

1. Record Nr.	UNINA9910780057503321
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Titolo	Patterns for America [[electronic resource]] : modernism and the concept of culture // Susan Hegeman
Pubbl/distr/stampa	Princeton, NJ, : Princeton University Press, c1999
ISBN	1-4008-0356-X 1-282-75380-0 9786612753800 1-4008-2322-6 1-4008-1203-8
Edizione	[Core Textbook]
Descrizione fisica	1 online resource (275 p.)
Disciplina	810.9/112
Soggetti	American literature - 20th century - History and criticism Modernism (Literature) - United States Literature and anthropology - United States - History - 20th century Culture - United States - History - 20th century National characteristics, American, in literature Modernism (Aesthetics) - United States Arts, Modern - 20th century Arts, American United States Civilization 20th century
Lingua di pubblicazione	Inglese
Formato	Materiale a stampa
Livello bibliografico	Monografia
Note generali	Description based upon print version of record.
Nota di bibliografia	Includes bibliographical references (p. [215]-257) and index.
Nota di contenuto	Front matter -- Contents -- Acknowledgments -- Introduction. The Domestication of Culture -- 1. Modernism, Anthropology, Culture -- 2. Dry Salvages: Spatiality, Nationalism, and the Invention of an "Anthropological" Culture -- 3. The National Genius: Van Wyck Brooks, Edward Sapir, and the Problem of the Individual -- 4. Terrains of Culture: Ruth Benedict, Waldo Frank, and the Spatialization of the Culture Concept -- 5. The Culture of the Middle: Class, Taste, and Region in the 1930's Politics of Art -- 6. "Beyond Relativity": James Agee and Others, Toward the Cold War -- 7. On Getting Rid of Culture: An Inconclusive Conclusion -- Notes -- Index

In recent decades, historians and social theorists have given much thought to the concept of "culture," its origins in Western thought, and its usefulness for social analysis. In this book, Susan Hegeman focuses on the term's history in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. She shows how, during this period, the term "culture" changed from being a technical term associated primarily with anthropology into a term of popular usage. She shows the connections between this movement of "culture" into the mainstream and the emergence of a distinctive "American culture," with its own patterns, values, and beliefs. Hegeman points to the significant similarities between the conceptions of culture produced by anthropologists Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead, and a diversity of other intellectuals, including Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Dwight Macdonald. Hegeman reveals how relativist anthropological ideas of human culture--which stressed the distance between modern centers and "primitive" peripheries--came into alliance with the evaluating judgments of artists and critics. This anthropological conception provided a spatial awareness that helped develop the notion of a specifically American "culture." She also shows the connections between this new view of "culture" and the artistic work of the period by, among others, Sherwood Anderson, Jean Toomer, Thomas Hart Benton, Nathanael West, and James Agee and depicts in a new way the richness and complexity of the modernist milieu in the United States.
