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The Theory of Autopoietic Culture: Processes and Inquiries beyond the Frame

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Abstract: This paper will briefly introduce the theory of autopoietic culture derived specifically from the writings of Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela, and discuss its implications for the humanities, including re-theorizing research to transcend disciplinary constraints and opening new branches of inquiry in the humanities. The theory of autopoietic culture articulates that culture is an autonomous and autonomic unity that is a network of processes and production of components that are continuously generated and “recursively participate through their interactions in the generation and realization of the network of process of production of components which produced them” (Maturana, “The Organization of the Living” 153). In this theory, culture is an autopoietic unity which is always in process and is brought forth by an observer in an act of distinction occurring in a consensual linguistic domain. This presentation will very broadly discuss Joseph Beuys and Gloria Anzaldúa as examples of how this theory may be used to re-theorize analysis and research that focuses on fixed moments opening new areas of inquiry based on what is commonly left out of the frame. It is also possible that observation and analysis within a theory of autopoietic culture will lead to alternatives and challenges to the hegemony of current academic paradigms of inquiry in the humanities.

Keywords: Culture, Autopoiesis, Autopoietics, Cultural Theory, Humanities, Interdisciplinary, Process, Systems Theory, Joseph Beuys, Gloria Anzaldúa

SOME OF THE latest academic trends in the humanities are embedded within a model of inquiry driven by practical outcomes and the presumed clarity of empirical research. Trends such as neuro-literary criticism, literary Darwinism, text-mining, and non-consumptive research, to take a few examples from the study of literature, empower this paradigm in the humanities by counting, identifying, cataloging, and organizing tangible events or objects that can be easily displayed and justified as objective knowledge. Because a paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn writes, further articulates itself, these models of research support, create, and reward a certain set of objectives (24). These objectives are in turn embedded in what Foucault referred to as the episteme, “something like a world-view... a certain structure of thought that men of a particular period cannot escape” (191). It is my contention that the promotion of this direction of analysis in the humanities leads to research and analysis shaped by utility that creates further partitions of culture by a process of infinite regressive framing. This paper is inspired by the consideration of another “world view” which can be brought forward as a predominant episteme for inquiry. By recognizing the theory of autopoietic culture, it is possible to avoid the trap of Zeno’s dichotomy paradox of continuous reduction ending in a motionlessness that separates the observer from systems and processes that define dynamic and autonomic cultures. The theory of autopoietic culture embraces a diversity of inquiry, transcends disciplinary boundaries, and values accounts of

amorphousness and the unknown. In short, the theory of autopoietic culture provides dislocated starting points for analysis that both surrounds and includes the artificial imposition of fixed frames of practical inquiry.

The brief description of autopoietic culture presented here is an attempt to suggest a model that in part removes pragmatic usefulness, in scholarship or society, as the dominant objective in the forefront of inquiry and criticism. Doing so allows us to account for more of the infinite variables of our interactions and thoughts that in current dominant paradigms can not be accounted for and to embrace what is outside the frame of the viewfinder as more relevant than what is within the frame. It is also an attempt to account for the continuous changes in time of the components and variables often presented as static, and most importantly, is predicated on culture continually defining the boundaries of itself. In this article I propose that by subsuming the demands of praxis, quantification, and empirical parsing within a theory in which culture is considered autopoietic, frames will dissipate, or at least turn translucent, allowing for different forms of inquiry that are reflective of the processes that define autopoietic culture and the observers' observations and positions within it. This discussion concludes with brief comments on Joseph Beuys and Gloria Anzaldúa indicating how we may recognize artworks and analysis situated within an episteme of self defining processes. Though probably unaware of autopoiesis, both Beuys and Anzaldúa lived their lives and created works that exhibit evidence of a world view of cultures that could be described as autopoietic.

