

Book Review: Kidd's *Pop Culture Freaks*

.....

Kidd, Dustin. *Pop Culture Freaks: Identity, Mass Media, and Society*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2016. 288 pages. ISBN: 978-0813349121.

Reviewed by Carlos Tkacz

In his first chapter, “An Introduction to the Sociology of Popular Culture,” of the second edition of *Pop Culture Freaks: Identity, Mass Media, and Society*, author Dustin Kidd writes, “In November 2016, American voters sent popular culture to the White House with the election of Donald J. Trump” (1). Kidd puts it in stronger terms at the end of that chapter: “Pop culture is the 45th president and celebrity studies is the new political science” (30). By beginning what he calls a “field guide” (27) to popular culture studies with the election of President Trump, who managed to leverage his celebrity status into a successful bid for the presidency, Kidd makes a strong case for the importance of popular culture studies in academia. This is a strong version of the student-centered argument that keeping up with popular culture can help teachers engage their students and stronger still than the argument that popular culture influences the identity of individuals in a consumer-based social structure and economy like that of the United States.

Indeed, Kidd's basic idea and the main question the text seeks to answer is the inverse of the latter claim. Rather than asking how popular culture influences identity, he makes clear that he is interested in answering the implied question: how does identity influence popular culture? This flip, while subtle, offers interesting and productive ground for inquiry into

the importance and the effects of popular culture in both the American and global contexts that also updates his previous edition (published in 2014) with new examples, more recent data, more inclusive language, and a new chapter. *Pop Culture Freaks*, as such, continues the conversation works like Ray B. Brown's *Against Academia: The History of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Movement, 1967-1988* (1989) and Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2006) began and offers a necessary and perhaps quintessential manual for scholars and students interested in understanding the importance of popular culture in contemporary society.

To these ends, Kidd engages in several overarching themes and concepts that guide his explorations of identity and popular culture, all of which are meant to elucidate on what he calls the "cultural toolkit" (10) that individuals use to make sense of their lives. Fundamental here is the way Kidd breaks up and looks at the concept of identity. While acknowledging the various definitions available to scholars, Kidd chooses to focus on five intersectional aspects of identity: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. To understand the influence of each of these on popular culture, which he chose due to their collective natures, Kidd uses the cultural diamond, which he borrows from Wendy Griswold. This conceptual map illustrates the spectrum between creator and receiver and between social world and cultural object. For Kidd, this form allows for more productive inquiries into the complex production, consumption, and effects of popular culture and points towards what he calls the Mass Media Matrix and the Matrix of Identity, both of which are ways of looking at the structures that help to produce media and identity rather than the individual instances of them. These,

in turn, lead Kidd to his three main conclusions about popular culture: first, popular culture paradoxically integrates us into the social world while simultaneously telling us we will never fully fit in. Second, the cultural diamond is necessary to understanding the assemblages that make up popular culture. Third, identity influences popular culture through the disparities and inequalities that appear in popular culture, from production to representation.

Each chapter, then, focuses on one of the elements of identity Kidd identifies. The chapters each begin with an exploration of the identity factor in question that includes the necessary theoretical underpinnings necessary for cogent and informed discussion of such difficult topics. Once that is established, each chapter then discusses representations of the chapter's main topic in whatever media formats are applicable, from television and film to sports and social media. From there, consideration is given to the creator (production) and the receiver (audience) sides of the cultural diamond, each followed by information on the methods used to attain and interpret the information presented. Finally, Kidd offers some insight in conclusion and extra resources for continued study. The final two chapters, however, stray some from the above form. Chapter 7, "Translating Harry Potter," looks at the global phenomenon of the *Harry Potter* series of books and films as a way to theorize global popular culture. Kidd focuses on the similarities of global iterations of popular culture and discusses the "McDonaldization" (216), a term he borrows from George Ritzer, of popular culture—the process by which mass media production and consumption both have become avenues through which "culturaleconomic" (217) modes are globally exported and reproduced.

In his conclusion, Kidd writes that "[t]his factory-based

culture industry is doomed to fail” (234) and advocates for “movement from media to art” (236), his way of saying that scholars should and must take popular culture more seriously, especially as technology allows for more and more decentralization in the creative processes that make popular culture. For Kidd, this move leads to a new cultural diamond that puts “participatory creation” across from “changed lives” and “transformed communities” above “revolutionary stories” (236). In the end, it seems, Kidd’s book is a defense of the serious study of popular culture, and he manages to make a convincing case in a well-designed and accessible text that also offers scholars and students new and interesting ways of approaching the field. As such, *Pop Culture Freaks* is a necessary introduction and intervention in popular culture studies that is sure to be useful to scholars and students alike.