In this paper I want to trace how and why *The Invention of Culture* (IOC) has resonated strongly throughout my encounters with anthropological theory and fieldsite experiences in the Caribbean. I briefly outline how some of its key analytical arguments about the meanings and applications of the ‘culture’ concept can be productively compared and applied to what at first glance might appear to be quite unrelated ‘new’ theoretical models about gender and sexuality, particularly Judith Butler’s ‘performative’ approach, more than twenty-five years after its initial publication.

As I began to write this paper I had two serendipitous moments which, for me, clearly signaled IOC’s ongoing influence and relevance in contemporary anthropology. The first occurred while reading Marshall Sahlin’s recent contribution to the *Annual Review of Anthropology* where he argues, in effect, that reports on the death of culture have been greatly exaggerated during the “postmodern panic” (1999). In the closing paragraphs of his critical review on the current usages and meanings of culture, Sahlins observes how cultures disappear just as we learn how to perceive them, then reappear in ways we had never imagined—even though I doubt that Sahlins had Wagner’s work in mind (it is not mentioned in the bibliography), it seems to me that this passage encapsulates much of what IOC is all about, and demonstrates its ongoing theoretical acuity, a point which I will elaborate below (Sahlins 1999: xxi). The second meaningful moment occurred when, after finishing my Chinese take-out dinner, I broke open a fortune cookie above my copy of IOC that lay on the table. The message that fell out of the cookie and floated down to rest on page nineteen read: “You are a person of culture.” Here was another key point of IOC! Clearly, when fortune cookie writers appear to have been influenced by IOC we cannot deny its widespread impact!
Numerous other papers in this issue of *Social Analysis* provide extensive analyses of Wagner’s work in relation to subsequent theoretical developments in anthropology, and the ways in which many of the arguments in IOC are currently used (or confused) in much contemporary cultural theory. I would like to approach IOC from a slightly different perspective that is more autobiographical, but which is also structured in relation to influential theoretical paradigms circulating in American anthropology in the late 1980s and 1990s. I will briefly sketch the initial impact that IOC had on me as a graduate student at the University of Virginia, and how it then assisted me in conceptualizing and framing my fieldwork observations on the politics of cultural identity in Martinique, a Caribbean island that is also an Overseas Department of France. However, I also want to focus on a number of questions that arose while I was in Martinique about the ways in which gender and sexuality figured in the production of official and popular cultural identity, discourses that were not fully addressed by IOC, and how I eventually came across Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of gender (1990 and 1993) that both complicated and extended some key ideas in IOC.

As a graduate student at the University of Virginia in the late 1980s, I took Wagner’s graduate class on symbolism. I must admit that I spent much of the time either astounded or dumbfounded (or both) as he presented us with octahedral models of the *habu* (see Wagner 1986: 77) or described the obviation of obviation. Yet, for all that I could not comprehend, some of the ideas that he outlined in the classroom which were also found in IOC, struck me as revolutionary ways of thinking about what it is that the anthropologist does. At least three of IOC’s primary points about ‘culture’ eventually operated as foundational principles of my fieldwork in Martinique. First, culture is a concept that we in the West created, and it says much more about us than ‘the other’ whom we study: “[We should not be] surprised if the resultant analogies and ‘models’ (of culture) seem awkward and ill-fitting, for they are born of the paradox created by imagining a culture for people who do not imagine it for themselves (1975: 27).” Here was a reflexive perspective on the discipline, and one of its key analytical concepts and objectives made almost ten years prior to the postmodern critique that emerged in the mid-1980s. But IOC was more than just a critique of the culture concept, for it did not propose an abandonment of the idea of culture, but rather a radical rethinking of how we should conceive of culture, and this leads to the second key point. Once we realize that culture is an ‘illusion,’ a term that we have ‘invented’ to bring the ‘other’ into our sense of order, then we must redefine culture as inven-
tion (Chapter 2). But ‘invention’ in IOC does not refer to ‘novel acts and ideas,’ but rather to the idea of invention as innovation which is in turn applicable to the whole range of human thought and action (1975: 36-37). While invention as innovation is identified as a primary aspect of culture, Wagner makes it clear that we must also simultaneously recognize the centrality of convention, and the dialectical relationship between these two terms (1975: 52). It is this dialectical relationship that forms the third key point, for in focusing on culture as an ongoing relation of mediation between convention and innovation, IOC completely redefines the meaning of the culture concept as it was utilized in most anthropological texts up to that point. Culture becomes defined through process and relation rather than stasis and bounded objectification; it is completely reconfigured as a dynamic force that simultaneously sustains continuity and creates change in thought, action and meaning.

