

# CULTURE AS CATALYST

## An Introduction

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As a concept, “representation” is multilayered, particularly with regard to notions of social difference, and extends far beyond what we see, hear, read, and experience. In the context of the essays and conversations that compose this book, “representation” also encompasses the tremendous impact of popular visual culture—art, media, entertainment, fashion, technology—on the construction of ideas, meanings, and value. And representation is shaped by those who do the “representing”—individuals, communities, and issues; by those who are being represented; and, perhaps more important, by the sometimes-problematic nature of these representations in relation to truth, equity, and power. Thus, the dynamics around representation inform our engagement with and positioning within the sociopolitical and economic systems that structure our lives. And these systems involve and affect individuals, communities, and nations in ways that change who we are, what we think and feel, and how we live.

In this moment, our world’s culture workers are taking up salient social issues, which often leads to the representation of those issues in artistic, creative, and physical forms. Many of these urgent topics are discussed in this book and intersect directly with the power and politics of representation—or of *mis*representation, which itself has deep historical roots. As criminal justice reform advocate Johnny Perez has noted in many discussions, to continually incriminate and incarcerate Black and brown people, which we in the United States have been doing since the founding of this nation and even earlier, we must first criminalize them in the eyes of our society. Problematic imagery contributes to criminalization—and there are problematic images everywhere.

Yet if our popular visual culture has the ability to paint people and ideas in a negative light, it also has the power to transform these perceptions. Through the simple act of a visual or other embodiment of something people don’t know or understand, individuals can bring about change by working critically and inventively across cultures and industries. In 2016, I, along with Ian Berry, Dayton Director of The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, and the

museum's team, took this thinking as our starting point for a public forum to explore and debate these points. We wanted people to get “comfortable with being uncomfortable” as we collectively pushed through difficult ideas, histories, and experiences about representation in its myriad forms. We considered the key political, social, and economic issues that culture workers are contending with, many quite fervently, on local, national, and global scales. We wanted to examine these topics from numerous angles, each with an eye to the ways in which visual culture has intervened in shaping and engaging these themes. For example, why not talk about race by examining whiteness and white privilege as well as by examining what “whiteness” really looks like? Or debate the immigration crisis by looking at both the literal and figurative borders that human beings construct in order to block movements by other human beings? The result was the Accelerator Series: ten conversations aimed at envisioning and bringing about real change.

*Culture as Catalyst* combines transcripts from the Accelerator Series conversations with meditations by a selection of the panelists along with contemporary artworks. At the book's core is the belief that popular visual culture is powerful and can not only denigrate but also elevate. The words and images of pop culture are grounded in the present-day social, economic, and political landscape; at the same time, they draw inspiration from the visual realm. The juxtapositions between words and images—in this book and in the world—explore and highlight the ways in which art and visual culture contend with and intervene in critical social issues.

Ten key topics that dominate our economic, political, and, above all, social psyche—beginning with whiteness and “default culture” and ending with food justice—structure both the conversations and the book. Our goal for the interdisciplinary focus has been to forge a way forward, often through complex historical and contemporary terrain. And especially to urge each of us, honestly and openly, to do the difficult work of interrogating how we see and interact with those around us.



**White privilege is an absence of the negative consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost.**

—Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 2017

Historic power structures in the United States, which developed along lines of race and class, are still active in the present moment. Whiteness stands at the pinnacle of these structures and as a standard against which much is measured within the social and cultural context of the United States. Matthew Cooke, Treva B. Lindsey, and Dara Silverman explore what happens when whiteness and white people are charged with examining themselves, their privilege, and the ways in which they consciously and unconsciously uphold and benefit from institutions built upon white supremacy. Rather than taking these institutions as assumed or “fixed,” the panelists maintain that they can and must be dismantled and reconfigured.

In her frank analysis of whiteness, Lindsey speaks of the ambivalence a marginalized group has in regard to the assumed “default, or dominant, white mainstream culture.” Foremost for her, however, is the larger project of dismantling white supremacy; it is an effort, she asserts, that all must prioritize and undertake. Lindsey notes the psychological labor required: “This is about a humanity project of questioning and learning the spots of inhumanity that we have had, and what it means to care for somebody and understand that their nonliving or dying impacts all of us...if I died right now...that should impact you, right? But there are millions of me dying right now that we don't give a damn about.” Many scholars and activists working today seek to shift the burden of representation and regular engagement (or “labor”) around race and racial issues onto those who occupy spaces of power and privilege because of their whiteness. And in so doing, both physical and psychological space can be cleared for the centering of other bodies and voices.





