

## Chapter Four: Local Culture, Popular Culture, and Cultural Landscapes

### **What Are Local and Popular Cultures?**

A **culture** is a group of belief systems, norms, and values practiced by a people. **Folk culture** is small, incorporates a homogeneous population, is typically rural, and is cohesive in cultural traits. Often, the phrase 'folk culture' is substituted for **local culture**, which is a group of people in a particular place who see themselves as a collective or a community, who share experiences, customs, and traits, and who work to preserve those traits and customs in order to claim uniqueness and to distinguish themselves from others. **Popular culture** is large, incorporates heterogeneous populations, is typically urban, and experiences quickly changing cultural traits. Both types of culture encompass music, dance, clothing, food preference, religious practices, and aesthetic values.

The **material culture** of a group of people includes the things they construct, such as art, houses, clothing, sports, dance, and foods. **Nonmaterial culture** includes the beliefs, practices, aesthetics, and values of a groups of people. The material culture usually reflects the nonmaterial culture.

Whereas local culture is usually passed from generation to generation and maintained by familial and religious systems, popular culture is spread rapidly by use of media and marketing. Frequently in popular culture, key cities such as New York and Paris are the **hearth**, and ideas spread through a process of **hierarchical diffusion**: From key big cities, to smaller cities, then to suburban malls. Often, ideas spread from local culture into the popular culture; painting henna on hands or playing hacky sack would be examples of this phenomenon.

### **How Are Local Cultures Sustained?**

The pressure to **assimilate**, or adopt the cultural characteristics of the main culture, often strains local cultures. Indeed, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the US government actually had an official policy of assimilation in place to discourage Native Americans from practicing their **customs**, or practices that a group of people routinely follows. In the case of the Plains Indians, it was the Ghost Dance and the hunting of buffalo that were violently prevented by the US policy of assimilation. Because of this, local cultures often create boundaries around their culture to distinguish themselves from the dominant culture. They can do this by defining a particular tradition as their own, or also by avoiding **cultural appropriation**, or the taking of their cultural traits by outsiders and used by those outsiders to accumulate wealth or prestige. Guarding a musical form or natural pharmaceuticals would be an example of this.

Due to their typical isolation, rural local cultures have an easier time maintaining their ways because migration into their areas is less frequent. Often, groups such as the Amish or Hutterites will move away from areas that are becoming suburban toward more rural areas to maintain their isolation. When local cultures seek to practice their culture, they sometimes run afoul of the ideas of the popular culture; an example of this would be the Makah Indians seeking to hunt whales as their ancestors did. Sometimes local areas will embrace a forgotten cultural trait and bring it back into the daily life of the community; this is known as **neolocalism**. An example of this would be Lindsborg, Kansas creating a Swedish motif to its community life that had not been present before. In all cases, the local community is attempting to create stronger community ties in opposition to the outside pressures to conform to the larger culture.

Sometimes within large cities a local culture is defined by creating tightly-knit **ethnic neighborhoods**. Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, Italians in the North End of Boston, and hipsters in East Nashville all have unique festivals and practices in an effort to maintain the local culture of their neighborhood. Pressures of the outside world constantly challenge the local flavor, as yuppies buy up properties in Harlem and artists buy lofts in the Jewish area of Brooklyn.

Sometimes local cultures try to keep their customs to themselves; for example, the estate of Sioux Indian leader Crazy Horse sued to stop a brewer from marketing Crazy Horse beer. The process of taking a name, idea, or persona from a local group and trying to cash in on it by marketing it to the larger market is known as **commodification**. The reality TV show *Amish Mafia* would be an example of this. Often, the issue of **authenticity** arises wherever commodification is found—many local customs are too complex to be accurately portrayed by

commodification, and thus are inaccurately typecast. An example would be Guinness Brewing of Ireland and its Irish Pub Company; 'real' Irish pub experiences placed all around the world.