In IOC, convention and differentiation are also utilized to identify different cultural groups—that is, some cultures operate on conventionalizing tropes while others operate according to differentiating tropes—but I was never convinced by this division as it contravened some of the principles of invention as described above, and did not seem to work well in our contemporary world where there is more movement and mixing between the so-called differentiating and conventionalizing cultures than ever before. I was most influenced by the redefinition of culture as a dialectic, objectivizing and mediating movement that is full of play and contradiction (1975: 151, 156) as I found it to be a new and stimulating way to think about this concept. I could see how this was a proposal drawn out of and against the ‘synthetic, synchronous’ cultural models of Kroeber, Steward, Parsons, Lévi-Strauss, and other cultural paradigms still influential in the 1970s, but I was impressed at how it anticipated the rise of various postmodern cultural positions without actually being postmodern since IOC struck me then (as it still does now) as very much embedded in the ‘grand theory’ tradition of how humans make meaning (more on this below).

When I arrived in Martinique to begin investigating how particular forms of ‘cultural identity’ were being produced in a former colony that continues to maintain close political, economic and social ties with its colonizer (France), the veracity of Wagner’s arguments about the ‘assumption of culture’ was striking, only here it was not the anthropologist, but rather the cultural bureaucrat who was busy trying to invent a culture in the ‘opera-house’ sense (1975: 21) of systemic and objective definitions, whether it be through a return to Africanité (promoted through the Negritude movement of Aimé Césaire, a playwright and politician who has had
great influence over ‘cultural’ policy in Martiniqu; see Arnold 1981, 1994) or through embracing a ‘hybridized, Créole’ cultural identity (manifested in the Créolité movement led by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Rafael Confiant; see Price and Price 1997). The ways in which these bureaucrats and various artists wrote about ‘developing’ or ‘rediscovering’ a Martinican heritage and/or ‘cultural identity’ as something distinct from a contemporary nationalist French identity followed, almost word for word, Wagner’s description of how an actor acting in a conventional context attempts to articulate something that conforms to a cultural, moral convention (Wagner 1975: 46). Then, as I began to participate in a theater group staging a play to open the annual cultural festival of Fort-de-France (the capital of Martinique), I began to witness how, in the attempt to create a production that represented the collective experience of being Martinican, various idiosyncrasies and ‘inconsistencies’ arose which challenged the director’s attempts to create a narrative that conformed with the officially sanctioned cultural objectives promoted by the political and artistic élite. This was particularly evident in the creation of appropriate male and female characters in the play. As we approached the opening night, the director became increasingly frustrated with the actors’ ‘failure’ to achieve the qualities of ‘typical peasant men and women’ who were the primary characters of the play; she felt that the actors should not have any particular problems in reproducing the dialect and actions of these kind of people as ‘everyone should know’ how peasant men and women would talk and move in a particular situation. However, I came to realize that these so-called ‘failures’ of appropriate movement and speech were moments in which the mask of convention (in this case, gendered convention) was momentarily removed, and the inventive process of gender was being revealed. When the director said she did not know what else to do in order to get the female actors to “gossip more naturally” or the male actors to “hoe the gardens more realistically,” as these activities should be “second nature” to the actors, I was witnessing creative, inventive moments where individuals were being something other than ideal, conventionalized men and women. Yet these were also conventionalizing, collective moments as the spectral force of a gendered ideal was invoked through the director’s accusation of failed representation (Wagner 1975: 50). Here, then, was an example of the cultural dialectic rendered explicit in the rehearsals of a state sanctioned play to be performed at an event imagined to be of great synthesizing cultural significance.

