

## CULTURAL WORLDS



Culture is what human beings make of the world, but not everything that human beings make shapes culture.

In 1979 the flamboyant artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude (in our culture, people signal artistic flamboyancy by using only their first names) conceived of a project called *The Gates*. They imagined lining the paths of New York City's Central Park with saffron-colored curtains mounted on steel arches. A proposal to the New York City Parks Department was rejected—the department said that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's proposal was “in the wrong place and the wrong time and in the wrong scale”—and the idea languished in their studio, dormant though never forgotten, for more than twenty years. Only a few people in the community of artists knew about the project.

The vision for *The Gates*, as with all art and all culture, was to make something of the world—in this case, the “world” of Central Park, which is itself a grand exercise in world making by the landscape designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Even when *The Gates* was just a set of sketches and pastel drawings, it was already a cultural good in one sense—the work of human beings trying to make something of the world.

But if *The Gates* had never been actually produced, it would never have become a fully realized cultural good. Go back to the diagnostic questions we asked in chapter one and imagine asking them of *The Gates* in the year 1999 when it was just a collection of sketches, proposals and maps, along with further ideas found only in the artists' imaginations and conversations. *What does The Gates, circa 1999, assume about the way the world is? What does it assume about the way the world ought to be?* We could certainly answer these questions. *The Gates*, circa 1999, assumes the existence of Central Park, its significance in the life of New York City and its wider significance as an emblem of the possibilities of urban spaces. It assumes the chilly, leafless, barren terrain of a New York February (the project was always envisioned for mid-winter). It assumes that the world should be adorned, at least from time to time and temporarily, with billowing fabrics that reveal and yet sometimes also conceal paths, hills and valleys. It assumes—in significant tension with many artists' convictions, especially in the modern and postmodern eras—that art should be colorful, accessible, fun and free to the public.

But then move on to the next three questions. *What does The Gates, circa 1999, make possible? What does it make impossible, or at least much more difficult? What new forms of culture are created in response?* We're stuck. There is little to say because *The Gates*, twenty years after it was first proposed, had had almost no effect to speak of. About the only cultural artifacts that had been created in response were a few bureaucratic documents categorically rejecting the artists' proposal. And perhaps those documents did make some things impossible, or at least much more difficult, if they discouraged other would-be flamboyant artists from proposing any such works for Central Park. *The Gates*, circa 1999, was an artifact—a human effort to make something of the world—but it was not yet fully culture. Which is another way of saying that it was not yet—and as far as its creators knew, might never be—shared by a public.

Culture requires a public: a group of people who have been sufficiently affected by a cultural good that their horizons of possibility and impossibility have in fact been altered, and their own cultural creativity has been spurred, by that good's existence. This group of people does not necessarily have to be large. But without such a group the artifact remains exclusively

personal and private. It may be deeply meaningful to its owners—Christo and Jeanne-Claude may have treasured their sketches and maps in the privacy of their studio—but it has not reshaped the world for anyone. At least not yet.

As it happened, in 2003 a new mayor and new parks commissioner finally approved a somewhat revised proposal for *The Gates*. Michael Bloomberg, a successful businessman turned mayor, was clearly motivated more by millions of dollars in potential tourist revenue than any intrinsic artistic merits of the work itself. Christo and Jeanne-Claude had modified their plan so that no trace would be left when the installation was removed, and they themselves underwrote the \$20 million in costs with proceeds from sales of their other works. And Central Park was a different place that it was in 1979, thanks to various cultural developments—cleaner, safer, more hospitable and far more widely visited by New Yorkers and out-of-town visitors alike. On February 12, 2005, “*The Gates*, Central Park: 1979-2005” unfurled for a sixteen-day run.