The theory of autopoietic culture derives from the terms and model established by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in their writings on the theory of the living organization. I am considering the system that they have used to describe the processes of some organisms, as a model that can be used to describe and define culture. As biologists, they have not supported the use of their argument as applied to society, or as I will do here, to a theory of culture (within which "society" is an autopoietic system). While not openly supporting this view, they have come very close to articulating it in their book *The Tree of Knowledge* (239-250), and others, such as Niklas Luhmann, have described particular spheres of society as autopoietic. The central, but not freestanding, defining characteristic of the theory of autopoietic culture is that culture, something originating with humanity and reflected upon by the same, is an autonomous and autonomic unity that is a network of processes and production of components that are continuously generated and "recursively participate through their interactions in the generation and realization of the network of process of production of components which produced them" (Maturana, "The Organization of the Living" 153).

According to Francisco Varela, an autopoietic unity is a self creating system that "continuously produces the components that specify it, while at the same time realizing it (the system) as a concrete unity in space and time which makes the network of production of components possible" (Varela 5). Therefore a unity, according to Maturana and Varela, is a "complex system that is realized as a unity through its components and their mutual relations" (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 188). As a complex system, this unity, culture in this case, is "defined as a unity by the relations between its components which realize the system as a whole, and its properties as a unity are determined by the way this unity is defined, and not by particular properties of its components" (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 188). The components of the autopoietic unity (culture) are those elements commonly used in definitions and explanations of culture including language, people, symbols, beliefs, objects, etc. But in this theory the

definition and the properties of the unity are derived from the relations between the components and not from the components themselves.

A unity (culture) is brought forth by an observer in an act of distinction occurring in a consensual linguistic domain. The linguistic domain is the consensual acquisition of communicative behaviors dependent upon the particular ontogeny (defined as “the history of structural change in a unity”) of the observer including social interactions (Maturana and Varela 74 and 207). While all the elements in the theory of autopoietic culture are equally necessary for the processes by which it exists, the observer is of pivotal importance given the basic assumption that culture is (cultures are) continuously created by humans, observed by humans, and humans are both active and autonomic participants. This theory argues that whatever culture is, or is not, is determined by its characteristics as an autopoietic unity and its definition derived from one observer to another is accepted as vastly incomplete because of the limits of the observers. The observer is discussed in more detail below.

With regards to the elements or components, the description and analysis of elements of culture by observers has been the predominant focus of disciplines concerned with analysis and understanding of culture. They are usually framed, focused, and isolated from the network of processes that produced them to conform to the observers’ analytical paradigm. This has led to a greater emphasis on distinguishing boundaries from the observers’ point of view, the boundary of a specific outcome, specific process, or specific structural element. The focus on beliefs, values, and behaviors in culture (for example) has demonstrated that the properties of these cultural elements determine in part the interactions and transformations of these components which then provide the criteria with which to form distinctive boundaries from the point of view of an observer. These boundaries are determined by the perceived properties of the elements, some of which also determine the interactions, continuously define the boundaries, and in turn determine, in part, the properties of the beliefs or objects themselves. Thus, components in culture, including observation, breed cultural components. There is no vacuum within which the components’ processes exist in isolation. A belief, an object, or a symbol is produced by interactions with other components.

As an autopoietic system, culture is organized and defined as a unity by a network of relations. The emphasis is on the organization network of relations and processes of culture that produce its structure, not on the structure itself. The structure of culture is not synonymous with its organization. According to Maturana, it is the organization of an autopoietic unity (culture in this case), or the relationship among its components, that constitutes it as a unity (“The Organization of the Living” 152). In other words, the components themselves, crudely described as values, beliefs, behaviors, symbols, or material objects, cannot define an autopoietic unity. It is the relationship and processes between these components that define the autopoietic unity given that they continuously produce themselves and in so doing define the boundaries of the unity within which relations and production can take place.

