We must say something to be able to say it in a certain manner. (Sapir 1921: 63).

The conventions of language must be “metaphorized” through some interrelation with situational phenomena (the context of speech, “the world”) if they are to produce meaning (Wagner 1975: 107).

A magical ritual… which, when considered psychologically, seems to liberate and give form to powerful emotional aesthetic elements of our nature, is nearly always put in harness to some humdrum utilitarian end—the catching of rabbits or the curing of disease (Sapir 1924a: 415).

Once fire has been tamed, for whatever mad motive, by whatever very clever (“very gifted,” “very lucky”) inventor, with whatever profound spiritual revelations or strategic effects, someone is eventually (who knows how much later?) going to use it for light, for heat, for cremating or making toast… (Wagner 1975: 136).

[H]uman culture… provide[s] remedies for the conflict and suffering it creates (Henry 1963: 10).

We create, and propel ourselves with, our problems as we go (Wagner 1975: 76).

[I]t became evident that not only a physical situation *qua* physics, but the meaning of that situation to people, was sometimes a factor, through the behavior of the people, in the start of the fire… Thus, around storage of what are called “gasoline drums,” behavior will tend to a certain type, that is, great care will be exercised; while around a storage of what are called “empty gasoline drums,” it will tend to be different—careless, with little repression of smoking or of tossing cigarette stubs about (Whorf 1956: 135).

It is generally assumed that our Culture, with its science and its technology, operates by measuring, predicting, and harnessing a world of natural “forces.” But in fact the whole range of conventional controls, our “knowledge” … is a set of devices for the invention of a natural and phenomenal world… The significant aspect of this invention … is that its product must be taken very
seriously, so that it is no invention at all, but reality. If the inventor keeps this seriousness firmly in mind (as a “safety rule,” if for no other reason) … then the resulting experience of “nature” will sustain his conventional distinctions (Wagner 1975: 71-72).

There has been much anthropological ink spilled over the question of “structure” and “agency,” but those of us who have been spilling it over the last couple of decades do not often think of this activity as an example of the very process we are theorizing. Or, to phrase it another way, how many of us working on what we see as the ‘cutting edge’ maintain explicitly in consciousness the connectedness of our cutting-edge work to past work? True, most of us cite revered ancestors or respected contemporaries, but the politics of citation is one thing, an appreciation of meaningful intellectual genealogies quite another. I will admit that I have on occasion cited work I have not read, simply to avoid a referee’s anticipated objection or to bow to disciplinary fashion; but I will also admit to occasional feelings of despair underpinned by the old notion that “there’s nothing new under the sun.” That is, whether or not I bother to cite predecessors, I operate under the assumption that whatever I might figure out in “my work” will have been figured out by someone else, and probably by many other people on many other occasions.

These musings are by way of introduction to my personal sense of the place of Roy Wagner’s The Invention of Culture in late twentieth-century anthropological culture theory, and more particularly, of the relationship of that book to my work on the politics of culture in Quebec. From the perspective of a long-term culture historian, someone like, say, the Kroeber of Configurations of Culture Growth (1944), Wagner’s 1975 book (published the year before I began fieldwork in Quebec) and the book that resulted from my fieldwork (published in 1988) appeared at approximately the same moment. From my perspective, as a myopic practitioner, Wagner’s The Invention of Culture came out of the blue and “scooped” (as the newspaper folks used to say) by a decade the innovations in culture theory that developed in the 1980s. But those innovations were not, in some ways, all that innovative. As both Robert Brightman (1995) and Regna Darnell (2001) have recently argued, within the Boasian tradition, as Boas’s critique of evolutionism was developed by his great students into a mature culture theory, many of today’s cutting-edge issues were richly interrogated. This is a tradition of interrogation that The Invention of Culture continues, as the catalogue of extracts which opens this paper is meant to suggest. As Wagner himself puts it: “a great invention is ‘reinvented’ many times (1975: 136).” The Invention of Culture was first published in David Schneider’s Prentice-Hall Anthropology
Series, and the original format (the look and feel of the book) is similar to that of Schneider’s *American Kinship* (1968). It may be my imagination, but I hear similarities in the voices conveyed by the two books—an echo of Schneider’s ironies in Wagner’s voice. More important, Wagner’s work engages the debate about anthropological culture theory in relationship to American culture that was one of Schneider’s great contributions.