Hundreds of thousands of city residents and visitors walked through the park during those sixteen days. And suddenly it became possible to answer the three questions that were unanswerable before. *What did The Gates make possible?* Artists and city officials answered this question differently: the artists could point to the ways that the installation helped visitors see Central Park’s winding paths afresh; the mayor pointed to the revenue the city earned from the influx of tourists. *What did The Gates make impossible, or at least much more difficult?* It made it impossible to reserve a hotel room in Manhattan during the two weekends of the installation—normally not a problem in the dead of winter. The artists’ willingness to fully fund their own artwork, praised by Mayor Bloomberg, might well make it more difficult for public support of the arts, especially grand public installations, to gain widespread support. *What new culture was created in response?* Newspapers and magazines published articles celebrating, criticizing and interpreting the project; reproductions of the artists’ sketches and drawings, formerly languishing in their studio, were sold at a premium to eager buyers, with the proceeds funding a New York arts foundation; and no doubt, the fertile imaginations of Christo and Jeanne-Claude were already at work on an even grander project somewhere in the world, its prospects

enhanced by the popular success of their venture in Central Park.

### REAL ARTISTS SHIP

Culture making requires shared goods. Culture making is *people* (plural) making something of the world—it is never a solitary affair. Only artifacts that leave the solitude of their inventors' studios and imaginations can move the horizons of possibility and become the raw material for more culture making. Until an artifact is shared, it is not culture. In the pithy words attributed to Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs when his engineers were tempted to put off the release date of the first Macintosh: "Real artists ship." Jobs was willing to flatter his engineers, with their attention to detail and passion for perfection, by calling them artists—but he also was calling them back to the fundamental requirement of every software developer, to "ship" a working product to a wider public.

In February 2005, *The Gates* shipped. It crossed the threshold from personal project to shared cultural good. And yet, at another scale, *The Gates* never set sail at all. For billions of people, *The Gates* came and went without notice, moving no horizons and generating no new cultural artifacts. Indeed, if you live far from New York City, *The Gates* may not have had the slightest cultural effect on you until you read these pages. For a few million people, at least for a few weeks in February 2005, *The Gates* was culture, but for most of the world it might as well have stayed in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's studio.

So just as we can't speak of culture without speaking of particular artifacts and specific things, we can't speak of culture without speaking of particular "publics": specific groups of people who are affected by particular acts of making something of the world. Once again, we're reminded of the danger of talking about "the Culture," as if it were an undifferentiated, single thing. Just as we must always ask which cultural goods are meant by a reference to "Culture," we must also ask which public receives and responds to those goods. If real artists—and real engineers, lawmakers, novelists and general contractors—ship, they have to have a real shipping address. Beyond the addresses where their cultural artifacts arrive, those artifacts are not culture at all.

The insight that culture has many different addresses, and that not

every cultural good affects the same public, is the most basic form of “multiculturalism.” Multiculturalism begins with the simple observation that the cumulative, creative process of human culture has happened in widely different places, with widely different results, throughout human history. Before the rise of modern technologies of communication and transportation, the work of culture making could be going on simultaneously in myriad locations, each cut off from the next. Over thousands of years, one generation made something of the world and handed on an enriched (but perhaps also, in other ways, impoverished) world to the next. As this process was repeated over and over, in realms from the preparation of food to the nature of political authority to the stories that were told to make sense of the stars, cultures developed—historically continuous traditions of a particular, multigenerational public who shared a set of common cultural goods, handed on and honed by countless culture makers who “shipped” to their neighbors and their descendants. The Greeks, and the writers of the New Testament, called these various cultural traditions *ta ethnē*—the “peoples” or “nations.”

So when we speak of “ethnic” cultures we (making something of the cultural good that is the Greek word *ethnē*) are referring to these extraordinarily complex, rich collections of traditions of culture making, each rooted in a particular set of times and places. But we should not be misled by the common associations of the word *ethnic*. In many American supermarkets you can still find an “ethnic food” aisle—as if only some kinds of food participate in a particular cultural tradition. Nonsense—all food is “ethnic.” Real cooks ship too, and they ship to particular addresses.

## COURTHOUSE CULTURE

My first—and so far, only—visit to a court of law came when I was twenty-six years old, a newlywed in search of a new name.

Few aspects of any culture’s world-making project are as deeply rooted as the traditions of marriage, the set of cultural practices that make sense of men and women, our passionate and sometimes unruly affections for one another, and our capacity to conceive and nurture children. In my case, my culture, as expressed in the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, didn’t quite make sense of the world as I understood it. When

Catherine Hirshfeld and I had filled out our marriage certificate, it was easy enough for her to change her name to reflect the biblical teaching that we were creating a new family by making our marriage vows to one another—she could simply change her last name to match mine, and change her former family name to her middle name. But on the “groom” side of the marriage certificate there was no way to change my name—even though my religious tradition, perhaps hinting at the matriarchal assumptions of one stage of Jewish history, said that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Why couldn’t my name, too, reflect that new identity that had been sealed in our promises to one another?

