THE ART OF LOSING ONE’S OWN CULTURE ISN’T HARD TO MASTER, IT’S OBVIATION
Roy Wagner, Gregory Bateson, and the Art of Science Writ Large

Elizabeth Stassinos

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seemed filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster;
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

to obviate a symbol is to dissolve it into something else in an illuminating way; to obviate the realm of human responsibility or that of the innate is to derive the other from it in a demonstrably meaningful way. In the latter respect, obviation corresponds to the revelatory aspect of ritual. (R. Wagner. Lethal Speech, (1978): 32).

Like Gregory Bateson, Roy Wagner leaves no heirs. This is not the curse of Souw, but the curse of original thinking. Like Bateson though, Wagner has bequeathed to a future anthropology a certain style of thinking about Others, an elegant way of dislocating the Western self from its routines, its kinships, its ego, its diaspora. In this paper, and as a student of Wagner’s at Virginia in the 1980s and 1990s, I hope to trace some of Wagner’s work through Bateson’s and to compare some of the habits of mind of these two ethnographers and theorists and relate these back to The Invention of Culture. If I seem to forget that text in places or re-start it in others, it is because I have tried to stay close to that topic that led both in such oppo-
site (one could say complementary schizmogenic) directions, one to biological sciences, the other to science fiction. I section off observations on their ethnographic theory by using poetry to express shifts in topics for, at their best, Wagner and Bateson are poets of that extreme human condition so sought after by ethnographers, culture shock.

The Immortality of Ethnography

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there
(S. Plath. *Elm*).

In my first undergraduate independent study in 1986 (my sophomore year at U.VA.), Wagner insisted I read Bateson’s ground-breaking study of ritual and culture theory, *Naven*. I will try to repeat that gesture here by reading Wagner’s and Bateson’s careers using Bateson’s theory of “schizmogenesis,” a concept developed in *Naven*, as a metaphor for their career paths within and beyond anthropology. I also attempt to gauge the influence of Bateson’s notion of “schizmogenesis” on Wagner’s theory of “obviation.” Wagner’s connection with Bateson has become for me, a study of very different progressions in and away from anthropology, each focusing more on the loss of perspective as a heuristic ethnographic tool than on building up a new perspective at all, the usual focus of ethnographic theory.

Like Bateson in *Naven*, Wagner always begins his narratives with a recognition of the problem of ethnography, with a Sherlockian taking of the seven percent solution, the understanding that the ethnographer ruins her “sample,” her data and her understanding, simply by discovering it in fieldwork. Much like Bateson in his 1936 epilogue to *Naven*, Wagner’s method in the *Invention of Culture* is to confront the very language of ethnographic work and the bias these terms lend to analysis. We learn that our ‘culture cult’ creates the Other’s ‘cargo cult,’ that our ‘invention’ of them puts the lie to our ‘convention’ of science.

More importantly for American anthropologists, Wagner uses the last chapters of the text to predict some of the problems inherent in American anthropological perspectives, the invention of nature and even the odd concept of ‘progress’ that plagues social sciences. But as I reread these passages, I am struck by the fact that Wagner’s cure is a Batesonian explication of the ethnographer’s condition, the ethnographer’s problem of ‘learning to learn,’ of losing one’s own culture, one’s own schemata. Assuming that it is easy
to forget how to be an American (and isn’t that an odd confession we have all made when, socially clumsy, we return from the field?); it is much harder to forget what is important about that loss, that our culture’s symbols must constantly be reinvented. What is the loss of one’s own culture like today? What is the symptom of enlightenment that drives today’s ethnographer into accepting the necessarily incomplete quality of ethnography (and life), as opposed to that wonderfully totalizing undergraduate discovery of ‘self?’ I think *The Invention of Culture* still tells us what to expect.

**Science and the Art of Ethnographic Loss**

“One has to commit a painting,” said Degas, “the way one commits a crime.” But you constructed boxes where things hurry away from their names …

Minimal, incoherent fragments: the opposite of History, creator of ruins, out of your ruins you have made creations (E. Bishop. “Objects and Apparitions/for Joseph Cornell,” in *Geography III*).

