The second edition of Kidd’s *Pop Culture Freaks* takes on the inequalities and identities of a complex culture. From *Harry Potter* and *Dear White People* to Beyoncé and beyond, this is essential reading for sociologists and students who struggle to understand our clashing and confusing social worlds. This remix is even better than the original!

—Matthew W. Hughey, Associate Professor, Sociology, University of Connecticut, and author of *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption.*

*Pop Culture Freaks* is an accessible introduction to the intersections of power, identity, and pop culture – the disparities pop cultural industries create and exploit, and the identities that influence pop cultural production, content, and reception. With sociological chops and a fan’s enthusiasm, Kidd offers invaluable tools for critical thought and empirical study of this familiar, weird, and consequential landscape.

—Joshua Gamson, Professor, Sociology, University of San Francisco

*Pop Culture Freaks* offers a powerful analysis of the power and inequality at work in popular culture. The balance of theory, empirical work, and contemporary examples and illustrations from pop culture is awe-inspiring. Offering a new approach, engagingly and accessibly written, with clear and well-summarized illustrations of research and data, Dustin Kidd’s approach is captivating and among the most innovative and important introductions to the sociology of popular culture.

—Tristan Bridges, Assistant Professor, Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

We are immersed in pop culture, but unable to comprehend our connection to it. *Pop Culture Freaks* is a crucial intervention, where Kidd proves he is just as adept at clearly engaging the ideas of writers like Michel Foucault as he is the music and images of artists like Beyonce.

—Lester Andrist, PhD, The University of Maryland
Utilizing each chapter to present core topical and timely examples, *Pop Culture Freaks* highlights the tension between inclusion and individuality that lies beneath mass media and commercial culture, using this tension as a point of entry to an otherwise expansive topic. Dustin Kidd systematically considers several dimensions of identity—including race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability to provide a broad overview of the field that encompasses classical and contemporary theory, original data, topical and timely examples, and a strong pedagogical focus on methods.

*Pop Culture Freaks* encourages students to develop further research questions and projects from the material. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are brought to bear in Kidd’s examination of the labor force for cultural production, the representations of identity in cultural objects, and the surprising differences in how various audiences consume and use mass culture in their everyday lives. This new, revised edition includes updated examples and data to reflect a constantly changing pop culture landscape.

**Dustin Kidd** is a pop culture expert and associate professor of sociology at Temple University. His research examines film, television, fiction, social media, comics, video games, music, and the arts, focusing on both inequalities and the ways that marginalized groups use media to challenge those inequalities. He is the author of the books *Social Media Freaks*, *Pop Culture Freaks*, and *Legislating Creativity*. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and an MA in English from the University of Virginia.
Pop Culture Freaks
Identity, Mass Media, and Society

2nd Edition

Dustin Kidd

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am very pleased to share the second edition of Pop Culture Freaks. Writing a new edition gave me ample opportunities to respond to discussions that I have had with my readers, including the many students who have read the book as an assignment in their classes.

In popular culture, we are taught to have a fetish of the new. Whether it’s the latest release from a band, the newest update of an app, the opening week of a new movie, or this week’s episode of a new show, we as audiences are encouraged to always focus on the newest thing. At the request of my readers, I have conceded to the fetish of the new in this second edition of the book. Many of the major examples that provided the opening narratives of the chapters have been updated with more recent examples. Glee and Modern Family have been replaced with Dear White People and Beyoncé’s Lemonade. But I do make several references to popular culture from earlier decades because it is important to have a sense of the history of the entertainment industry and to understand how that history foregrounds the current landscape of commercial culture.

In addition to updating the major examples in the book, I have also updated the data wherever possible. For the first edition of the book, published in 2014, I relied on primary and secondary data from the year 2010. For this second edition, the data is largely drawn from 2016. The new data is not much different from the old data. The patterns of racial exclusion and invisibility, the symbolic annihilation of women, the confinement of LGBTQIA folks to a pop culture closet, the dismissal of the working class, and the trope of isolation for characters with disabilities are consistent from the first edition to the second, with very little indication of progress. There is a great deal more open
discussion of these issues in Hollywood at the moment, and that discourse is an important step, but we as concerned audiences need to be vigilant to ensure that discourse eventually becomes action and progress.

One place where progress happens is language. For this second edition of the book, I have made a few changes in the language that I use related to identity. As often as possible, I have tried to change the words “female” and “male” to “women” and “men,” because the latter pair of words places more emphasis on the personhood of the individual. “Male” and “female” are adjectives that function as scientific sex classifications that can be made to many different species, not just humans. I have changed the acronym LGBT to LGBTQIA, to highlight the wide array of queer identities. I continue to use the word “Hispanic” when referring to U.S. Census data, as this is the term that the Census uses, but I otherwise prefer the terms “Latino/a/x” (to refer to an unspecified individual) and Latinos to refer to a group of individuals. Readers may wonder how to pronounce Latino/a/x, so my advice is to simply choose one of the variants Latino, Latina, and Latinx (pronounced la-teen-ex) when speaking. Finally, I have revised the language around disability to banish the word “disabled” from the text because it tends to diminish the personhood and multi-dimensionality of the individual person or character, in part because it can function as both an adjective and a passive tense verb. I want to remove the sense that disability is something imposed and focus instead on disability as a normal part of the wide-ranging experience of being human.

The first edition had a lengthy chapter on global perspectives on popular culture, with postcards from pop culture outposts around the world. I never felt comfort writing that chapter because it is really beyond my expertise. I have pared the chapter down to focus on how Harry Potter experiences the process of translation as it finds new audiences around the world. I leave it to readers and other scholars to find or create great analyses of pop culture in non-U.S. locations.

Finally, the closing chapter of the first edition—a meditation on the films The Matrix and Freaks—has been replaced as part of the shift away from dated examples. The new conclusion focuses on ways to maintain the sociological perspective on popular culture long after closing the covers of the book. I have placed a copy of the original conclusion essay on my website. My website can be visited for a wide range of resources for readers and teachers. Find me there and on Twitter!

Dustin Kidd
dustinkidd.net
@PopCultureFreak
This book is dedicated to all of the students in my classes on popular culture since I started teaching in this area in 2001. Their thoughtfulness, creativity, and high expectations have made me the scholar and teacher that I am. I thank them all. Students from my fall 2010 popular culture course played an important role in the collection of the television data, along with graduate students in my spring 2011 seminar on culture. Students from my fall 2012 popular culture course played an important role in the collection of the film data. Dr. Corrine Castro served as a valuable research assistant in the early stages of this project while she was a graduate student at Temple University.

I first engaged the sociology of popular culture as a teaching assistant for Bethany Bryson. Bethany provided a road map through this exciting terrain that is evident throughout this book. I also thank my other intellectual role models, Sarah Corse, Sharon Hays, and Julia Ericksen.

Eric Crawford produced the wonderful illustrations in this book. The team at ChatterBlast Media guided me gently into the world of social media.