But beyond that, Wagner’s work addresses two fundamental, and fundamentally intertwined issues in anthropological (and literary, philosophical and scientific) modernism; the interplay between “society” and “the individual,” culture and personality, structure and agency, on the one hand, and the basic processes of semiosis, on the other. These issues are “fundamental” in the sense that we modernists can never transcend them, but are condemned, it seems to me, to replay them over and over again. In this sense, then, *The Invention of Culture* reaches right back to the beginnings of culture theory, as it came to be institutionalized in turn of the-twentieth-century anthropology (and sociology too, for that matter). *The Invention of Culture* provides particularly bold answers to particularly stubborn old questions.

There are several components of Wagner’s answers to those questions. First, *The Invention of Culture* insists that “culture” (as an analytic or philosophical construct) is a figment of a particular society’s imagination. That particular society, which I will call “modern” for convenience, understands and evaluates its own creativity in terms of such notions as “work,” “production,” “refinement” and ultimately, “civilization.” To quote Wagner:

> family life and interpersonal relations play an almost negligible part in the historical accounts that are generally used to validate our cultural self-image. Typically, these myths are obsessed with man’s development as a history of productive techniques, a gradual accumulation of ‘tools’ and ‘adaptations’ indicating progressively greater technological sophistication… ‘Culture’ emerges as an accumulation, a sum of great inventions and mighty achievements (1975: 24).

Even in various anthropological definitions of culture that focus on symbols and ideation rather than technologies and artifacts, the emphasis remains on culture as product. Further, as Wagner easily shows, anthropologists are just as much obsessed with production as any captain of industry, and this in several senses: we conceptualize the practice of anthropology as “work” (“fieldwork”), we objectify our experiences during fieldwork as encounters with other cultures, and we build our professional careers out of our published accounts of those encounters. Or, in Wagner’s terms, we invent others as culture and then sell those cultures, or our accounts of them, in our professional marketplaces.
Second, *The Invention of Culture* sets off the peculiarity of this system of creativity by contrasting it to the world of Daribi people, people whose “productivity,” Wagner tells us, “is not obsessed with tools or techniques” but with the “distribution” of people themselves: “Whereas products themselves, or money with which to buy products, are not in demand, producers are (p. 25)”. Leaving aside for the moment the relationship of this argument to various strands of “gift versus commodity” and “West versus rest” theorizing, let us just note Wagner’s clever comparative reading of the anthropological encounter. Anthropologists, as we have just said, want to objectify experiences in the field as culture, then market that culture in books, films, and/or museum exhibitions. But Daribi people, working from their own sense of creativity, “see the anthropologist’s creativity as being his interaction with them, rather than resulting from it (p. 26)”.

Third, anthropologists, just like Daribi people and everybody else, invent the world in terms of their own, historically peculiar style of creativity. It follows that when we invent others as culture, we are not merely describing them; rather, we are giving shape to our understanding of our encounters with those others, and the shape we give those understandings is in part a function of our own, historically peculiar style of creativity. Anthropology, then, is not an objective science, it is, to use Wagner’s term, a “mediative” one: “The study of such exotic modes of conceptualization actually amounts to a resymbolization of them, transforming their symbols into ours (p. 30).” Wagner’s argument about what is essentially the question of cultural translation dovetailed with Clifford Geertz’s ideas about the interpretation of culture and the fictitiousness of ethnographic writing (Geertz 1973)—ideas that were further developed in James Clifford’s influential work (Clifford 1988). The works of Wagner, Geertz and then Clifford were seminal to a renewed debate about objectivist versus constructionist approaches to culture, a debate that continues even now to engage us.