### **How is Popular Culture Diffused?**

The diffusion of the agricultural revolution took 10,000 years. The diffusion of the industrial revolution took 100 years. The diffusion of the tech revolution took 5 years. Thanks to modern technology and transportation systems, **diffusion decay** no longer can be neatly shown as a bullseye with the hearth in the middle and the innovation neatly diffused in a circle around it. Rather, **time-space compression** (figure 4.11, page 113) more accurately shows how quickly innovations diffuse; those places linked by technology and transportation networks get the new cultural trait much faster than those places not connected.

How do we find the hearths of popular culture and how do certain places establish themselves as the hearths of popular culture? After all, *all aspects of popular culture-music, sports, TV, dance-have a hearth or place of origin*. An example of a hearth and the diffusion that took place could be the band Phish. Starting in a college town in Vermont, the band's growth shows **hierarchical diffusion** by first spreading to other college towns, college students being the most susceptible people to enjoy their music. **Relocation diffusion** also played a role, as the band's constant touring exposed new audiences to their music. Corporations can often be the agent of diffusion, in essence becoming the hearth itself. For example, MTV's global reach enables it to immediately transport a new cultural trait; MTV uses research and focus groups and 'cool hunters' to find the next big thing and then push it to the world. It's like a triangle: at the top is the innovator (2-3% of the population); the trend setters (17% of the population) pick up on what the innovator is doing; then comes the early adopter, then the mainstream (the bottom 80% of the population). MTV finds it and gets it out, often tweaking it to make it more marketable; once it reaches the mainstream, it's very often lame, uncool, and ready to die.

Often a trend experiences **reterritorialization**, or when people within a place start to produce an aspect of popular culture themselves, doing so in the context of their local culture and making it their own. Hip Hop music is an example of this. The hearth of Hip Hop was Compton and Harlem; if one wanted to see an authentic performance, those neighborhood venues in those places were where to go. Hip Hop then diffused to Europe; German Hip Hop band Die Fantastischen Vier made music that reflected the local experiences of its community, reterritorializing the music to its locale and the unique issues and cultural traits facing its people. Hip Hop is now global; imagine an Indonesian Hip Hop band...

Skateboarding is a good example of the power of media to diffuse the culture throughout the world. With its hearth in Southern California, skateboard magazines helped spread skateboarding to Europe and to a limited extent Central America. But with the advent of ESPN X games and video games such as Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, skateboarding has not only gone worldwide, but has also replaced baseball as the sport of choice among young people in terms of numbers participating. American media is very powerful in diffusing culture. Until recently, *Baywatch* was the most watched TV show in the world. Western Europe and Japan also play a strong role culturally. Some other countries are reacting to this. For example France requires its radio stations to devote 40% of its air time to French speaking songs. One of the goals of Al Qaeda is to fight the spread of American sexual and commercial influence over the more traditional, fundamentalist Muslim countries.

### **How Can Local and Popular Cultures Be Seen in the Cultural Landscape?**

The pull between globalized popular culture and local culture can be seen in the **cultural landscape**, or the visible imprint of human activity on the landscape. For example, one can see from driving down a major thoroughfare in the US that Americans value commercialism. Furthermore, you could be plunked down in the middle of any American commercial district and not be able to tell what town you were in due to the same businesses being present in all of America. The term **placelessness** has been coined to describe the loss of uniqueness of place in the cultural landscape due to one place's looking like the next. It is not just in America; many of the same business names will be seen in most of the major cities of the world. The largest KFC in the world is in Beijing, and there are more Yum Brand (Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut) locations in China than in the US. This is due to the three dimensions of cultural landscape convergence (meeting to become one/same):

1. Particular planning and architectural ideas have diffused around the world. For example, indoor shopping malls.
2. Individual businesses have very widespread so that they are everywhere. McDonalds!
3. Wholesale borrowing of idealized landscape images promotes blurring of place distinctiveness. For example, there is a mini-Manhattan replica in Las Vegas, and Main Street USA is at Disney World.

Cultural borrowing and mixing is happening all over the world. Thus the **global-local continuum** is the idea that what happens at one scale is not independent of what happens at other scales; local influences global and vice versa. **Glocalization** is the term for this global/local interaction and influencing. **Diffusion routes** are those routes that a particular cultural form follows as it spreads. For example, the mid-Atlantic style of architecture spread westward and southward due to similar climate needs.