**I was and still am that same ship which carried me to the new shore, the same vessel containing all the memories and dreams of the child in the brick house with the toy tea set. I am the shore I left behind as well as the home I return to every evening. The voyage cannot proceed without me.**

—Luisa A. Igloria, *Juan Luna's Revolver*, 2009

The current global discussion about the international movements of people—both voluntary and forced—extends far beyond political boundaries. It calls into question how we think about issues of identity and citizenship; how we define home and a sense of belonging and/or displacement; and perhaps, above all, how and what we define as the legal and political rights of human beings. Of utmost importance is delving more deeply into concepts of mobility and migration from both local and global perspectives.



In their conversation, Hassan Hajjaj, Richard Mosse, and Tanya Selvaratnam examine the multilayered aspects of borders both visible and invisible. Selvaratnam, in her essay, writes, “When those in positions of political power seek to divide us with physical borders and walls, our imaginations are the most effective tools we have to keep cultural borders open.” She explains that reading was and is a means for her, and by extension all of us, to traverse boundaries and engage in the free exchange of ideas. She extends this everyday act to the making of art and other forms of culture that both tie people to a particular place but also extend their connections to others in distant locations. Through cultural production, we can bridge divides as well as recognize and overcome differences.



**An attempt to create a new conceptual terrain for imagining alternatives to imprisonment involves the ideological work of questioning why “criminals” have been constituted as a class and, indeed, a class of human beings undeserving of the civil and human rights accorded to others.**

—Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 2003

Those who have been incarcerated become muted—visually, figuratively, literally. It is, as Elizabeth Hinton, Duron Jackson, and Johnny Perez assert, a tortured existence that no current system can redeem. Along with the roots of mass incarceration, they examine the present-day criminal justice system, especially as it impacts communities of color. And they question the economic and political interests served by the United States with the world’s highest rate of incarceration.

Perez, a human rights and criminal justice reform advocate, opens his essay with an assessment of American hypocrisy concerning mass incarceration: “As a nation, we pride ourselves on holding onto the principles of decency, compassion, and the preservation of humanity [yet]

criminal justice policies in the United States do not reflect [those values].” His text chronicles his thirteen-year incarceration, much of which was spent in solitary confinement. Perez uses his experience to rethink how the United States seeks to punish and reform. How can we find a way forward? He touches on the critical impact of perception and representation—particularly in film, television, and print media—on how we see crime and people who allegedly commit those crimes and on how we believe it is best to penalize them. The panelists discuss the possibility of dismantling what many call the criminal “injustice” system and work as a society to reconceive punishment and reform or rehabilitation.

**The technology you use impresses no one.  
The experience you create with it is everything.**

—Sean Gerety, ThinkAdvisor.com, 2019

At the current moment, technology in all of its varied forms is changing at light speed, touching every aspect of our lives. “Immersive technology” (often encapsulated within the broad term “artificial intelligence”) has given rise to a new era in virtual experiences, particularly since about 2015. In visual fields, including art and media, there are tangible implications around the ways in which technology, and specifically AI, intersect and intervene in our world. Artists, activists, and creatives have drawn on immersive technologies to generate projects that are intent on challenging the social, political, and economic ramifications and complexities of the technology itself. In particular, journalists and scholars have called on this new medium to shift the linear style of visual storytelling to allow for multiple paths and entry points. At the same time, AI has the potential to reinforce stereotypes, contributing to massive economic and social disruptions and alienation, and to implement new systems of invasive monitoring and control.

What do these new developments in technology mean for education, entertainment, social policy, and systems of codified knowledge?



Who regulates immersive technologies? Who will be part of these new cultures, and who will be left out? Amir Baradaran, Farai Chideya, and Michael Joo observe that the disconnect between the invention and the consumption of technologies such as VR and AR has made evident a tendency to homogenize people or “users”—a tendency predicated on who is devising the technology and on a specific idea of who the user is. We are not mere bystanders to evolving technologies, however: how we interact with, support, or reject certain technologies can have lasting effects on our daily lives and the lives of the generations that follow—and we can make those decisions to elevate diverse voices and fight for greater justice.



**It’s no surprise that a generation of women who were brought up being told that they were equal to men, that sexism, and therefore feminism, was dead, are starting to see through this. And while they’re pissed off, they’re also positive, bubbling with hope. One obvious outcome of being brought up to believe you’re equal is that you’re both very angry when you encounter misogyny, but also confident in your ability to tackle it.**

—Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, 2013

Maintaining ownership over our own history and narrative is critical. This has not always been the case for women, but over the last several decades, in part due to the rise and, more important, evolution of women’s movements, the situation has shifted. The digital realm and its new and ever-changing technologies have paved the way for a fourth-wave feminism. Advanced platforms allow women to come together, organize hashtag campaigns, and build grassroots movements. Social media has created a permanent arena within which women can share their stories,



engage with current issues, and secure a means to enact social and cultural change. In addition to social media, some of the issues foregrounded in fourth-wave feminism are intersectionality, inclusivity, racial equality, gender neutrality, gender expression, sexual harassment, workplace equality, image authorship, sex positivity, and call-out culture.