Fourth, culture is invention, and here is where we return to those foundational problems of the individual and society, structure and agency, and their semiotic construction. *The Invention of Culture* has an exceptionally clear sense of the way in which individual-and-society theorizing ceaselessly traps itself in its own objectifications. To counter such entrapment, Wagner insists that each instantiation of “culture,” of “structure,” is an invention, a recontextualization that must by definition contain an element of creativity, of innovation. When people act in the world, they are not simply reproducing culture or structure, they are creating it anew, even that part of it which we imagine to be “conventional”:
The contexts of culture are perpetuated and carried forth by... being invented out of each other and through each other. This means that we cannot appeal to the force of something called “tradition,” or “education,” or spiritual guidance to account for cultural continuity, or for that matter cultural change. The symbolic associations that people share... their “morality,” “culture,” “grammar,” or “customs”... are as much dependent upon continual reinvention as the individual idiosyncrasies, details, and quirks that they perceive in themselves or in the world around them (pp. 50-51).

Or, summed up in a pithy metaphor: “Meaningful expression... always moves in a world of cultural illusion, one, moreover, which it continually ‘lays down’ for itself, as a tank lays its own tracks (p. 42).” (To add to my catalogue of extracts, recall Edward Sapir’s similar, and very famous metaphor of linguistic drift: “Language moves down time in a current of its own making (1921: 160).”

It is this last point that engages most directly the problem of the individual and society, of agency, structure and creativity. Culture theory, it seems to me, swings back and forth between the social and the individual, the collective and the creative. When we go too far in one direction, a “correction” organizes itself and pushes us back in the other direction. If, in the heyday of Lévi-Straussian analysis during the late 1960s and early 1970s, structures were to be found everywhere, the reaction that set in during the 1980s has glorified “agency,” “resistance” and “practice” to such an extent that their use by theorists is now almost completely predictable. Schneider parodied the situation in an imaginary interview with himself:

It is important to remember that culture emerges from practice, and so practice is the very essence of what the anthropologist studies. And practice is always the site of contestation. Culture is contested, not shared. Human beings are intentional agents, they are not just robots... [But] gender, class, race, and the state are all fundamental in defining the identity and social position of each subject, so that by simply knowing the gender, class, race, and relationship to the state of the subject, predictions with a very high probability can be made about what their action is likely to be (1995: 6).

Following Schneider, it is easy to imagine practice theorists critiquing the excesses of structuralists, and vice versa, but harder to imagine a way out of the trap. The Invention of Culture is an attempt, more thorough-going than most, to escape the trap.

The way to escape the trap, of course, is to realize (without backsliding on the issue!) that “society,” “culture” and “the individual” are themselves symbolic constructs (cf. Sapir 1949: 515), the results or ongoing effects of semiotic processes, not the ground-zero of social reality out of which semi-
osis grows. “Where” exactly we should “locate” semiosis if not in “the individual” or “the culture” (cf. Benedict 1934: 253) is a question more confusing than helpful, for, as Whorf pointed out, the very phrasing of the question stems from the “Standard Average European” habit of spatializing non-spatial realities. Semiotic processes are real; they “happen” in the world but they do not happen “in” space such that it is useful to be constrained, as we are by our language habits, to imagine them in three-dimensional terms. As Whorf puts it: “this has gone so far that we can hardly refer to the simplest nonspatial situation without constant resort to physical metaphors,” and he continues with a long list of such expressions—to grasp the thread of an argument, to get to the point, and so on (Whorf 1956: 146).

Instead of writing about society and the individual, Wagner writes about invention, reinvention, and the opposing (in his model) processes of “collectivizing” and “differentiating”: “Action, thought, interaction, perception, or motivation is always a matter of ordering or rationalizing (‘collectivizing’) the variable and the individual, or of individuating or particularizing (‘differentiating’) the moral and the conventional (pp. 42-43, emphasis in original).” This use of gerunds (in English, words with an “-ing” affix which turns a verb into a noun) may seem awkward, but Wagner’s adherence to the terminology throughout the book is an important tactic to make his point.

