions to this volume approach Wagner’s work in a variety of ways. Some chapters (Nahum-Claudel, Kelly, Keisalo) explore what we could call the ‘early Wagner’, whilst others concentrate on his more recent and even unpublished work (Pitarch, Coelho de Souza, Rodríguez and López). Holbraad successfully draws on both the old and the new. Some authors stick to Wagner’s work exclusively whilst others open up theoretical comparison by drawing on a constellation of related yet differentiated concepts and authors. Neurath and Goldman put Wagner’s work into dialogue of that of Latour and Deleuze and Guattari, whilst Kelly and Coelho de Souza establish links with Viveiros de Castro’s Amazonian perspectivism and kinship studies respectively. The presence of Strathern’s analysis of Melanesian agency is explicit in Magazine’s chapter, whilst Nahum-Claudel writes of an almost identical ethnographic phenomenon drawing on Wagner’s analysis.
The degree of dialogue with Wagner’s work is also unevenly explicit. Nahum-Claudel develops a systematic comparison of Enawene-nawe and Daribi kinship processes mediated by Wagner’s work; Keisalo focuses on the specific method of obviational sequences; Magazine utilizes the idea of ‘reverse anthropology’; and both Holbraad and Pitarch explore the notion of expersonation. All the chapters, nonetheless, share a particular analytical stance that is one of the more relevant anthropological lessons of The Invention of Culture, and one that places Wagner’s work firmly within what Viveiros de Castro and Goldman (2012) call ‘post-social’ anthropology. This stance is thoroughly anti-representational and disposes of the method of remitting people’s discourse and practice to a more ‘real’ and explanatory ‘society’, in a manner that Latour (1993, 2005) has made almost a trademark of his ‘symmetrical anthropology’. The ‘post-social’ is evident when Goldman takes on the paradox of the possibility of people being ‘born made’ in Candomblé, steering clear of the sociological approach of ‘explaining the paradox away’ of those who see such claims as status-seeking manoeuvres; its is also evident when Keisalo avoids the analysis of humour in terms of a supposedly hidden ‘serious message’ or an equally implicit pointer to the openness and multiplicity of meaning-making, and when Magazine avoids traditional anthropological assumptions about indigenous peasants holding fiestas as individual sacrifices for the greater communal good; finally, it is manifest when Questa speaks of Nawa dancers becoming the spirits and not just representing them. All these are instances of this analytical stance. In the language of The Invention of Culture, the chapters share a commitment to endowing anthropological subjects with the same creative capacity as that of the anthropologist, and thus avoiding an anthropology that is a mere extension of our symbols.

References
Introduction


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