And finally, thank-you to all of the creative professionals, devoted fans, and rigorous scholars who demand that we take popular culture seriously. You are the true pop culture freaks!
THE POP CULTURE PRESIDENT

In November 2016, American voters sent popular culture to the White House with the election of Donald J. Trump. Trump was the star of the hit reality television show The Apprentice and one of its executive producers. He is famous for his heavy use of Twitter and for his long-standing relationship to celebrity culture. Before becoming the President of the United States, Trump primarily worked as the head of the Trump Organization, a private company founded by his grandmother and his father. But while running the business from 1971 to 2017, his primary interest seemed to be fame. According to Trump’s page on the IMDb (formally known as the Internet Movie Database) he has 25 credits for acting, most of which were for playing fictional versions of himself. He had uncredited appearances in two episodes of The Jeffersons, in 1981 and 1985. Other credits include Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The Nanny, and Sex and the City. He won a Golden Raspberry Award, also known as a Razzie Award, for Worst Supporting Actor for his 1989 appearance as himself in the Bo Derek film Ghosts Can’t Do It.

The Apprentice had an impressive 14-season arc with Trump as lead, and continued for one additional season starring celebrity-turned-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the original version of the show, contestants competed to become an assistant to Trump through a series of team challenges. From the start, the teams were divided by gender. This is commonplace on the number of assignments he completed.

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1 www.imdb.com/name/nm0874339/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1.
reality television but was particularly striking in a context that was meant to mimic white-collar workplaces. In each episode, with occasional exceptions, a contestant was dismissed from the show with Trump’s famous catchphrase, “You’re fired!” In a variation of the show, known as The Celebrity Apprentice, B-list celebrities compete to raise money for charity. They, too, are signaled off the show with Trump’s classic declaration, “You’re fired!”

You’re fired. That is basically the message that entertainment culture sends to each of us. We may survive for a few episodes with our charm and grace, but, ultimately, we are fired for one reason or another. The message of pop culture taken as a whole is that we are not good enough. We are insufficient persons due to our race or ethnicity, gender or gender identity, social class, disability or body type, sexuality, age, faith or lack thereof, nationality, values, education, or any other aspect of our identities.

You’re fired is the catchphrase for The Apprentice, but it is the essential message of all entertainment media. Certainly, reality TV is in the practice of firing its contestants and, by extension, its audience. Consider the example of The Biggest Loser. Contestants are selected not simply for their weight, but also for the way that being overweight gives them a story of marginalization or despair. Producers look for contestants with extreme stories and extreme personalities. Once they make it to the show, they are subjected to grueling workouts and voted off one at a time for the very thing that brought them on the show in the first place: their struggle with weight loss.

The mentality of “You’re fired!” extends beyond reality TV to sports, video games, spelling bees, and a million outposts of popular culture where competition is the name of the game. Television dramas may not feature competition, but they are mostly driven by the inadequacies of their characters, whether it is the criminal behavior of law and order shows, the failing health of patients on medical dramas, or the corrupt souls of the major characters on political thrillers.

If TV dramas and sitcoms do not make competition their central theme, they are nevertheless caught up in their own competitions for Emmy Awards, advertising dollars, and audiences. Every wing of entertainment culture has one or more awards that validate the success of a small few while sending a message of “You’re fired!” to the rest. In entertainment, you’re only as good as your most recent work. A few weak productions and suddenly you need a comeback.

Who doesn’t get fired? Well, Trump for starters. After 14 seasons of The Apprentice Trump was elected to be the President of the United States. Trump
provides a nice metaphor for the entertainment industry itself, which seems both unfireable and ascendant. It assumes greater and greater control of our social and political structures and our day-to-day lives. Films and songs and shows may flop, but the massive corporations that make them live on. If entertainment was once a diversion at the end of the workday, it is now a ubiquitous voice calling out to us at every turn and every hour of the day. That voice has a lot to say, but the most consistent message is clear: You are not good enough. Buy more. Otherwise, you're fired!

LOSERS, STRANGERS, AND FREAKS

Losers, freaks, misfits, cripples, and queers: the world of popular culture has a way of telling us that we do not fit in, and then turning around and selling us a ticket to conformity, to the pop-culture prom with a gorgeous date. But the ticket is always a counterfeit; we never get into the prom, at least not for long, and we have to buy yet another ticket. Unless we fight back—organizing our own alternative prom and turning around the weapons of mass culture.

We may compare the fired contestant on The Apprentice to the stranger in a 1908 essay by the early sociologist Georg Simmel. Simmel begins “The Stranger” with a discussion of wanderers—traveling merchants in particular—who roam into a new community, bringing with them an awareness of everything that is beyond and outside of that community. Simmel is most intrigued by the wanderer who then lingers, settling into his surroundings, but always being identified as an outsider, someone who never attains full membership in the community because he is not organically a part of it. The persistent presence of this stranger provides for the larger community what Simmel calls a “union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship . . . an element whose membership within the group involves being both outside it and confronting it” (2010, 302–303).

Being fired—by your boss or by popular culture—means being denied full participation in the social milieu while still living within it. Popular culture tells us that we are ugly, but it constantly promises to make us beautiful. It tells us that we are failures, but it swears it can sell us the formula for success. This book explores how the popular culture we produce and consume creates a sense of closeness and remoteness for all of us, living in a world in which we are pressured to conform, in ways that few of us can fully achieve. The very same traits that make us unique individuals also prevent us from realizing the popular ideals of our time, which we affirm and produce through the music
We dance to, the television shows and films we turn to for entertainment, the books we read, and even the websites we access for diversion or information. This is a book about the intersections of identity—the associations that make us who we are and give us a sense of belonging to the tribe—and popular culture, the somewhat mechanical set of meanings and values that dominate our world, regardless of our tribal membership.

Why freaks? The word *freak* can be very off-putting; it is an insult. Interestingly, it is a slur that has never attached itself to any particular group. Kids who are gay have been called freaks for their sexuality. Christians have been called freaks for their faith. Artists have been called freaks for their self-expression. People with disabilities have been called freaks for the unique qualities of their bodies or minds. Smart people have been called freaks for their high IQs. Anyone is susceptible to being called a freak. The word is a mechanism for undermining the social power of the person at whom it is targeted. It implies that the recipient has been poorly socialized to be a member of the community. On the surface, *freak* is an accusation against the individual target, but it also implies that our mechanisms of socialization may be suspect. Who is responsible for these freaks? Parents? Neighborhoods? Schools? The media?

I embrace the word *freak* in this book, first because I believe that we operate within a commercial culture system that treats us all as freaks. The system’s goal is to push us to spend and consume, and that means that we can never be satisfied. We are told that we can find peace and satisfaction when we achieve the right lifestyle, but nothing is ever good enough. There is always another gadget to buy, another imperfection in our bodies, another reason to feel like a freak. If we are not maligned for our race, class, gender, sexuality, or bodies, then we are maligned for our religion, age, ethnicity, political ideology, or cultural tastes.

How do we escape the freak cycle, in which popular culture tells us that we are not good enough, and then sells us a path to supposed perfection, and then says we failed to follow that path successfully and have to buy into the next path that it offers? As I look at audiences, the people who consume popular culture—which is to say, all of us—I notice that those who seem to find some peace and satisfaction are the ones who lean into the identity of the freak. When commercial culture says they are not good enough, they say, “Hell, yeah!” and laugh. They take the messages embedded in popular culture and twist them around to find new kinds of meaning that allow them to experience empowerment and pride.
I argue that we are all pop culture freaks in a commercial culture system that is inescapable and needs all of us to feel insufficient. But I also argue that embracing our freak status may provide us with the tools to find some agency within that system and have some control over how the culture industries influence our lives.

DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE

The term **popular culture** has a variety of meanings, and I will be very specific about which ones I am using in this book. The word *popular* is from the Latin *populus*, meaning “the people.” Historically, both in Roman times and in other societies, “the people” referred not to all people, but rather to a very specific and very large mass of poor and working people. It excluded a tiny group of ruling elites, who were associated with a very different kind of culture—a privileged set of cultural goods like paintings, classical music, literature, and other forms of creative expression—that we now refer to as **high culture**. Everyone else had what we call **folk culture**—local music, crafts, oral traditions, morality plays, and many other types of expression. Another term for folk culture that is sometimes used is **low culture**. Low culture has a different connotation from folk culture because it places the emphasis on a cultural hierarchy. High culture is presumed to be elevated not just by the economic class of its patrons but also by the level of quality or value that it carries. Low culture is diminished by its presumed lack of value. Yet another common term is **mass culture**, which refers to the idea that everyone shares the same mass-produced culture. The idea of mass culture can be a useful way of thinking about certain shared experiences and symbols, but it obscures the fact that the audience for any one cultural work is often just a sliver of the population.

If *popular* means the people, then popular culture could be associated with folk culture, low culture, or mass culture. But popular culture has many meanings. Folk culture is local, rooted in regional identity. The popular culture that I discuss in this book has been carefully scrubbed of that kind of localism to make it appealing across regions. Low culture is a subjective designation, riddled with bias and power and unusable as a sociological category. Mass culture is a usable category, but it is actually not an accurate description of most contemporary culture. As the 2016 election highlighted, we really do not all live in the same cultural spaces.

Although categories like high, folk, low, and mass culture are still in use, both in the United States and around the world, they do not apply to a lot of
the culture that is now produced and consumed. This is attributable in part to the growth of the middle class, as sociologist Herbert Gans explains in *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1999). As a cultural category, middle class refers to a set of lifestyles. Members of the middle class have enough money to purchase almost everything they need, rather than making these goods at home. But they do not have so much money that they can commission a crafts person to make these goods for them individually. For example, they do not typically sew their own dresses, nor do they hire dressmakers; instead, they purchase mass-produced clothing.

The growth of the middle class, both economically and culturally, has resulted in a shift in how we think of popular culture, from the working masses to the vast middle class. Middle-class cultural practices are so ubiquitous that middle-class consumption has become the norm for everyone. Even those who may sew their own dresses out of economic necessity or commission custom-made dresses because they are economically privileged probably also purchase most of their clothing at the fashion mall. This book focuses on the culture associated with this middle class, which has become so broad as to functionally include all Americans, even those who are desperately poor or fantastically rich.

This brings me to the word *culture*, which also has a variety of meanings, some of them rather contradictory. On the one hand, we have the notion that something “cultured” is somehow refined because it has been cultivated. Some process has occurred to move it from a raw, uncultured state to an elevated, cultured state. In this sense, *culture* may refer to sacred elements of society, such as religious artifacts or high culture art. But in sociological analysis, culture is much broader than just high culture and much bigger than just the sacred. It is also everyday, or as the scholar Raymond Williams puts it, “culture is ordinary” (2002 [1958], 91). So what is this thing that is both sacred and everyday? It is shared meaning.

Shared meaning is the meat and bones of culture. Meaning ranges from our highest beliefs about god and the sacred to our everyday tastes about food and fashion. It is the political ideologies we fight over and the everyday assumptions we take for granted. These meanings are structured into our languages and the various other ways that we communicate. Some meanings are relatively fixed and hard to change; others are constantly being debated and negotiated. Culture is produced within families, neighborhoods, schools, and churches—and it is also produced by the entertainment industry. The mass media floods our homes and lives with stories about the human experience, and each story includes a set of claims about what the world means.
The culture in question in this book is that of the culture industry: commercially produced meanings embedded in expressive works that include text, audio, and video. I said that we are looking at the culture of the vast middle class. To be more specific, we are looking at the commercial culture that is produced in a society driven by middle-class identification, even for those who are very rich and those who are very poor.

Unlike culture that is produced and enjoyed within a community, commercial culture separates the formation and reception processes in very clear ways. Formation refers to the process of making a cultural object. It refers to both production—the economic dimension, including the labor force that makes the work and the determination of its economic value—and creation—the artistic dimension and the ways the work is infused with meaning. Reception refers to the ways that audiences receive a cultural good, such as a television show, and make use of it. It refers to both consumption—how we access and select a cultural good—and interpretation—how we determine what the cultural good means and how we act on those meanings. When a cultural object is made within a community, production and reception are part of the same social moment. The local singer, performing in a coffee shop or bar, stands immediately in front of her audience. The sociologist examining that moment is able to study both production/creation and reception and unlikely to invest in a distinction between the two. In commercial culture, a very clear division of labor separates producers from audiences and separates the process of production temporally and geographically from that of reception. Television shows are made in Hollywood and distributed across the United States; films are shot in Hollywood or “on location” and shown in theaters across the country. Fashion magazines are edited in New York and devoured by readers all over. Music is recorded in Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville and downloaded on computers, phones, and iPods everywhere. Traditionally, production is reserved for a lucky few. Social media, the Internet, and smartphones have blurred the lines between culture makers and culture consumers in some ways, but while any of us can now make and post our own stories, we do not control the systems on which our stories are shared.

Wendy Griswold (1994) provides a visual representation of the relationship between makers and audiences in her concept of the cultural diamond (see Figure 1.1). We see that producers/creators and audiences are placed at opposite ends of the diamond, as are the social world and the cultural object. Social world refers to the totality of the community in which the cultural object acts. It may be hip-hop culture, America, global culture, or any other social unit we could imagine. Of course, creators, objects, and receivers are embedded in
this world, but for our analytical purposes we are teasing out cultural objects to better understand how they work. As we do so, we learn that these cultural objects are connected to the larger social world through both production/creation and reception, so we need to study both to understand the objects.

Consider the example of *The Apprentice*. The show is a cultural object created by a team of producers, writers, directors, and many others. It depicts a social world that centers on a competition between business professionals, who are sometimes replaced with celebrities. But it is meant to represent the social world of the white-collar workforce in general, not just that of a Manhattan TV competition. To get from the real boardrooms of the white-collar workforce to Donald Trump's boardroom, the content of the show is filtered through the perspectives and interests of the people who make it. Those creators are acting in part on the perceived desires of their audience. The interests of the creators and the desires of the audience probably disrupt the show's capacity to offer an accurate reflection of the social world of American high schools. Reflection theory, a sociological approach to literature and other forms of cultural objects, examines the ways that culture reflects the social world. Although the theory has its critics, it nevertheless offers a powerful way of understanding the content of culture. Mark Burnett, the creator of the show, did not invent the boardroom that we see on *The Apprentice* out of thin air. He built it with elements from the social world: his own experiences in boardrooms, other shows and films that feature boardrooms, and his star Donald Trump's descriptions of the boardroom. In *The Apprentice*, contestants spend much of the season competing on gender-based teams. This is a reflection of standard reality TV show practice, not standard business practice. In fact, it would be illegal to engage in such a practice. So, we can see right away that the reflections that we see in popular culture are distorted reflections, like the fun house mirror that makes us look bigger or smaller than we really are. The representations that we see in *The Apprentice* and other shows are a reflection, however distorted, of the creator's experiences and of the intended audience's desire to the extent that the audience can weigh in through market research up front and then ratings once the show debuts.