Culture, as an autopoietic unity, is not monolithic but contains other autopoietic unities. According to Maturana, “in an autopoietic system all its (dynamic) states are states in autopoiesis and lead to autopoiesis” (“The Organization of the Living” 154). Thus, other cultures (unities) may be contained within another culture (unity). The process through which this occurs is related to the ontogeny of a given culture. In autopoiesis, according to Maturana and Varela, change is continuous and is triggered, but not determined, by the medium or milieu within which the culture (unity) is distinguished, internally within the culture (unity), or through structural coupling with another culture (unity) (Maturana and Varela 96). For

every culture (unity) has an ontogeny, as do its components, and structural coupling occurs when there is a recurring interaction between two or more cultures (unities), or components, which contributes to their combined ontogeny and structural congruence (Maturana and Varela 75). This is reciprocal between the cultures (unities) and may cause a natural drift, an evolution in the cultures (unities) which is a result of recurring perturbations, defined as “interactions that trigger changes of state” (Maturana and Varela 98). This is called a “consensual domain” (Maturana, “Cognition” 43). According to Maturana and Varela, “natural drift will follow only the courses that are possible at each instant,” this implies that there are innumerable possible courses that a culture (unity) may take without losing its organization during the course of recurring perturbations (Maturana and Varela 109). This is part of the reason why there are an infinite number of outcomes or variations of culture, variations and outcomes which can only partially be described by an observer, because the observer describes a fixed point in the unity’s structure and time, a fixed state that cannot describe the continuous change and flux of the unity.

This outline of a basic model of culture as an autopoietic unity is presented to demonstrate how culture defines itself through its processes of organization. These are second order observations, observations of an observer observing and are used to freeze the structure of the organization for explanation. This is where definitions of culture are generally derived and where most analysis of culture(s) takes place. However, in this theory “cultures are in a continual process of interaction with one another through perturbations that affect their individual and combined ontogenies, leading to the natural drift of culture and cultures that occurs through interactions with other cultures” (Boyd 5). In other models, cultures are defined and differentiated based on their structure and organization determined by observing and distinguishing components of culture.

Maturana writes that an observer is “a human being, a person; someone who can make distinctions and specify that which he distinguishes as an entity.... All the distinctions that we handle, conceptually or concretely, are made by us as observers: everything said is said by an observer to another observer” (“The Organization of the Living” 151). Distinctions are made in the linguistic domain and according to Maturana such domains are usually described in semantic terms, by which the observer describes the course of actions as if it was the meaning and not the structural coupling that determined the actions and organization of the autopoietic unity (Maturana and Varela 207). This leads to what Maturana calls the “descriptive fallacy”: given that culture is autopoietic then it is a fallacy for observers to describe changes of state in culture based solely on fixed references to the structural elements at a fixed point in time. This is because

the notion of information is valid only in the descriptive domain as an expression of the cognitive uncertainty of the observer; and, because the changes of state of a state determined system, be it autopoietic or not, are determined by its structure, regardless of whether or not for some purpose that the observer may consider applicable. (“The Organization of the Living” 158)

The observer is part of culture and is able to make distinctions, “to operate as if external to (distinct from) the circumstances in which he finds himself” (“The Organization of the Living” 151). The act of distinction becomes the starting point for Maturana and Varela because it is the basis, in their model, of knowing how we know. A distinction is “an act which distin-

guishes what has been indicated as separate from its background,” and a unity, in this case culture, is brought forth by an act of distinction (Maturana and Varela 40). The distinction is also a point of criticism because of the argument’s apparent circularity, pointed out by Luhmann, that knowledge is possible by the introduction of distinction, beginning with distinguishing knowing from not knowing and moving to “knowledge is what knowledge takes to be knowledge” (438). As William Rasch notes in his book on Luhmann, the act of distinction which is both made and observed with other observers accounts for the dominance of certain paradigms of observations, given that “observing as an operation that makes a distinction and is then bound to use one side of the distinction, and not the other side, to continue its observations” (171). Obviously the grouping of like distinctions, including a distinction not to accept distinctions, aligns observers into groups within the linguistic domain, while still remaining participants in the operational processes of autopoietic culture, since, according to Maturana and Varela, everything said is said for another observer. As an observer, Luhmann writes, we are caught in a circle, that “the distinction between operation and observation appears itself as an element of observation. On the one hand, an observation is itself an operation; on the other hand, it is the employment of a distinction” (438). But this circularity is a problem only in fixed time. In processes of organization, according to Luhmann, the distinction re-enters what it has distinguished, to be distinguished again or not (438).