However, some questions were not being answered sufficiently through my understanding of IOC’s arguments. Despite witnessing a good example of cultural dialectics, nothing was changing. By the time of the Festival’s
opening night, the actors had become ‘appropriate’ male and female peasants who moved and spoke in accordance with the director’s conventionalized ideal; those that had not learned to act appropriately had been replaced. Furthermore, in other plays that were written and performed by and for Martinicans, as well as in interviews with participants in the local fine arts scene, similar gendered types often appeared, and one of the primary, most oft-repeated elements in the (re)presentation of this type was heterosexual desire, that is, performances through which a gendered ‘identity’ was at least in part defined through an articulation or action indicating sexual desire for someone of the opposite gender. Yet during my fieldwork, I had come to know a number of self-identified gay Martinican men involved in the arts at all levels (and eventually met gay men with other careers as well), so I began to wonder why their desire was not acknowledged in any state-funded productions or in official statements about Martinican cultural identity. Why was there an absolute silence about homosexual desire in these ‘official’ cultural identity projects and statements? More generally, I began to wonder on what basis was heterosexual desire ‘conventionalized’ over homosexual desire, and was this connected to constructions of gender produced through a colonial context? These kinds questions led me to think more about the issue of power in the cultural dialectic and its role in preventing or enabling change. The explanation of cultural change in IOC struck me as a bit too egalitarian; that is, convention and invention seemed to be related in a playful see-saw movement where the occasional individual invention might culminate in the inversion of cultural convention (1975: 104-105). In my opinion, the forces or regimes that privileged certain ideals or conventions were not being adequately addressed.

As I wondered more about the implications of sexuality in the making of gendered identities, and why some discourses were constantly privileged over others, a number of people recommended that I take a look at Butler’s work on gender, primarily her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) (GT) and * Bodies That Matter* (1993)(BTM). It did not take long to see why Butler was suggested: in the opening paragraphs of GT, she identifies power as a central aspect of her inquiry into the project of gender, and more generally, identity. Butler applies a Foucauldian perspective in her analysis of how juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent, and how these subjects are created through the regulated process of repetition of signification (1990: 2, 145). In the case of gender, Butler argues that it is a regulated fiction produced through discursive regimes of power, and that one of the most powerful cultural discourses of gender is the ‘natural-
ness’ of heterosexuality which is presupposed upon the assumption of two sexes, male and female, that exist as ‘naturally’ different and attracted to each other (1990: 6-7). Yet these two sexes are already culturally defined through their division into the categories of male and female, and the assumption of their sexual desire for each other. In other words, the internal coherence of either gender requires a stable and oppositional heterosexuality which helps to constitute gender as a neat system. Since these assumptions of the ‘natural’ coherence of sex, gender and sexuality are socially instituted and maintained forms of intelligibility and stabilizing concepts in the establishment of the coherence and continuity of the person, the presence of gendered beings who appear to be persons, but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined will be potentially subversive and therefore threatening (1990: 17, 22). Hence the marginality of the homosexual, the cross-dresser and other persons whose activities, statements and/or appearances destabilize the heterosexualized gender matrix.

Here, then, was a partial answer to my questions about the absence or silence surrounding homosexuality in official discourses of gendered identity in Martinique, and the link between, gender and sexuality. In various official and everyday acts, a powerful ‘regulatory fiction’ of heterosexualized gendered identity operated as one of the foundational principles of performing Martinican identity, and homosexuals would not be accepted because they appeared to be normatively gendered persons with an ‘inappropriate’ sexual desire, thus threatening a key cultural construct of gender. Yet, as Butler mentions (albeit without developing the point), these sexualized, gendered figments of identity are also/always shot through with differentiating features of race, class and other modalities (1990: 3). In the case of Martinique, these modalities are produced through and specifically related to a neo-colonial relationship with France. Much more could be said about this, but at the very least we must recognize the centrality of race—that is, being classified as blanc (white) negre (black) chabin (near white) or mulattre (mixed), just to name a few of the many racial/ethnic categories utilized in Martinique—that must be integrated into any analysis of gender and sexuality in Martinique (see Murray 1999, 2000). In other words, gender and sexuality are not only produced through and in relation to each other, but also through and in relation to other social categorizations such as race that are themselves constituted through and in relation to gender/sexuality.

Thus, while IOC opened up the interpretive spectrum in its recognition of culture as a contradictory, inversionary process of relations in which convention and invention operate dialectically, Butler complicates and
extends this process as she explains why the dialectic does not exist on a level playing field, and how some (gendered and sexual) conventions are embedded in powerful, complex and diffuse regulatory networks of institutional and informal discourses, thus limiting the range of possible 'inventive' alternatives.

Yet I was also struck by how much Butler and Wagner have in common in their discussions of how conventions and identifications are produced, despite their significantly different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds. Butler’s primary theoretical framework is performativity. She claims that the subjective experience of gender (and, for that matter, any other ‘identity’) is constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results (Butler 1990: 25). Performativity is the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. The creation of subjects who belong to a discursive norm (of heterosexualized gender in this case) also creates its own ‘abject’ that which is outside the domain of the subject. These abject persons both delimit and destabilize regulatory regimes of truth while they are simultaneously a product of them. Thus, in the case of gender, it is wrong to assume that gender is always constituted coherently and consistently; indeed, we should never presume the subject of ‘women’ or ‘men’ (1990: 6).