The differences in scope, impact, and reach between digital space and “real time” are notable. Social media has, without question, provided the greatest vehicle yet for current feminist thinking and for the transnational spread of a powerful and inclusive feminist ideology. Yet there are still questions around whether this fourth wave is truly intersectional. Women of color have brought attention to the idea that many white women call out issues relating to gender but not to race, for example. Many young people have raised concerns around the term *feminism*, which is rooted in gender binaries that may not consider members of LGBTQIA+ communities. Clearly, each feminist movement faces new challenges and must evolve new tactics.

Kimberly Drew, Natalie Frank, and Amy Richards discuss these changing ideas and ideals of feminism and how different types of cultural production can respond to, reinforce, or reshape them. Frank, for instance, uses her painting to assert agency and dignity over how women and their bodies, sexuality, and power are represented. Her paintings and drawings of primarily white women—sometimes featuring her own renditions of well-known stories, such as Pauline Réage’s 1954 erotic novel *Story of O*—seek to challenge visual perceptions of these women, who vary in class, status, and profession, and also to challenge her viewers, asking them to consider varied platforms of representation. Again, representation for marginalized or disenfranchised people in particular is vital: Drew, a writer and curator, wonders “what the fruits of this next era will be... I have... watched as women have excluded trans women from notions of feminism time and time again. I wonder how we will take charge of this triumphant moment, how we will document ourselves, and most important, how we will all hold ourselves accountable.”



**People are trapped in history  
and history is trapped in them.**

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955

The debate over whether to remove public monuments that celebrate complicated individuals or events is connected to our sense of history and memory and also to our understanding of what is, and should exist within, “public space.” Power, agency, and voice affect how we construct, contend with, and come to terms with contentious aspects of our histories and how these histories, events, and communities are visualized, concretized, and memorialized. When these statues, plaques, flags, and other markers are removed, debate arises over erasing certain histories. At the same time, we are opening new ground for rewriting and expanding our historical narratives.

Dan Borelli, Titus Kaphar, and Karyn Olivier discuss these questions of memorialization, commemoration, and the ways in which “history” is constructed visually and physically. They further explore who are the decision makers for monuments in public spaces and play with the idea of permanence: can monuments be temporary? Olivier’s project statement for her 2017 public interventionist installation *The Battle Is Joined* declares, “Monuments are established with the assumption that we as a nation have collectively decided that something should be remembered, honored, and celebrated. In reality, we don’t have equal voices in this mandate, but in my insertion, the intention will be for each of us to see and imagine our critical role in the ever-evolving American story.” Working toward that equality and that inclusion—not just in moments and celebrations but in ordinary day-to-day life—is where the transformation can begin.



**Citizenship is more than an individual exchange of freedoms for rights; it is also membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community. To be deemed fair, a system must offer its citizens equal opportunities for public recognition, and groups cannot systematically suffer from misrecognition in the form of stereotype and stigma.**

—Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 2011

Citizenship is a multifaceted idea. It connotes a sense of legitimate belonging as well as of social right; it is a form of agency, an active practice, and a dynamic relationship of accountability between public service providers and their users. It also implies home, purpose, and responsibility. However, the ways in which we conceive citizenship, especially in the United States, as well as the rights and responsibilities that we believe citizenship may or may not encompass, vary widely.

Citizenship, we often presume, is a monolithic ideal that each person has a “right” to claim after having undergone a vetting process, but it is actually far more complex and fluid. Sam Durant, Eric Gottesman, and Minita Sanghvi sift through the sometimes-fluid elements that make up “citizenship,” acknowledging that these global yet varied ideas are imbued with each government’s interests and inevitably bring with them a range of issues often tied to identity. Citizenship can mean different things depending on an individual’s race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as well as political and economic background. Contrary to mainstream thinking, it does not necessarily mean that each person—each citizen—has access and ability to participate in the act or right of belonging in the same way. We have to work to maintain what it means to be a citizen by voting, speaking out, and showing up to actively create change.