As audiences watch the show, they may internalize the meanings they make from it. That is an important claim that we need to examine. I am not saying that audiences internalize the meanings that Mark Burnett or Donald

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2 Griswold (1981) offers one of the best examinations of reflection theory.
Trump infuse into the show. Rather, I am saying that the meaning is made by
the audience itself. The audience has limited tools for this meaning-making
work, but the work is theirs. Audience members are limited by the available
interpretations of the content and by the personal experiences they bring to
the viewing. These interpretations and experiences generate what one sociol-
ogist calls a tool kit. Ann Swidler suggests that “cultures provide a ‘tool kit’
of resources from which people can construct diverse strategies of action”
(1986, 281). If Swidler’s notion is correct, then we draw on past cultural expe-
riences to construct meaning and make choices in new situations. Some of
my favorite shows over the years include The X-Files, Ugly Betty, and Game of
Thrones. These shows are part of my cultural tool kit. When I confront a diffi-
cult situation, I can reach into that tool kit and grab one of the characters from
those shows to determine how I will respond. Should I grab Fox Mulder, Betty
Suarez, or King Joffrey? Those are three very tools and they will result in very
different lines of action on my part!

In sum, this book asks questions about the ways the culture industry gen-
erates a wide array of social meanings through the production/creation, con-
tent, and reception of commercial culture objects that, taken as a whole, are
consumed by the mass of society. Attention is given to all four points of the
cultural diamond: creator, cultural object, receiver, and the social world.

THE FUNCTIONS OF POPULAR CULTURE

In his book The Rules of Sociological Method (1938), Émile Durkheim argued
that social institutions exist to serve certain necessary social functions. He
defended this claim with the tricky example of crime. Despite the percep-
tion that all crime is bad, Durkheim took the stance that crime is normal, is
unavoidable, and serves positive functions for society. Today, popular culture
performs many of the functions that Durkheim attributed to crime. Crime and
its punishments have become so routinized and obscured from public obser-
vation that they simply are unable to play the same role that they did when
trials were held in the public square and executions were spectator events.
Occasionally a major hearing, such as the trial of O. J. Simpson, will capture
public attention, but that is only because of the mediating role of commercial
media. I contend that popular culture serves five major social functions.3

3For an expansion on this discussion, see Kidd (2007).
First, popular culture generates basic social norms. Although no American consumes all of American popular culture, most Americans consume quite a lot of it. In *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner (1980) identify popular culture as the key means by which the ideas of the dominant classes may be transmitted to the whole of society in the era of late capitalism. Today, in the realm of sexuality, popular culture is becoming a vehicle for new ways to think about sexual orientation. The new visibility of gay characters and artists is providing LGBTQIA youths with more images of people like them. When then Vice President Joe Biden stated his support for gay marriage, he cited *Will and Grace* as an important factor in changing American minds about gay people.

Second, popular culture produces social boundaries. The clothing we wear, the music we listen to, and the television we watch not only constitute our identities, but also help to separate our identity categories from others’ identity categories. My love of Willie Nelson and Emmylou Harris helps me to find others who are “like me.” People who listen to Billy Ray Cyrus or Eminem are not “like me,” at least not musically. Maybe there is an Eminem fan who really should be my friend; fashion, television, film, and literature may yet bring us together.

Paul Willis (1977) finds that popular culture in the form of fashion is an important tool for boundary maintenance among working-class adolescent males in Britain. In *Learning to Labor*, Willis takes as his subject population a group called the “lads,” who actively resist the authority of the school system. The lads define their identities in contrast to the “ear’oles,” who embrace school culture, and in contrast to the school itself:

> As the most visible, personalised and instantly understood element of resistance to staff and ascendancy over “ear’oles,” clothes have great importance to “the lads.” The first sign of a lad “coming out” is a fairly rapid change in his clothes and hairstyle. The particular form of this alternative dress is determined by outside influences, especially fashions current in the wider symbolic system of youth culture.

(Willis 1977, 17)

Fashion is shorthand for a distinctive set of values, goals, and practices. Willis uses the phrase “coming out” in a generic way, not in reference to gay kids acknowledging their sexual orientation. But it is also true that young people
often use fashion as a marker of coming out of the closet and embracing gay identity. There is no inherent reason for gay youths to change their hair, clothes, or other aspects of their appearance. But as Lady Gaga says in her song “Hair,” these are among the few tools that young people have to declare their individuality.

Third, popular culture produces rituals that generate social solidarity. People who share identity categories have solidarity with one another, thanks to the rituals of popular culture. Teenagers are united by rhythms at the rave and the club; college students come together to watch “Must See TV” on NBC; Harry Potter fans become friends at book release parties or while standing in line for the movies. As a college student in the 1990s in the small-town South, I used to go to The Round Up on Friday nights for line dancing with the locals. These rituals produce feelings of shared sentiment—the excitement and love for Lady Gaga as a role model and mother figure, for example—and these feelings produce social cohesion by bonding members of society together in relationships of trust and shared purpose.

Why does solidarity matter? Based on the work of Durkheim, it is clear that solidarity is the basis of social cohesion; the sense of trust that solidarity engenders is a necessary precondition before members of society will take the risky step of investing their resources, time, and selves in their societies. Without solidarity, humans are purely biological—and not social—entities. In contemporary capitalist societies, popular culture is one of the most important sources of the rituals that produce solidarity, because of its widespread and frequent consumption.

Fourth, popular culture generates innovation. It is an outcome of technical innovations, such as the printing press and photography. But the market value of popular culture has produced a race for new technologies whose benefits extend beyond the realms of the popular and the cultural. Arguably the most important area of technological progress as a consequence of popular culture is the Internet. The World Wide Web is largely driven by one of the most financially successful areas of popular culture: pornography. We can thank the porn industry for such important technological advances as e-commerce and streaming videos (Barss 2010). These technologies are now widely used for non-pornographic purposes of business and leisure. Americans consume pornography at very high rates, and many Americans spend a fair amount of money on it. The financial stakes have allowed pornography to take risks in
technological advancements that have offered tremendous benefits to the rest of the online commerce world.

Fifth, and finally, popular culture generates social progress. Books in particular have been very important. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 publication of *The Jungle* (Sinclair 1936 [1906]) led to significant reforms in the American food industry. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe 2001 [1852]) prepared America for massive reorganization of its racial structure and is credited as at least a partial cause of the Civil War. Contemporary spaces of popular culture that lead, or may lead, to social change are numerous and varied. Dan Savage’s It Gets Better project is a prime example of using the Internet to effect social change—not just a decline in suicide rates among LGBTQIA youths, but also a transformation in how Americans treat gay people. The weighty role that popular culture performs in social change makes it an important element in the dynamics of contemporary social life.