As observers working in disciplines making distinctions, we generally rely on observations rooted to a particular point on the scale between isolated objectivism and idealism, and evidence fixed in time and space connected to other evidence by some form of cause and effect. We form a question (usually fixed) and provide an answer, occasionally in the form of more questions. As observers, we choose our point in the spectrum (or it is chosen for us?) between the rational or inspirational and proceed to work with a language in which we generally adhere to the communications metaphor of the conduit (Boyd 6). But considering culture as autopoietic requires that we recognize a continuous present, or happening, and that, according to Maturana, it is as observers that we invent past, present, and future to explain this present (“The Nature of Time”). There may also be a correspondence with Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of human existence, in this case the observer’s existence, as ‘happening’ between birth and death (Guignon 7).

By not being aware that the organization of culture (the unity) is what gives it its identity, we may construct outcomes on specific time based observations as if a particular consequence exists outside ourselves and carries meaning in and of itself that others will recognize if pointed out to them. These outcomes, and the meanings that they carry, are categorized according to the similarity of their observable characteristics with other like outcomes and form a disciplinary discourse. These discourses and disciplines form the backbone of a particular historically justified exegesis and praxis of learning and teaching. But in autopoietic culture we are autopoietic unities within autopoietic unities and, according to Maturana,

it is our history of recurrent interactions that makes possible our ontogenic structural drift in a structural coupling that affords interpersonal coordination of actions; this takes place in a world we share because we have specified it together through our actions.

This is so obvious that we are literally blind to it. (Maturana and Varela 233)

As I have argued elsewhere, we create the descriptive world with other observers, but the descriptions as well as ourselves simultaneously share and create the cultures within which

we are describing (Boyd 7). But descriptions of the system take place at a given point in time, which represents the system's structure only at that moment. A point in time is not indicative of the continuing processes of interaction and structural coupling that organize a particular unity (culture). Thus the theory of autopoietic culture reveals itself to be less concerned with fragments of fixed time and fixed observations and more with autonomic processes that continue unobserved in a type of continuous present or "duration" as described by Henry Bergson (15-16).

It is these processes that define the unity (culture), though the requirements of academic rigor cause many disciplines to extrapolate from them fixed structural elements or components without accounting for what cannot be accounted for (what is outside the frame of focus) and often artificially separating the observer from the observed. Additionally, this theory allows for infinite inclusion of bounded autopoietic unities within autopoietic unities, each interacting with one another through perturbations with the environment or each other, in a constant state of change resulting from and contributing to an evolving ontogeny of the unities. This describes, in one sense, the "amorphous, indescribable mist" of culture to which Gary Fine refers, and the multiplicity of possible descriptions, from practical to theoretical, which in their breadth and indistinctness are impractical (733). But in a second sense, it also accounts for the 'mist,' itself, part of the "ensemble of invisible relations" of social reality that Pierre Bourdieu describes that is otherwise nearly impossible to account for (16).

In part I am also arguing that amorphousness, in sources and analysis, which causes consternation to those who need some kind of specificity, is a source of strength, as is the lack of hierarchy and the symbiotic requirement between the observers and the unities with regards to a basic awareness of the existence of structural objects in the unity. This is the knife edge between the subjective and objective that Maturana and Varela's theory of living systems intends to walk, in part by integrating the role of the observer into the process of autopoiesis.

If there is a shift in the hegemony of the empirical and consumer praxis episteme toward the process and systems view of autopoietic culture (within which such an empirical view exists), inquiry into the humanities would by necessity find the metaphor of the frame inappropriate. Equally inappropriate would be the consideration of fixed guidelines or a methodology for the theory of autopoietic culture. However, there are individuals whose artistic and academic works might serve as analogies for the type of analysis and inquiry that is possible when cultures are considered autopoietic.