Wagner produces a similar argument in his analysis of the idea of ‘culture.’ He explains that culture, as it has been used by anthropologists, is a subject that is created through the act of trying to represent it more objectively (Wagner 1975: 1, my emphasis). There is no ‘a priori’ natural objective thing that is culture, but rather it is an expressive invention that is invoked by a certain social group to represent conventions that can never be fully realized, and are therefore always subject to reinterpretation.

The conceptual parallel between Wagner’s ‘invention’ of culture and Butler’s ‘performative’ of gender exists in their similar deconstruction of systemic, containing and naturalizing social categories, exposing them as tropes or discourses that are brought into being as they are spoken, and can therefore never be fully realized or stabilized; their totality or completeness can only remain an ideal. Culture is created by the anthropologist (or the cultural bureaucrat) as a syncretic ideal—gender is perhaps more rooted in the popular imaginary, but it is no less an imagined ideal that is permanently deferred. There is thus no ‘a priori true’ culture or gender prior to their utterance. However, both Butler and Wagner note that as these so-called ‘natural’ terms are uttered, they invoke an historicized convention/truth regime that limits invention and ‘abjectified’ possibilities. The cultural fact or gendered utterance, therefore, is always ambiguous, for
there is always the simultaneity of a conventionalizing context or discourse which anchors the fact/utterance within a particular privileged meaning, and an inventive context which may allow for different interpretations and possible change. Every utterance carries its own shadow, its own abject or opposite that has the potential to be just as normative or real. It is this fundamental simultaneity and ambiguity of meaning within any social category that Wagner’s and Butler’s arguments emphasize. Both are saying that gender, culture and all other categories of social organization and classification are concepts without any ‘natural’ foundation or closure; they are permanently opaque due to the density of production, the complexity of context, and the never ceasing struggles over ‘valid’ meaning.

While it is of course important to keep in mind the differences between Wagner’s and Butler’s models as they reflect different historical moments in which their texts were produced as well as quite different disciplinary interests and agendas, I want to conclude by reiterating how IOC, a text written in a pre-Foucauldian, pre-postmodern, pre-reflexive era, managed to anticipate so much of what was to come in the social sciences and humanities over the next two decades. If, as I have argued, we can find similarities in the principles of IOC and Judith Butler’s work, written fifteen years later (and it should be noted that her texts continue to have a major impact in anthropology and other disciplines some ten years after they were written), then surely we can see the relevance of maintaining IOC as a key text in contemporary anthropological debates about our primary concepts and raison d’être.

Roy Wagner has done to culture what Judith Butler has done to gender—he ‘queered’ the concept. I am borrowing this term from a movement in sexuality studies that identifies Butler as one of the key thinkers who has forced us to question the ‘naturalness’ of the relationship between gender and sexuality categories, and to redefine them as contested, unstable discourses that are at the same time deeply embedded within other powerful discourses which work to maintain highly specific and naturalized definitions. The same principle applies to how Wagner has treated ‘culture’ through his desire to permanently destabilize the concept in order to recognize it as relative, contingent, and subjective at all times.

But despite this ‘queering’ of culture, IOC does not in any way say that ‘culture’ is non-existent, or an invention that therefore renders it artificial and useless. In many ways, IOC follows ‘the grand theory’ traditions that it so persuasively critiques as it proposes a universal model for understanding encounters between the anthropologist and the subject of inquiry. The tension within IOC between ‘grand theorizing’ and ‘relativizing cultural cri-
tique’ creates, for me, a stimulating, destabilizing, contradictory and therefore productive reading that is as relevant now as it was over twenty five years ago. It presents a possible direction for cultural analysis after the necessary, but often nihilistic critiques of anthropology that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s. If productively applied to recent theoretical developments like Judith Butler’s work on gender and power, I believe IOC will continue to be of great importance to anyone interested in understanding the production of meaning and its multiple representations manifested across the infinite diversity of contemporary humanity.

NOTES

1. To claim that the English term ‘gay’ and the French term gai as it is used in Martinique are equivalent is to oversimplify the situation. While these terms are quite similar in that they are both used by many individuals to describe their consistent sexual and romantic preference for someone of the same gender, there are also significant differences in the individual experiences and larger socio-political contexts in which these terms operate. See Murray 2000 for further explanation.

2. For more on queer theory, see De Lauretis 1991; Jagose 1996; or McKee 1999.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