To some, popular culture is bizarre; to others, it is evil. For most of us, popular culture is everyday, taken-for-granted. But it has particular functions and it exists for a reason. The primary reason that I have isolated here is capitalism. Popular culture is a means by which culture generates profit. But once in place, popular culture then co-opts many other important social functions. Norm generation, boundary maintenance, ritual development, innovation, and social change are the key social functions to which popular culture contributes. To claim that popular culture serves important functions in society is not to claim that it must do so in a particular way. While recognizing the value of popular culture as a social institution, it is still necessary to critique the content of this culture as well as the particular mechanisms by which it is produced, distributed, celebrated, and interpreted.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ARGUMENTS**

Now that I have clarified what popular culture means in this book, let me articulate the research questions that I am asking about popular culture. *What is the relationship between popular culture and identity?* This seems like a relatively straightforward question—setting aside for the moment the definition of identity, which I address later. However, from a social science
perspective, it is not clear what direction of influence I am querying. Asking how popular culture shapes identity is very different from asking how identity shapes popular culture. To do the former, I would need to examine the stages in the formation of various identities—racial identities, gender identities, class identities, and so forth—to see where popular culture plays a role. That is not what I do in this book; although it is a very important question—aspects of which appear from time to time throughout the book—it is not the focus.

I ask the opposite question: How does identity influence popular culture? To answer this question, we need to make our way around the cultural diamond—from the social world, to production, to cultural objects, to audiences, and back again to the social world—to see where and how identity shows up at each point. I focus on five dimensions of identity: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. The first three dimensions—race, class, and gender—have been heavily studied by sociologists for years, including in the context of popular culture. The last two—sexuality and disability—are now being studied by sociologists to an increasing degree, but have received less attention in the context of popular culture. These five dimensions are not by any means the only aspects of identity. We could also ask about religion, region, age, political ideology, and many other factors that both make us who we are and give us a connection to others like us. The kinds of identity that I am examining are all collective rather than individual. They are associations we make that connect us with others. The choice of these five dimensions may seem somewhat arbitrary in comparison to the longer list of collective identities that we could formulate, but what links them together is the particular prominence they have in contemporary US and global politics. I have devoted a chapter to examining commercial culture systems in a few select locations around the world.

Although I have not limited the formats of popular culture discussed in this book—there are many, and technology continually allows for new formats to emerge—some have been so prominent and so heavily studied that I discuss them at length. These include television, music, film, magazines, books, and the Internet (including variations on telephones, iPads, and other devices).

To formulate my question one more time: How do race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability influence the production, content, audience, and social world for television, music, film, magazines, books, and the Internet, both in the United
States and abroad? Now I have a large research question that is also very specific. It spells out the variables (types of media, types of identity), gives some indication of how I operationalize them, and clarifies the locations where the question is addressed. The work of answering this question is limitless. For some aspects of the question there are excellent studies that I can draw from and synthesize. For others there is enough relevant work that I can begin to speculate what the answers may be. And yet for some aspects of the question the best I can do is suggest what finding the answer may look like. Even as I, and other researchers, work on answering this enormous question about the relationship between popular culture and identity, the terrain is moving. New technologies create new media formats with new possibilities. Changing political and economic climates shift the meanings that we attach to various aspects of identity. So even the questions that we have answered before need to be answered again. The notion that everything we could possibly say has already been said is the farthest thing from the truth. We have only just scratched the surface!

Although the work of examining the relationship between identity and popular culture is vast, the process of synthesizing the work to date into this book does allow me to make some preliminary arguments.

**Argument 1:** Popular culture serves the dual and contradictory role of integrating us into the social world while also insisting that we have failed to fully integrate. We are invited into the mass media matrix, but after accepting that invitation we are constantly made to feel that we do not deserve to be at the party.

**Argument 2:** Production, content, and reception are deeply connected and are deeply embedded in the larger social world, so any attempt to understand popular culture without paying attention to all four points of the cultural diamond is inevitably flawed.

**Argument 3:** The primary way that identity influences popular culture is by creating deep disparities, which are found especially in the labor force demographics for production, the representations found in the content, and the experiences of the audience.

Having laid out my questions and arguments, I now address two key issues: the mass media matrix and the matrix of identity.
The Mass Media Matrix

Popular culture is ubiquitous. I have students, friends, and colleagues who approach me all the time with questions about current trends in popular culture. They often preface their questions by telling me that they are not popular culture consumers. They presume that I am a pop culture know-it-all and insist that they are pop culture imbeciles. There are two problems with this. First, popular culture involves such a dizzying array of cultural objects that no one person—not even a scholarly expert—can keep up with more than a fraction of it. Second, the array of cultural objects is so insidious in our lives that no one really escapes it. When one friend told me she had no interest in popular culture, I asked her what kind of music she liked. Her answer was alt country. That genre of music does not come from the Tennessee hills or the back roads of Texas; it was created by the popular music industry and places my friend in a very clear category of cultural consumer. She likes the storytelling of country music, but not the religious values. She thinks of farms as the place where organic food is made. She probably drives a Volvo or a Subaru, definitely not a pickup or an SUV. We do not have to watch prime time TV, or go see the latest blockbuster, or download the number one pop song, to be engaged with popular culture. The film at the bottom of the box office is still a form of popular culture, as is the book that never cracks the best-seller list or the canceled show that a handful of people happen to discover and fall in love with when it comes out on DVD. They all come from the same industry.

The most important point to note about the culture industry is that it is controlled by a very small handful of corporations. In 1988 media scholars Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky complained that a mere 24 companies controlled the US media output (Herman and Chomsky 1988). In 1999 Robert McChesney updated that number to six: Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, Seagram, News Corporation, and Sony—although he noted also the significant holdings of AT&T and General Electric. As of 2017, the major players are Comcast, Disney, Time Warner, CBS, Viacom, and 21st Century Fox. CBS and Viacom are technically distinct entities, but a third company called National Amusements holds a controlling share of each. National Amusements is owned by billionaire Sumner Redstone. The corporation 21st Century Fox is now distinct from News Corporation, but both are controlled by billionaire Rupert Murdoch. He separated the news and print divisions from
the entertainment divisions so that lawsuits against his publications could not threaten the well-being of the other entities.

The list of the major media giants shifts a little every year, because some holdings are sold or simply spun off as their own entities. Sometimes when this happens, the company names make it difficult for the novice researcher to keep track. For example, in 2008 Time Warner Cable split from Time Warner, making them separate financial entities. Or consider the case of Sony Music Entertainment, a division of the Sony Corporation. Moving backward in time, Sony Music Entertainment has also been known as Sony BMG (during a partnership with Bertelsmann), Columbia Records, and the American Record Corporation. Many Americans think of Columbia Records as an important part of American music history, but may not realize that it still exists as a corporate entity under the name Sony Music Entertainment, owned by the Japanese Sony Corporation.

How we identify the major media corporations depends in part on how we define the media. If we focus on types of media formats produced, then we would likely start with television, radio, film, music, print media, and digital outlets. If we also consider distribution mechanisms, then cable and telecommunications (such as mobile phones) are added to the list.