Wagner told me once that he had written to Mary Catherine Bateson, asking her if there were any clues in Bateson’s other works besides those in *Naven* about “zygogenesis,” an idea it seems Bateson toyed with but dropped for cybernetics theorizing, the schizophrenic’s familial double-bind, the dolphin’s deutero-learning, the alcoholic’s cathedral of control. He told me that she had replied briefly and in the negative. I was going to look for “zygogenesis,” perhaps beginning with *The Invention of Culture*, or better, in Wagner’s Hegelian retort to Lévi-Strauss in *Lethal Speech*. Was there something about New Guinea that led these men to study Western ethnographers as flawed bats or dolphins, in a totemic vein perhaps where ethnographers are animals that had lost, or perhaps only forgotten, something important about learning? Were dolphins and their deutero-learning or bats and their echo-locating another way to talk about the humanity or culture we have not yet achieved and obviously didn’t understand when we did find them? And where is psychiatry in all of this thinking with animals? Wagner gives sense to Daribi tropic formulations like “a goat is not a very good pig; the best pig is a cow (1978: 28)” in the same way that Bateson frees the schizophrenic’s or alcholic’s logics of control, double-bind and metalogue. Note Bateson’s Wagneresque unpacking of the schizophrenic lyric “That plane flies awfully slowly” as “I shall miss you.” Here the schizophrenic wonderfully defines a message about relationship without referencing himself or the other person (Bateson 2000[1972]: 235).
Theories and Pidiks
(pidik—a heuristic joke played on initiates in New Guinea)

To go deeper into the parallel purposes of these men, I had to forget even New Guinea and have been driven to discuss Wagner and science fiction (that Castenada/Ursula LeGuin angle that no one, especially myself wanted to write). Here is where I resolve for myself Bateson’s influence on Wagner’s obviational theory.

Bateson’s influence on obviation goes hand in hand with Wagner’s gift of the outside perspective, that heuristic anomie through which he constantly renews his anthropological insight. In fact, I claim here that it is the “controls,” artificial perhaps and conscious, that both men used on their study of human beings and their ethnography that it is important to describe. For Bateson, this “control” or pidik was biology; for Wagner, it continues to be science fiction and Castenada’s tonal-nagual opposition. Both of these intercultural “other” disciplines helped each to control their insights into the grand theories of their day, with Wagner still charting these and other postmodern terrains. But first I must underscore what I mean by “controls” for insights. And here I merely borrow from Bateson’s notion of “schismogenesis.”

Comparing Wagner’s trajectory with Bateson’s I found it useful to think of their oeuvres as operating, respectively, along what Bateson calls “symmetrical” and “complementary” paths. In Naven, Bateson defines schismogenesis as “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals.” He adds to this notion of differentiation two kinds of progressive change, “symmetrical” where “a relationship between two individuals (or groups)” is so “if each responds to the other with the same kind of behaviour” or “complementary” “if most of the behavior of the one individual is culturally regarded as of one sort (e.g., assertive) while most of the behavior of the other, when he replies, is culturally regarded as of a sort complementary to this (e.g., submissive) (1958: 311, 308).” The trick here is not to make the mistake I did in my abstract, looking for collaboration unnecessarily. Rather, the trick here is to see Wagner and Bateson progressing theoretically by reacting to their own “fieldworker” selves as a species of “other,” as a self that can be learned from and that one is in a constant dialogue with. That is, I see Wagner and Bateson reacting as much to New Guinea culture and culture theory as to the self that is shed in each idea they leave behind, each fieldwork or case study written through, each book, each writing, published or not, and in Bateson’s case, each discarded discipline. It is in these sloughed off
selves where I find the interesting changes in their intellectual trajectory, their next ‘new new thing.’

