Culture²: Entry

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Does culture need a theory?

*Yes, sure, why else would you teach
classes on "cultural theory."*

*No, not as an explanation.
There is no culture that doesn't come
equipped with its own theory about itself.*

The matters of humanist concern—poems, television series, table manners, rap songs, or Balinese cockfights—are well aware that they're part of a culture. Technically speaking, they don't need scholars to tell them so. Conversely, much of what is branded "theory" is itself a cultural practice, producing its own reflexive loops of, about, and within academic knowledge.

Regrettably, then, labeling something with the slippery signifier "culture" doesn't tell you much about it. The word is more of a semiotic vessel that contains multitudes, sometimes platitudes. So if you go ahead and add another level of observation—as in "cultural studies"—you may well end up producing "stuff about stuff," as Michael Bérubé once quipped.[1] Despite its slipperiness, however, the word "culture" has had very distinct things to say in the writings of those who have been using it professionally. Just think of the tonal difference between W.E.B. Du Bois making a bold claim on the "kingdom of culture" in 1903 and Ruth Benedict designating culture as "a more or less

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1   Michael Bérubé, "Introduction: Engaging the Aesthetic," in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Bérubé (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 9.

consistent pattern of thought and action" in 1934.[2] The culture concept has performed tremendous cultural work—and it continues to do so as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century. In fact, the recent trend toward calling any systemic groupthink behind real or imagined social problems "culture"—think "gun culture" or, in a different register, "cancel culture"—has set the American culture concept on a darker course, one that is fully aligned with, well, the culture's political situation. Seen from a more abstract perspective, the sheer proliferation of the phrase "*x* culture" points to a veritable *culture culture*—a curious way in which "our" culture observes and describes itself through the prism of "culture."

In a way, then, culture doesn't need to be squared—it squares itself.

And yet here we are with *Culture²*. Niklas Luhmann once remarked that academic talk of "culture" only subsists on the fact that we cannot do without it—however, not because "culture" is such a well-defined and useful concept but because any proposal for an alternative terminology would likely reproduce its inadequacies.[3] *Culture²* means to probe this predicament: if the loaded term "culture" is our best bad option to address, in impossible abstraction, all those behaviors, practices, forms, and ideational or ideological structures that "have been learned"—that is, the labors, arts, sports, techniques, sciences, productions, reproductions, consumptions, emotions, and daily routines of human life—then perhaps the *study* of culture is the most recursive and self-involved cultural activity of them all. The title of our volume pays homage to this intuition. It holds that what in some quarters is still called "*cultural* studies" should be taken at its word. In this spirit, *Culture²* sets out to read a number of contemporary "observations" on aesthetics, technology, literature, violence, entertainment, institutions, storytelling, capitalism, sexuality, nonhumans, the Anthropocene, etc. as the learned self-observations of a fairly coherent, historically specific, and clearly critical moment in modern thought.

In doing so, we recognize that cultural theory, broadly conceived, doesn't only think of itself through "keywords"—as in Raymond Williams's founda-

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2   W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 (London: Penguin, 1996), 7; Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 1934 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

3   Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society, Volume 2*, 1997, trans. Rhodes Barrett (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 176. The book's German title resonates well with the reflexivity stressed in the present volume: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (literally: "The Society of Society" or "Society's Society").

tional handbook—but also, and despite our increasingly fragmented ecosystem of scholarly communication, through individual "key works." Based on this premise, our book features fifteen essays on a selection of key works in the study of culture published over the last two decades. These essays do not speak the language of classical "reviews," encyclopedic surveys, polemical dismissals, or enthusiastic partisanship. Instead, they attempt to take seriously the implications of the project's title and enter into a respectful and responsive dialogue with their chosen interlocutors. We like to think that the chapters that follow manage to avoid the safe stance of external judgment in favor of the more tentative receptiveness, perhaps even self-consciousness and uncertainty, afforded by positions of considered con-temporaneity and third-order observation.

This is why *Culture²* is not a handbook, encyclopedia, or a "state of the field" compendium. Its goal is not to canonize "must-reads" of cultural theory but to spark productive debate through the presumptuous act of singling out individual texts that can exemplify the potentials and constraints of current modes of "doing theory."

The group of scholars assembled here represents a transatlantic network; their outlook on cultural studies is deeply informed and, at the same time, delimited by Anglo-American conversations on theory and method, while also being detached from the immediate institutional ties and political stakes of a national scholarly community. With its editors based in European American Studies (what a term), *Culture²* attempts to place the works it covers in a larger transnational conversation.

Among the "key works" discussed in the fifteen chapters are some of the most quoted books of the past twenty years (Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons*, Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, Caroline Levine's *Forms*, Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*) alongside several perhaps less obvious entries that reflect the interdisciplinary traffic of ideas passing through the fields of cultural and literary studies from areas such as anthropology, evolutionary biology, media studies, or sociology (by way of Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Michael Tomasello's *Why We Cooperate*, John Durham Peters's *The Marvelous Clouds*, and Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*).[4] After collecting these one-sided dialogues, and writing

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4   While finishing the proofs for this volume, we came across a tweet indicating that Lauren Berlant now uses the pronouns they/them. We asked Lauren Berlant to confirm, which they did. They also told us that it's fine to use she/her for a book they published

two of them ourselves, we see the gaps and omissions in this scholarly as-
semblage more glaringly than before. For this reason—and to underscore the
provisional nature both of culture and of *Culture²*—the book is subtitled Vol. 1.
If and when there will be a Vol. 2 remains to be seen. Should it come to pass,
the twenty-first century will probably have moved into some post-COVID-19
era. (Several of the chapters carry visible traces of the current pandemic, as
they were completed in the early days of lockdowns and social distancing in
2020.) What awaits on the other side of this watershed, no theory can pre-
dict—but chances are that, for better or worse, it will still recognize itself as
culture. In this sense, too, the act of theorizing theory is a task *for* the twenty-
first century.[5]