As an experiment, we will use the five major broadcast networks as an entry point to this analysis: NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, and the CW. This analysis is accurate as of the publication of this book, but subject to change as holdings shift. NBC is part of the larger company NBC Universal, which was jointly owned by Comcast and General Electric until Comcast purchased GE’s 49 percent share of the company in March 2013. ABC is part of the Disney-ABC Television Group, which is owned by the Walt Disney Company. CBS is part of the CBS Corporation, which is a subsidiary of National Amusements, along with Viacom. Formerly, CBS was a division of Viacom, but it split off in 2005. The CW is owned jointly by the CBS Corporation and Warner Bros. (a subsidiary of Time Warner). The C stands for CBS, and the W stands for Warner. Finally, Fox is owned by 21st Century Fox as part of its Fox Entertainment Group. So, the five major broadcast networks point us to the powerful role of Comcast, Disney, National Amusements, Time Warner, and 21st Century Fox. “5 Major Media Conglomerates” presents a visual indicator of the relative size and holdings of some of the major media conglomerates. These corporations constitute a media oligopoly, a term explained in Table 1.1.
**TABLE 1.1. Keywords for Understanding Media Consolidation**

**Oligopoly:** An industry that is controlled by a small handful of corporations that are functionally no longer competing with one another. The media industry is an oligopoly, because a small group of companies controls the industry, and they are deeply interconnected and share the same interests (McChesney 1999).

**Vertical Integration:** A cost-saving method for businesses that involves controlling every aspect of the creation and distribution process. For example, a corporation that owns a music studio may also seek to own a song publishing business, a music distribution business, etc. Moreover, corporations that own businesses across different media formats can cross-promote cheaply and easily, such as when *Glee* promoted MySpace during its first season (Peterson and Berger 1975).

**Horizontal Integration:** A cost-saving method for a business that involves controlling ever higher proportions of the market production within a field. A corporation that owns a music studio may purchase other music studios in order to control a significant segment of music production (McChesney 1999).

**Diagonal Integration:** A business growth method that involves controlling segments of multiple industries such as television, film, amusement parks, magazines, and sports teams.

**Corporate Interlocks:** The situation when a board member of a major media organization is also a board member of another corporation, making the media organization more favorable to the interlocking corporation. One team of researchers found that the boards of ten major media outlets are composed of 118 individuals who are on the boards of 288 different corporations, which indicates significant interlock. They also found that many of these media board members are also board members for major colleges and universities, and that many have served in political office, creating interlocks among the leadership of the media, the political leadership of the country, the educational leadership of the country, and the international corporate community (Thornton, Walters, and Rouse 2006).

**Federal Communications Commission (FCC):** An independent federal agency created by the Communications Act of 1934, charged with regulating the use of wire and radio communications, which are considered public goods belonging to the citizens. The Internet was added to the FCC’s charge by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which also created new allowances for cross-ownership. The FCC’s ownership rules are reviewed and potentially revised every two years, which means that further deregulation is always a possibility. The FCC is funded entirely by licensing fees and fines.
An analysis of the major media conglomerates reveals four key observations that will help us comprehend how powerful these corporations are and how insignificant the role of competition is for understanding their activities.

1. Each conglomerate has holdings at multiple points in the chain of production and distribution. In television, a conglomerate may have holdings in production studios, national networks, and local broadcasters. In film, the same conglomerate may have holdings in studios, film distributors, and national theater chains. This is referred to as vertical integration, a term explained in Table 1.1.

2. Each major conglomerate has broad holdings within the main media formats. One conglomerate may own multiple cable channels or multiple music labels. This is referred to as horizontal integration, a term explained in Table 1.1.

3. Each conglomerate has broad holdings across the main media formats. Most entertainment conglomerates have holdings in film, music, television, magazines, sports teams, amusement parks, websites, and more. This is referred to as diagonal integration, a term explained in Table 1.1.

4. The various conglomerates are interlocked by joint holdings and joint personnel. The executives at some companies serve on the boards for others. Some smaller media entities are co-owned by multiple conglomerates. Hulu, the popular streaming entertainment service, is jointly owned by Disney, Comcast, 21st Century Fox, and Time Warner. Table 1.1 explains the concept of interlocks and the various forms that an interlock can take.

The term culture industry is most associated with the mid-twentieth-century scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their 1944 book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944]). Horkheimer and Adorno viewed the culture industry as the inevitable conclusion of capitalism, which they believed was a cultural process of turning everything into a commodity. Early discussions of capitalism focused on factory production of the goods and resources necessary for survival and rarely touched on the commodification of art. But Adorno and Horkheimer observed that capitalism was extending its grasp into every aspect of human life, including the arts. Their critique of the culture industry was that it churned out mass-produced and dumbed-down works of culture that would only numb or deceive the masses:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it
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draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached; that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 44)

The diner must be satisfied with the menu because, in the authors’ view, the culture industry sells nothing other than itself—no life lesson, no enlightenment, no new possibility for the human experience. The stranger never gains full citizenship.

I refer to the culture industry as a matrix because of the incredible ways that media conglomerates are interlocked across production chains, media formats, and the globe. Their size, and the fact that they have no vested interest in competing with one another, leaves consumers with little influence over the industry. They are a large and powerful force that feels invisible in many ways. A studio may put its stamp on a particular product, usually in the opening or closing credits, but it remains difficult for consumers to see how interconnected all of these products are.

THE MATRIX OF IDENTITY

The mass media is just one of two major matrices that I examine in this book. The other is the matrix of identity, or what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the matrix of domination” (Collins 1990, 18). Identity is ubiquitous. It is a central political issue in an era of identity politics—gay marriage, “post racial” America, confusion over how to court women voters—and it is a growing research interest for scholars in both the humanities and social sciences. Sometimes my students complain about the constant focus on identity, not just in my classroom but also in many of their other classes. They tell me that they do not feel discriminated against and do not discriminate against others, and they wonder why we have to talk about discrimination and oppression all the time. Although I am certain we do not discuss discrimination and oppression all the time, I have no trouble defending the centrality of identity and inequality in the college curriculum.

Identity is a matrix of social mechanisms and is not reducible to individual interpersonal interactions, although it certainly has an impact on those. Scholars are not the inventors or authors of identity; at best, we can hope to describe its parameters and central organizing principles. Identity captures a core aspect of the human experience: the sorting of humans into groups that give us a sense of belonging and connection and also clarify who is excluded (and when and why).
Identity is a structural principle. It creates the boundaries of social groups and defines the norms of the people within these groups. Identity is an economic principle. It creates the basic divisions of labor, determining who will work in which occupations and how they will prepare for those fields. Identity is a cultural principle. It creates the central value systems that shape what we believe and what our lives mean.

In this book, I focus on five dimensions of identity and representation: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. Key social movements, including the civil rights movement, the labor union movement, and the women’s liberation movement, disability activism, and LGBTQ politics, have placed these dimensions of identity at the forefront of structural change by extending full social participation to previously excluded groups. To a lesser degree, these movements have also created economic changes, opening up new possibilities in the labor market. Culture, by comparison, has proven much more durable. The social meanings of racial, class, gender, sexuality, and disability labels are difficult to change. These identities may be performed—as suggested by the sociological concept of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987)—but that should never be misinterpreted as a suggestion that we can perform them any way we want at any time. Performances become scripted and institutionalized, making it very difficult to significantly alter them.