**We can have no significant understanding of any culture unless we also know the silences that were institutionally created and guaranteed along with it.**

—Gerald Sider, “Against Experience: The Struggles for History, Tradition and Hope among a Native American People,” 1997

In an age in which images, ideas, and even sounds are widely accessible, the topic of cultural appropriation, particularly within popular culture, has become an increasingly charged issue. Questions of appropriation have long been a part of art, music, fashion, and street culture: artwork by Dana Schutz, Hank Willis Thomas, and Richard Prince; music by Elvis, Madonna, Miley Cyrus, and Bruno Mars; in fashion, Gucci’s engagement with Harlem’s Dapper Dan; pro sports mascots; Halloween costumes; the Kardashians. The line between appropriation and appreciation seems to grow ever narrower: *cultural appropriation* and *cultural appreciation* are slippery and often overlapping. This multidisciplinary and multi-industry topic necessitates an examination of power, history, capitalism, imperialism, and assimilation, along with an interrogation of who exactly “owns” culture.

Discussions about appropriation have long come up in conversations around art, music, fashion, and popular culture, but currently there is an increased focus on the topic. What might this suggest about the larger world we live in? Ethnomusicologist Matthew Morrison asserts that, since the 1980s, the term *cultural appropriation* “has emerged in popular discourse as a critique of the misuse of the cultural attributes or performances of one community by those who do not belong or cannot claim an immediate connection to that group.” Today’s debates, as demonstrated in the conversation between Morrison, Jessica Andrews, and Renee Cox, involve expected inquiries—those around authenticity, agency, authorship, and voice—and also complex, consuming examinations of the idea of cultural borrowing. When a person or group “borrows” or draws inspiration from another person or group, is this key to their expressive process?







The creator's intent is of great consequence in answering the question. The panelists suggest that a formal and respectful acknowledgment of source materials is essential, but more may be needed to resolve the longstanding and growing complexities of appreciation and appropriation.

**You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. I don't mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, "I forgive. I'm finished with it."**

—Maya Angelou, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, 2013

Rejection, redemption, and forgiveness resonate across all communities, cultures, and perceived boundaries. What does it mean to "live in the gray," to allow ourselves to take a more fluid approach to how we



see others and how we choose forgiveness? Would a candid and frank exchange—one in which we share and listen with sincerity—be able to bring people together, to draw out our understanding, compassion, and empathy? "Forgiveness" can be many things: an idea, an action, a passive acknowledgment, a reactive response, or the process or act of letting go. For some people, forgiveness means redemption. For many, it feels like an ongoing generational process that dates back hundreds if not thousands of years. For artist Lyle Ashton Harris, forgiveness starts from within. For sociologist David Karp, restorative justice can be vital to forgiveness. Meanwhile, artist Alexandra Bell is more concerned with accountability, particularly in relation to large and thorny issues of racism. Bell, who is trained as a journalist and has worked in community advocacy, explains that she struggles with the amount of effort required to realize forgiveness, especially because those seeking forgiveness move on and remain in positions of privilege. How, who, and why we forgive can be divisive and personal, but we each must find our own ways to the goals of cooperation, growth, and harmony.



**The nation's fiscal health is dependent upon the health of the next generation. When we consider the cost of inaction in a matter of national security, lives are at stake; so it is the case with the Child Nutrition Act.**

—Debra Eschmeyer, *Huffington Post*, 2010

Healthy food nourishes the mind, body, and spirit. But not everyone has access to it or to the important information that it can deliver well-being to both individuals and communities. Equity and access lie at the core of food justice or food sovereignty—ideas rooted in the time-honored ethos of Indigenous peoples around the world. In this conversation, Kate Daughdrill, Anthony Ryan Hatch, and Leah Penniman underscore

that these ideas are far from new. Access to food is not only a necessity for human existence, it can also be considered a right that must remain open to all. These factors are essential as we rethink the future of food with an eye to social justice, sustainability, and the well-being of all people.

Hatch says that it is critical to consider how we think about food and the history of its related terminology: “The term *food security* established by the US government meant to give the US government a way to describe patterns of access to food...It strikes me that the term *food security* places food in the context of a discourse of war.” We must interrogate language around issues of food justice just as we interrogate the issues themselves—and especially who regulates access to food and who benefits from those decisions.



Individually and collectively, the conversations, essays, and artworks in this volume underscore the significant ways in which those on the front lines of culture, advocacy, and activism consider, confront, and engage social, economic, and political issues of the day. The thirty contributors to *Culture as Catalyst* examine the ways in which we see and think about the world around us and those who live in it. They lay out today’s critical issues around race, class, sexuality, and more from their own points of view and posit an overarching challenge: that each of us look at ourselves and our actions in order to become allies, speak up, take action, and affect change. They assert that we must ask ourselves whether we are ready to take on this all-important task and then offer multiple catalysts for us to see differently, to think differently, and, above all, to act. ▲