Joseph Beuys has been described contradictorily as an artist, educator, showman, manipulator, shaman, and fraud. Yet each of these descriptions requires a framing and focus on a particular series of static components from the processes of his life and works. Though there is no evidence that he was aware of autopoiesis or similar theories, such as Juri Lotman's theory of the semiosphere or Thomas Sebeok's globalsemiotics (or the semiotic sphere), Beuys's life and his broad interactions and creations are examples that demonstrate a concern for a unity of processes rather than static fixed points of structure. In his theory of Social Sculpture he claims that his works should "should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone" (Kuoni 19). As in autopoiesis, his works and life bring processes to the foreground, including thinking forms, spoken forms, and social sculpture as process (Kuoni 19). Beuys writes, "that is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, color changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a STATE OF CHANGE [capital letters are Beuys's]" (Kuoni 19). His works

are chemical, symbolic, organic, inorganic, alive, and dead with some works still continuing their processes today. This is the case with his ongoing artwork *7,000 Oaks* in Kassel, Germany. Beuys recognized his own life as a sculptural process and his manipulations, constructions, and destructions as part of a dynamic whole of interrelated processes defining that whole and the creating the constituent parts within it. His work requires the observer to be aware of a dynamic whole of interactions that predominantly continue unseen. What can be observed of Beuys's life and art are touch stones of frozen moments intended to draw attention to what has not been perceived when perceiving.

If Beuys and his work draw attention to process rather than structure, Gloria Anzaldúa's essay *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* provides an example of an alternative to the hegemony of pragmatic objectivity across paradigms of academic inquiry. While Anzaldúa gave no indication in her writing or interviews (that I am aware of) of any familiarity with autopoiesis, *Borderlands/La Frontera* demonstrates a type of inquiry that is possible if culture is autopoietic and the observer, aware of this, is also aware of her role of observing and contributing to the processes between structures (language, literary forms, mythology, symbolism, etc.) of the unity. Straining against the restrictions of the book form, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a web of metaphysical and physical descriptions and references. The text changes languages mid-sentence and weaves together the personal, historical, critical, and mythological challenging various binary social and cultural constructions along the way. Mohammad Tamdgidi wrote that Anzaldúa, "represents subaltern voices that differently challenge us to rethink in new ways the habitual, dualistic structures of knowledge prevailing in sociology about 'self and society'" (312).

Anzaldúa, observing her observations writes:

I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other 'objects' and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit... The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. (88)

This is a sentiment that speaks to the uncertainty of what can be known as an observer of a system, of which she is part, but that autonomically defines itself. This discussion of Beuys and Anzaldúa is obviously incomplete, but further exploration would reveal their oeuvres demonstrate a position that blends analysis and creation, self expression and self observation, within a larger unity of components in the process of creating and defining that unity.

In conclusion, the theory of autopoietic culture is not prescriptive as a methodology for analysis, but rather a theoretical episteme that accommodates and fosters alternative means of inquiry and creation largely because it presents a strongly interdependent view of structure, time, and the role of the observer. It is not practical and there is nothing that can be done with it. As a description of culture, in which culture defines itself by processes and interactions between components through time rather than just the observation of the components themselves, it supports an openness to interact with connections and processes that are often subdued and tamed for approved use in other paradigms. The works of Joseph Beuys and Gloria Anzaldúa provide a glimpse of how creation and analysis might appear if autopoietic

culture is the theoretical starting point. For it is within the theory of autopoietic culture that the framed outcome is deemphasized and empirical data is overwhelmed by the autonomic cultural processes that surround them.

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Scott H. Boyd earned his Ph.D. from the School of Interdisciplinary Arts at Ohio University. He has broad research interests including theories of culture, arts, autopoiesis, ethics, and neoliberalism in education. He has published on a range of topics including the artworks of Joseph Beuys; films of Werner Herzog; Foucault's episteme; interdisciplinarity, time, and autopoiesis; the theory of autopoietic culture; and neoliberal ideology in US higher education. He is also a creative writer, travel writer, and published poet who teaches literature and humanities at Middle East Technical University-Northern Cyprus Campus.



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The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Humanities community, as well as major developments in the humanities. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
SUSTAINABILITY The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com	TECHNOLOGY The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: www.Technology-Journal.com
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/	UNIVERSITIES Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: www.Universities-Journal.com

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