Having outlined what I think the trajectories are, it is important again to mention the “governors” or “thermostats” to these innovative reactions to fieldworkers selves once removed. As Bateson says in his theory of schismogenesis, it is not enough to assume random stimuli, change for humans has to do with learning as a kind of directional change (Bateson 1958: 284-5). To avoid mystification, Bateson posits the cybernetics group’s notion of “feed-back” and higher order learning or “deutero-learning” where one learns to learn, (e.g., gets better at taking tests throughout school whether or not one knows what the test is on or why). As in Naven, I see Wagner’s (symmetrical, within anthropology) and Bateson’s (complementary, outside anthropology) intellectual schismogeneses as just that “self-corrective.”

For Bateson, the ‘governor’ or self-corrective to his ‘compelementary’ reaction to anthropology and fieldwork-self came with pondering mental illness, addiction, and animal biology and psychology. The human being as an animal that learns not abstraction, but even more concrete, thoughtful, reaction to stimuli, is the point to which Bateson relentlessly returns. (One could say that this led him away from anthropology, but I think that is a premature assessment and that he was only really acting like an American anthropologist not a British functionalist). Naven is an incredibly eclectic work and within it we find all of the germs of Bateson’s later books and articles, remarks on psychiatry and mental illness, ideas about political and religious change, not to mention transvesticism and ritual transformation as modeled, much like Turner’s later work, on ‘play’ and ‘metalogy’; in this case, on who ‘wears the trousers’ (Bateson 1958: 148).

Wagner’s path, on the other hand, has been ‘symmetrical,’ shedding new ideas with each fieldworker’s self; each step towards what he now calls “the subject.” Here, the ‘governor’ or control on his outsider’s perspective has been science fiction and Castenada. The beauty of Wagner’s insightful use of these ‘outside’ texts has been that he can treat them all with equal seriousness as possible worlds, without the constraining rubric of whether or not they are objective ‘inventions.’ And here is where The Invention of Culture continues to answer my questions about reality and the fieldworker’s proper position with respect to it; just as we live in a ‘culture of science’ projecting knowledge in anthropology as a ‘science of culture,’ just as the ethnographer creates ‘culture shock’ about native’s ‘anthropologist shock,’ anthropology also provides a distance on these webs of meaning, privileging neither, investigating both.
In the *Invention of Culture* Wagner mentions Castenada’s notion of “nagual” as a neat counter to the attempts by Sperber and Barth to generate a “negative symbol,” that would be useful for the symbolic anthropologist to ‘think with.’ He writes that “nagual” is power, “that with which we do not deal” or “the thing that makes metaphor but always escapes in its expression,” like the Aztec theology of Moyucoyani to the god who “invented himself (Wagner 1981: xvi-ii).” Here is the ultimate symmetrical schismogenesis of Wagner’s oeuvre, using Castenada’s ethnography as science fiction to tidy up the conceptual flaws in an anthropology too hesitant to use theory to obviate its own culture’s obfuscating perspectives. For as Wagner points out again and again, the fieldworker does not need, like the science fiction author, to generate an unbelievable world. Unbelievable worlds we have. It is theories we need. The other point I would like to add here is that Wagner kept finding himself anew in anthropology by using animal worlds like Bateson’s dolphins and octopi, here bats, but turning bats into a way to talk about the anthropological ‘subject’ as opposed to Bateson who seems to me more comfortable with the idea that animals are actually learning. It is unclear to me that either Wagner or Bateson feel humans, with all of the same schismogeneic processes that animals have at hand, are learning terribly much using their newfangled consciousnesses. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Wagner holds out the thought that it is in myth, in the storyteller’s conscious creativity and innovation on cultural convention, that our salvation as a species is found, and daily. This version of obviation agrees with Bateson’s own use of schismogenesis in therapy.

**Winks and Twitches**

Obviously, he has no sense of shame,
He and the bird know everything is answered,
al taken care of,
no need to ask again.
-Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)
(E. Bishop. “Five Flights Up,” in *Geography III*).

Finally, *The Invention of Culture* asks us today if anthropology will yet follow Wagner beyond postmodernism, anthropology, with its potential to undercut Western knowledges, to reposition today’s fieldworker. He says to us then as now “We live in interesting times” (Wagner 1981: xx). I do, in great part because of him.
BIBLIOGRAPHY