So I was off to probate court to legally change my name to match Catherine’s: we would each have her family name as our middle name, and my family name as our last name. I would leave behind my middle name Bennett, along with its ties to my mother’s family, not to mention my childhood pride in the initials ABC, and become Andrew Hirshfeld Crouch.

But first I had to find the courtroom.

I walked into a vast hall echoing with footsteps and voices. Corridors led in several directions, marked with cryptic signs. A bored-looking woman wearing a badge sat behind a desk. When I explained my purpose she pointed vaguely down one of the hallways.

After wandering in that general direction I finally found the courtroom where my petition could be heard. When I finally reached the judge’s bench to make my simple request, I found my heart pounding and my throat dry. I stammered out my reason for changing my name, answered a few questions from the brusque though not unkind judge, and was done. I left the courthouse feeling the same mixture of triumph and exhaustion one sees on the faces of people who finish a triathlon.

I learned several things about culture during my visit to probate court.

The courthouse was, in one sense, part of my culture as an American citizen. But it was a sphere of culture I had no prior experience in. My feelings of dislocation and unease visiting the courthouse were not so different from the way I have felt when traveling in countries where I don’t speak the language. In both cases, I found myself thrust into a world-making tradition, with its own history, its own initiates who were fluent

in the culture. Though I hadn't left America—or even my own regional, ethnic and linguistic corner of America—in visiting the courthouse I had still entered a new sphere of culture, where I felt anxious and helpless. I suddenly understood why lawyers are such a good idea.

I also learned something about cultural power. Within the courthouse, of course, there were people with official power. The bailiff at the desk had a degree of power, the judge at the bench had even more. But quite aside from roles and titles, the daily inhabitants of the courthouse, whatever their position in its hierarchy, had a kind of power that came merely from being fluent in that sphere of culture. They knew their way around; they even knew who had official forms of power, and that knowledge was a kind of power in itself.

For a few moments, in an admittedly very limited way, I experienced what it is like to be poor. Poverty is not just a matter of lacking financial resources; it can also simply mean being cut off from cultural power. To be poor is to be unable to “make something of the world.” On first entering the courthouse I had no idea how to make something of its world. Only because I actually was not at all poor—I speak English, I am a fairly confident person, and I have the good fortune to live in a country where however vague and bored they may be, bailiffs are still expected to help ordinary citizens—was I able to navigate through the courthouse's unfamiliar culture and remake one of the most fundamental aspects of my world: my name.

## **SPHERES OF CULTURE**

The courthouse is just one of a host of spheres of culture. Thinking just in terms of buildings, consider the unique cultural features and the particular forms of world making embodied in a mall, a sewage treatment plant, a bank, a high school cafeteria, an auto dealership, a prison, a television studio, a resort hotel, a hospital, a high-rise office building, a library, a dentist's office, a semiconductor fabrication plant, a bar or—last but not least—a church. In each of these places, people are making something of the world. But the culture of each building, and the culture of the more abstract sphere they represent—retail, water treatment, banking, education and so on—has its own history of making and remaking, of

possibility and impossibility. Many things that are entirely possible in a cafeteria—say, a food fight—are all but impossible in a dentist's office, and vice versa.

These various spheres do overlap and influence each other—that is to say, they affect one another's horizons of possibility and impossibility. The culture of the sewage treatment plant has a great deal to do with the culture of the resort hotel, though the guests may never realize it: without sewage treatment for hundreds of rooms, the hotel could not exist. The bank's formal and informal lending policies affect how many cars the dealership can afford to have on its lot. Workers in the high-rise office building may prefer their church culture to be like their office's—pleasantly anonymous, professionally cleaned and well supplied with parking.