The key sociological concept that is used when we bring race, class, and gender together is intersectionality, a concept coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her early work on critical legal studies. Crenshaw’s groundbreaking work was driven by a very particular story. A woman who was denied a job felt that she was discriminated against because she was a black woman—not just as a woman or just as a black person. She was unable to pursue this claim in court because a judge argued she could lay claim to either racial discrimination or gender discrimination, but not both. The employer I question had hired women and black men, but seemed to avoid black women as a group. The case highlights the fact that we need to work within these intersections to make sense of identity and inequality.

In the context of popular culture, the key first issue that we need to consider with regard to identity and intersectionality is representation. Who do we see, hear, or read about when we consume popular culture and what meanings do these images, sounds, and texts convey about those people and groups? One way to think about the relationship between representation and inequality is through the concept of the stereotype. A stereotype is a representation of a group that is repeated so often that it comes to dominate the way
that the group is thought of in the social world. For example, representations of Asian men as effeminate and unattractive are rampant in American popular culture and constitute a stereotype. That stereotype impacts the day-to-day experiences of Asian and Asian-American men by shaping the ways that other groups come to think of them. This impacts these men in their jobs, communities, and families.

An important corollary to intersectionality is privilege, a concept most associated with Peggy McIntosh’s consideration of white privilege and male privilege. McIntosh discusses the blithely privileged statements that her male students made in classes in which she explored gender issues (McIntosh 2009 [1988]). As she realized that these statements were not deliberately malicious, but rather reflections of deeply seated, taken-for-granted assumptions, she began to question her own assumptions, which resulted from her privilege as a white person. She refers to these assumptions as an “invisible knapsack,” a set of tools and resources that privileged people carry around without ever realizing that many people do not have the same resources. Bringing intersectionality and privilege together allows us to see that most people experience some level of privilege and some level of oppression. For example, a white, gay, middle-class male may feel oppressed in a homophobic culture, without recognizing that he is also privileged by his gender and class. A straight black woman may feel oppressed by the combination of sexism and racism, without recognizing the ways that she is privileged by her sexual orientation and non-disability status. The concept of privilege forces our attention to the question of who benefits from this system of inequality.

In a memorable scene from the TV show Glee, the cheerleading coach, Sue Sylvester, invokes identity markers to call out a set of students from New Directions: “Santana, wheels, gay kid . . . Asian, other Asian, Shaft” (Brennan, Falchuk, and Murphy 2009). She is referring, in order, to the Latina woman named Santana, the student with a disability named Artie Abrams, the as-yet-not-out gay kid named Kurt Hummel, an Asian student named Tina Cohen-Chang, another Asian student named Mike Chang (no relation to Tina), and a black student named Matt Rutherford. The only minority character she doesn’t mention is Mercedes Jones. In that moment, Sue Sylvester is doing to these students something that popular culture does to many minorities: reducing them to one dimension of their identities. Only Santana, as one of Sue’s favorites, is let off the hook and given the full subjectivity that is implied when we are identified by our names, and not just by a single aspect of who we are. The effect of these one-dimensional labels is to render each recipient
a stranger in the very sense that Simmel discussed: both a part of the community and apart from it.

As mentioned previously, in this book I examine five dimensions of identity: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability status. Although I tease these dimensions apart for analytical purposes, I always include as much intersectional analysis as possible. For instance, when discussing sexuality I try to include comparisons between gays and lesbians to allow for gender analysis and to include racial comparisons as well. The fact that I discuss these dimensions separately should in no way obscure the fact that they are intricately linked. But it is very difficult to be fully intersectional at every moment of analysis. The matrix of the culture industry and the matrix of identity are two powerful social forces that work together to significantly shape modern life.

**TYPOLOGY OF POP CULTURE ADAPTATION**

Sociologist Robert Merton (1938) suggests that full social participation requires embracing the cultural goals of a society and utilizing the accepted means to achieve those goals. (See Table 1.2 for Merton’s five types of cultural adaptation.) In popular culture, the cultural goal is a kind of supersized American Dream. The perfect suburban house with the white picket fence is replaced by a “McMansion” in a gated community, or a perfectly appointed high-rise condominium. The family sedan has become a huge SUV. The official means of obtaining this supersized American Dream is conspicuous consumption. The more you buy the right kinds of goods at the right prices, the better. In the old American Dream, the emphasis was on working hard in school and having a career. Now the hard work is done in the marketplace, which is available on our phones and laptops.

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<th>TABLE 1.2. Robert Merton’s Five Types of Cultural Adaptation</th>
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<td><strong>Cultural Goals</strong></td>
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+ indicates access and/or acceptance; – indicates rejection; + indicates rejection and the substitution of new goals or means
(Source: Merton 1938.)
Merton uses the term **conformist** to identify those who embrace the goals and the means of obtaining them. In the case of popular culture, the conformist is actually the winner, the person who loves popular culture and is actually satisfied by it. This is the one person who makes it through every episode without hearing “you’re fired” and is finally declared Donald Trump’s apprentice. The pop culture conformist is a true belieber (a fan of Justin Bieber). But conformist status is hard to maintain. The second pop culture makes you doubt yourself; your access to the cultural goals starts to slip. Your American Dream is just never quite supersized enough.

In Merton’s typology, an **innovator** is someone who embraces the cultural goals but seeks alternative means of achieving them. For popular culture, an innovator is someone who wants to give the appearance of living the supersized American Dream, but doesn’t want to pay the price. The pop culture innovator found the textbook on Reddit, got those great boots from a street vendor, and ripped the new blockbuster film. Pop culture innovation carries the risk of being found out. “Oh, is that a knock off?” is not a good question to be asked in certain company. In extreme cases, pop culture innovators have even been prosecuted for rejecting the institutionalized means, as discovered by several teens who have been charged in court for the crime of music piracy. The innovator indicates a kind of **anomie**, or normlessness, because the normal means to the goals are unavailable or rejected.

Merton uses the term **ritualist** to refer to those who embrace the means—in this case consumption—but never achieve the goals. I would argue that popular culture transforms us all into ritualists. In 1992, Bruce Springsteen released a song called “57 Channels (and Nothin’ On),” which bemoans the disappointment of cable TV. Today, cable has closer to a thousand stations, depending on the package you purchase, and can cost upwards of $100 or more per month, once the promotional rate wears off. A lot of people spend a lot of money on an entertainment service that never seems to entertain. We keep consuming popular culture and buying the products that it sells, even though we never attain the perfection that it promises. The ritualist indicates a different kind of anomie because although the means are available and embraced, the normal goals are not.

What is the alternative? Merton’s typology gives us two extreme options. I could become a **retreatist**, rejecting the goals and the means entirely. For popular culture, retreat means rejecting the supersized American Dream and conspicuous consumption. A complete retreat requires that I watch no
screens, see no ads, read no magazines, hear no music, and read no books. The pop culture retreatist isn’t buying it. None of it. The ubiquity of commercial culture makes this near impossible, but we can at least image that one could retreat into the wilderness and perhaps escape popular culture.