The avoidance of those “spurious entities” (Sapir 1924b: 153), “society” and “individual,” is only one part of the solution to the problem. Another part is to turn SAE rationality on its head by insisting, as do most of the extracts in my opening catalogue, that semiosis cannot be reduced to rational thought or practical necessity. When Sapir says “we must say something to be able to say it in a certain manner,” he means that what comes first is the “certain manner,” not a pre-lingual idea transparently referencing some feature of the world. SAE common sense tells us there is a world out there and humans label it as they find it, and in order to manipulate it for their own ends. Boasian anthropology has had an unusually consistent sense of a counterintuitive position—one in which “the pattern” of culture or grammar constructs the world for us, including in that construction the whole host of “secondary reasoning[s]” (Boas 1911: 68) by means of which we explain, in terms of a culturally constructed rationality, our customs to ourselves. Human beings live through and in semiotic processes. Whether we can “explain” these in functional terms is an open question; about all we can offer at the moment is the apparently unhelpful, but perhaps profound, thought that our semiotic condition is a given, “just the way it is” for humans.
Now, turning briefly to the sort of critique of culture that came out of my research in Quebec, and work by many others in the 1980s on situations of national and ethnic identity-making: I did not approach my study of nationalism in Quebec as a means to critique the culture concept. As a good empiricist, I found myself forced to make that move by the situation I stumbled upon. As I remember it—and of course memory is treacherous—I was struck during the early months of fieldwork by the nationalist framing of what they called Quebecois culture. As I watched various political, educational, and recreational organizations displaying national culture, I came to realize that the proverbial Martian who did not know the rules would have no way of telling what was content and what frame—that is, at a folkdance demonstration, for example, the nationalist claim is that “our culture” is the dances, the folkloric stuff that is being presented. But the Martian would not know where the dances ended and the nationalist framing of them began; or, to put it another way, assuming this Martian were interested in “culture,” it would have no reason not to consider all the framing activities to be as “authentically” cultural as everything else. Quebecois culture, then, from this point of view was a culture of objectifying national culture. And my attempt to analyze Quebecois nationalist’s use of the culture concept led, in good anthropological-comparative fashion, to my attempts to rethink the anthropological concept of culture.

It was at this point in my investigation that I came to understand (and again, memory is treacherous, so beware the autobiographical account that may be little more than a secondary rationalization) the general implications, for culture theory, of this historically particular example of cultural objectification. Arguments about the semiotic construction and rationalization of reality put forth, in different ways, by Boas, Sapir, Benedict, Whorf, Schneider, Geertz, Wagner, and Clifford made new sense to me. From this perspective, culture itself was not a “found object,” nor was it naturally given; it was at once always constructed and always in the process of being reconstructed. Such a perspective had the potential to play havoc with the culture theory of most nationalisms, since those ideologies usually posited the existence of cultures (as well-bounded objective entities) as the basis of cherished national identities.

Comparing, finally, the studies of national culture-making of the 1980s and The Invention of Culture, it seems to me that the later work, including mine, focused on culture because the “natives” were doing so, whereas Wagner’s book focused on anthropologists using the culture concept to make sense of natives who did not share that concept with their anthropological interlocutors. In a sense, I see myself as having been forced by
the zeitgeist along the theoretical path I took, whereas I see Wagner as a loner, thinking himself right back to the beginnings of anthropological culture theory with no particular prompting from “events.” Now clearly, this sort of formulation buys into notions of creative genius versus overdetermined action that I sketched at the outset of this paper. And this sort of formulation depends also on a linear model of time and of cause-and-effect that partakes more of the myopic than of the olympian perspective. But if we conceive of the hundred-years’ development of professional anthropology’s culture theory as occurring more or less at one historical moment, then the notion that *The Invention of Culture* ‘scooped’ (or, for that matter, ‘caused’) the anti-structuralist theorizing that followed it falls by the wayside. In its place we need a different sort of model, one that focuses on the multifaceted potential of any cultural formation, that is, on cultured individuals’ potential both to invent the world anew and to reinvent the wheel—all at the same time. It is just such a model that *The Invention of Culture* imaginatively outlines.

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