Certain spheres of culture also have special powers. Every building required the approval of local (and sometimes regional and national) government officials before it was built. Furthermore, the culture that each building represents is constrained by laws that the government enforces. Other spheres of culture do not have the same coercive power as the government, but they are no less influential. Educational institutions pass on some kinds of knowledge and not others; mass media select a certain set of images and ideas to set before the public; retailers choose to offer some products and not others to consumers. These spheres of culture can profoundly shape the horizons of possibility and impossibility far beyond their own borders, as when a cell phone sold in the mall is carried into the library, the dentist's office and the church, creating the possibility of instant communication, and instant interruption, in all of those places.

## SCALES OF CULTURE

Just as there are many different *spheres* of culture—different encapsulated traditions of world making—so culture happens at many different scales. I wrote a good portion of this book in the Gryphon Café in Wayne, Pennsylvania, a friendly coffee shop presided over by a pony-tailed thirty-something owner named Rich, staffed by artfully scruffy twenty-somethings and patronized by the bourgeois bohemians of Philadelphia's Main Line, a crowd that includes bird-like suburban moms with chirping cell phones, groups of intermittently studious students from nearby colleges, and real-

tors looking over property listings with anxious-looking young strivers.

The fact that I can give you a fairly complete description of the Gryphon Café depends on its participation in a broader culture, one that includes coffee shops, ponytails, realtors and bourgeois bohemians. But the culture of the Gryphon Café—the things it makes of the world, the horizons of possibility it creates within its walls, the new culture that its denizens make in response—is not exactly like any other coffee shop. The Gryphon Café is not just making something of the vast world of coffee or the current boom in “third places” all over America fueled by the growth of Starbucks; it is also making something of the lovely building it inhabits at the corner of Wayne and Lancaster Avenues, of local artists who hang their work on its walls, of the availability of artfully scruffy twenty-somethings who somehow can afford to live in an affluent community on a barista’s wages. The horizons of possibility are ever so subtly different here from the horizons at the Starbucks half a mile from my house, which is why I often find it worthwhile to drive the ten miles to the Gryphon to wrestle with ideas and words. Within those horizons, people create new culture—a band called The Bitter Sweet plays on a Tuesday night, a parents’ association gathers here on Thursdays to talk about the public schools, teenagers practice their flirting over hot chocolate on a February afternoon after school.

The Gryphon Café, all seventeen tables and one thousand square feet of it, is a convergence of shared cultural goods. It is a culture. The scale of the Gryphon Café’s culture is small, compared to Christo’s *Gates*, and it certainly depends on many other forms of culture on a larger scale. But it is a real enterprise in making something of the world, with real cultural effects, and just because it is small does not mean it is insignificant or simple. A full description of the Gryphon’s culture could occupy a particularly hedonistic anthropologist for years.

But there are even smaller scales at which culture happens. A basic unit of culture is the family, where we first begin making something of the world. Food and language, two of culture’s most far-reaching forms, begin in the home, which may encompass a “public” as small as two people. It can take us decades to appreciate all the ways in which the culture of our families set our horizons of the possible and the impossible. Until we leave

our families and venture into the homes of our neighbors and friends, or perhaps the family home of our future spouse, we are likely not even to realize all the ways that our family sets our horizons. In one family's culture it is "impossible" for people who love each other to argue with one another; in another family's culture it is "impossible" for people who love each other *not* to argue with one another. One family makes it possible for the whole extended family of aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins and grandparents to gather nearly every week for Sunday dinner; another family barely manages to reunite at Thanksgiving. In one family elaborately spiced meals appear every night from the kitchen; in another comfort food comes by way of the freezer and the microwave. Family is culture at its smallest—and its most powerful.

It is easy to talk as if the culture that matters is culture whose public encompasses millions of people. Certainly a cultural artifact like the English language, which in one way or another touches perhaps two-thirds of the world's population, is of tremendous importance. But to focus only on cultural artifacts of such grand scale is to miss a crucial point, which is that the larger the scale of culture, the less anyone can plausibly claim to be a "culture maker." Who makes the English language? Who decides which new words get admitted into the common vocabulary? Who even can grasp the profusion of forms of English around the world, from the Scottish brogue to an American Southern drawl to the lingua franca of the Indian subcontinent? Culture that is everyone's property is in no one's grasp.