Another option made difficult by the ubiquity of commercial culture means is to become a rebel. In Merton’s typology, the rebel is one who creates and offers an alternative set of cultural goals and an alternative means to achieve them. The pop culture rebel is a DJ with two turntables and a microphone. The pop culture rebel knows how to code and hack. Escaping pop culture is nearly impossible. But creating an alternative, however small in scope, is possible. It requires recognizing that we all have the capacity to be artists and makers of the world. I suspect that many of my readers feel like ritualists in their current relationship with popular culture, but I hope that this book will inspire them to rebellion.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ANALYSIS

This book is designed as a field guide for any student or scholar who is interested in studying the influence that identity has on commercial culture. It summarizes the ways that this influence has been explored, along with the major relevant findings. It brings a wide variety of sociological theories and methods to bear on this issue. I try to focus primarily on sociological research, especially from the sociology of culture, but I also draw heavily from both communications studies and cultural studies. Communications studies offers an excellent perspective on the organization and influence of the media industries. Cultural studies provide a method for close textual analysis of cultural objects. The sociology of culture has emphasized the meaning-making strategies that audience members use in transforming cultural objects into a set of meanings and values that guide their daily actions and preferences. In addition, I draw from both classical and contemporary theories and theorists. Table 1.3 summarizes the theoretical approaches used in this book.

In addition to a range of theories, I also introduce several methodological approaches. In each of Chapters 2–6, I discuss three methodological approaches: production studies, content studies, and audience studies. These methods include both quantitative and qualitative approaches and demonstrate a range of ways that social research questions can be answered. Table 1.4 summarizes the methods discussed in this book.
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<td>Chapter and Topic</td>
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| Chapter 2, Racial Perspectives | **Cultural Efficacy:** A method introduced by Michael Schudson for examining the social potency of a cultural object: how and why a piece of culture works.  
**Labor Force Analysis:** Using demographic data to examine the labor force participation of various groups within culture industries.  
**Audience Ethnography:** Using participant observation to study the ways that consumers engage with cultural objects and experiences. |
| Chapter 3, Class Perspectives | **Qualitative Content Analysis:** Recording key observations about how social issues are represented and discussed within cultural objects.  
**Production Ethnography:** Using participant observation to study the process of cultural production.  
**Audience Surveys:** Using closed questions to gather broad data about audience consumption patterns and preferences. |
| Chapter 4, Gender Perspectives | **Descriptive Analysis:** An open-ended approach to understanding the kinds and types of representations that occur in popular culture.  
**Creator Interviews:** Using directed questions to interrogate the process of production through the lens of cultural producers.  
**Cultural Controversy:** The study of culture wars and other conflicts that reveal deep-seated assumptions about meaning. |
| Chapter 5, Sexuality Perspectives | **Quantitative Content Analysis:** Using coding sheets to examine and compare large amounts of popular culture content.  
**Production Surveys:** The use of closed questions to generate quantitative information about what producers make and how they think about the production process.  
**Audience Interviews:** Using directed questions to examine the processes of consumption and interpretation. |

*continues*
To sum up, this book is a field guide to the many ways that social researchers can answer the following question: How do race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability influence the production, content, audience, and social world for television, music, film, print media, and digital culture? Although most of the book focuses on the contemporary United States, Chapter 7 turns to global comparisons. I argue that the relationship between identity and popular culture creates a kind of contradiction that tells us that cultural goals can be achieved without providing the means to realistically achieve them—because in fact the goals are truly unattainable. I further argue that in our analysis we must continually look at the connections among production, content, and audience and at how these key points are embedded in a social milieu. Finally, I argue that identity creates deep disparities that do far more than carve out niche markets—they drive us apart from one another and exacerbate cultural, economic, and structural hierarchies.

Sociology provides us with a powerful set of theoretical and methodological tools for answering our questions and exploring the arguments that I make. Several theoretical perspectives are explored throughout this book, but many more are not covered. This is also true of the methods reviewed here. Some sociologists choose a particular theoretical frame and a particular method and commit to them throughout their careers. I advocate an alternative approach in which all theories and all methods are available tools in our tool kit for

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<th>Chapter and Topic</th>
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<td>Chapter 6, Disability Perspectives</td>
<td>Thick Description: Studying cultural texts in depth and in context to deeply understand the kinds of meanings they convey and the ways that these meanings are enacted. Organizational Reports: Reviewing key organizational documents to understand how associations within the culture industries, such as labor unions and guilds, assess and act on their varied interests. Autoethnography: A method through which researchers examine themselves and their position within the groups they are examining.</td>
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sociological analysis. This allows us to choose the best tools for the job depending on the question we are asking and the realities of the data that we produce.

Why does this matter? One great reason why it matters is that in November 2016 popular culture was elected as the new president of the United States. As it happens, the entertainment industry from which this president was recruited is one of the most racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic labor markets in the country. White people are repeatedly cast in non-white roles, leaving few jobs for minority actors. Non-disability actors eat up all of the roles for folks with disabilities. Actors with no personal connection to the transgender experience are performing in transgender roles despite the availability of excellent trans actors. Women are consistently and notoriously underpaid and then quickly dismissed when they are deemed too old to sell tickets. Non-American cultures show up in our popular culture only as sites of war and the training ground of terrorism. Successful straight actors have the audacity to tell gay actors to stay in the closet for the sake of their careers.

Hollywood is Donald Trump’s world. He has found solace and success there since long before The Apprentice launched in 2004. If you wonder what Donald Trump’s attitudes are about women and minorities, just take a look at how few of them have worked as producers, directors, and writers for The Apprentice.

To understand the election of Donald Trump, we need to put the poll data aside and start asking questions about the entertainment industry that built the Trump celebrity. What stories does our entertainment industry tell us? More importantly, who gets to tell these stories and whose stories are silenced?

As a scholar who studies issues of identity in popular culture, I am often treated as a quirky outpost of academia, writing and teaching about something that does not matter. After the 2016 election, I promise you it matters a great deal. Pop culture is the 45th president and celebrity studies is the new political science.

**RESOURCES**

**Resources for Understanding the Culture Industry**

- Video: Robert McChesney’s *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, from the Media Education Foundation. Available in many libraries. Some clips can be found on YouTube.
- Website: Free Press. www.freepress.net.
• Website: IMDb. An online database of information on both movies and television programs, including credits for both on- and off-screen roles. https://imdb.com.
• Website: By the Numbers. Tracks tickets sales and other information for film. www.the-numbers.com.

Resources for Examining Identity

• Website: Project Implicit. A set of online tests that help to reveal a variety of biases we may hold. https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit.
• Website: Census Quick Facts. A broad overview of demographic information on the US population. www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/00.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does media consolidation matter? How does that impact the role of choice for audiences and consumers?
2. Why do we need celebrity studies and the sociology of popular to understand our modern political system?
3. Why does the off-screen labor force of producers, directors, writers, and executives matter for understanding the on-screen content?
4. How are women and marginalized groups represented in mainstream popular culture?
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