But as we consider smaller scales of culture, we begin to have more meaningful influence over what culture makes of the world. As parents of two children, Timothy and Amy, my wife Catherine and I truly have the ability to make some things possible and others impossible for them and for ourselves—even though our culture making takes place within larger horizons over which we have less control. So the culture of our family makes possible, or at least much easier, music making, bread baking, reading, storytelling, baseball watching and Sunday afternoon tea (and also occasional spasms of collective busyness, prolonged sessions on the Internet, and frantic Sunday mornings before church); it makes impossible, or at least much more difficult, video games, football prowess and fashion-forward dressing (also, all too often, quiet time for mom and dad,

a clean kitchen and prayer). I can do very little about the horizons of the English language, but I can do a lot about the culture of my family. For better and for worse, it is what Catherine and I have made it.

Likewise, in her work as a professor of physics, Catherine can do much to shape the culture of her courses and her research lab. In the somewhat sterile and technological environment of a physics laboratory, she can play classical music to create an atmosphere of creativity and beauty. She can shape the way her students respond to exciting and disappointing results, and can model both hard work and good rest rather than frantic work and fitful procrastination. By bringing her children with her to work occasionally she can create a culture where family is not an interruption from work, and where research and teaching are natural parts of a mother's life; by inviting her students into our home she can show that she values them as persons, not just as units of research productivity. At the small scale of her laboratory and classroom, she has real ability to reshape the world.

As we move out from our own home or workplace, we move into larger scales of culture. When we moved to Swarthmore, the small town in Pennsylvania where we now live, we entered a cultural world very different from Cambridge, the city we had just left. And our town's local culture participates in larger layers of culture—the culture of southeast Pennsylvania, the culture of the United States, the culture of the North Atlantic nations. To understand the culture of my little four-person nuclear family, you also need to understand the myriad scales of culture that surround it, radiating out like concentric circles from our household to the four-thousand-year-old project of Western civilization. To understand the culture of Catherine's laboratory, you also need to understand the college where she teaches, the broader worlds of physics and academia, and the extraordinary human enterprise of scientific investigation and discovery. Each of those circles contributes to what Catherine, our children and I can imagine as possible and impossible—each circle constrains us and sets us free.

## **FINDING OUR PLACE IN CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

If human beings stayed in one place for eons, then the different scales of culture might look like the ripples outward from a single pebble land-

ing in a lake. But because people are constantly on the move, cultural circles overlap almost everywhere in the world, and nowhere in such an intricate pattern of mutual influence as the United States. My family preserves some of the cultural heritage of the American Midwest and South. Down the street is a Jewish family who participate in a set of concentric circles that trace their way back to the ancient nation of Israel. Across from them is a couple who have been shaped by the concentric circles that made twentieth-century China. Two blocks over is a family whose African American culture was decisively shaped by the Atlantic slave trade centuries ago.

When we talk about cultural diversity, we are often thinking of the ripples that have been imported through centuries of such voluntary and involuntary movement across cultures. The diversity of a country like America is sustained by countless choices about which cultural world we will inhabit, where we will settle down to our world-making project. My choice to drive to the Gryphon Café, to make something of (and make something within) the horizons it generates, reinforces certain cultures—the culture of the independently owned coffee shop, the culture of bourgeois bohemia, the culture of the automobile—and leaves other cultural spheres and scales untouched and untended. When my African American neighbor passes by the Italian American-owned barbershop in our town on his way to a black-owned barbershop six miles away, he is not just prudently calculating that the culture of Italian American barbering has no idea what to make of what the prophet Daniel called “hair like pure wool”—he is also reinforcing his link to a culture that could otherwise become distant and irrelevant.

So finding our place in the world as culture makers requires us to pay attention to culture’s many dimensions. We will make something of the world in a particular ethnic tradition, in particular spheres, at particular scales. There is no such thing as “the Culture,” and any attempt to talk about “the Culture,” especially in terms of “transforming the Culture,” is misled and misleading. Real culture making, not to mention cultural transformation, begins with a decision about which cultural world—or, better, worlds—we will attempt to make something of.

Some people choose a set of cultural ripples that was not originally

their own. When they do so in pursuit of economic or political opportunities, we've traditionally called them "immigrants"; when they do so in pursuit of evangelistic or religious opportunities, we've called them "missionaries." But as the wheels within wheels overlap more and more in a mobile world, most of us have some choice about which cultures we will call our own. We are almost all immigrants now, and more of us than we may realize are missionaries too.

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