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in a Cosmopolitan Sense*

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COMING CLOSE AND KEEPING ONE'S DISTANCE: THE AESTHETIC COSMOPOLITAN AND TRANSCULTURAL CONVERSATION

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*"Please enjoy the unusual responsibly."
– label for Hendricks Gin*

In his 2007 book, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, music critic Carl Wilson conducts what he calls a "taste experiment": he endeavors to find a way to appreciate the music of international superstar Celine Dion.¹ This is harder than it sounds. Wilson had previously regarded Dion w/ nothing but contempt, and he comes by it honestly, claiming membership

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in a community of rock fans that favor various forms of indie rock, punk and post punk, outsider music that frames itself as resistant to the ways of mainstream music markets. To a listener who prizes rock music's potential for subversion above all else, Dion's aggressively commercial and sentimental schmaltz is anathema. Though Wilson owns up to his oppositional stance, at the same time he acknowledges the many millions that do love her music, and who have turned her into the international star she is today. He sets for himself the task of finding a way to appreciate her music, to try and understand what it is about it that appeals to so many people. Wilson's project is motivated in part by values he describes as "democratic": he wants to transcend the borders of the particular subculture or "taste world" he has dwelled within in order to forge a more sympathetic understanding of other music listeners within and without his own community, to shed his own tendencies to a kind of hipster elitism that he has come to find "inimical...to an aesthetics that might support a good public life".²

I would like to present Wilson's "taste experiment" as an example of what I am going to call the *aesthetic cosmopolitan project*: the active, morally serious project of cultivating an appreciation for artworks or other cultural artifacts that are culturally unfamiliar, or "non-native", to one, in a manner that is informed by a commitment to cosmopolitanism.³ Cosmopolitanism has been characterized as a family of views in moral and political philosophy that share the core idea "that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated".⁴

For the purposes of this paper's argument, I propose that the aesthetic cosmopolitan is committed, at minimum, to the following three claims, all of which are found in contemporary accounts of what is often referred to as "moral

cosmopolitanism”, put forward by thinkers like Kwame Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, and Mitchell Aboulaflia. The first claim is moral universalism, the view that “all human beings are members of a single (metaphorical) moral community and that they have moral obligations to all other human beings regardless of their nationality, language, religion, customs, etc.”.⁵ Usually accompanying this is an anti-parochialism that finds expressions of varying severity across different accounts of cosmopolitanism, but at minimum claims that the loyalties and duties that make legitimate moral claims on one are not *exclusively* parochial (i.e., grounded in allegiances to more “local” communities) in nature. The next two claims have their origin in what is sometimes called “cultural cosmopolitanism” but are found united with moral universalism in contemporary accounts. The first is a political brand of pluralism that celebrates cultural diversity as a good that should be promoted, and rejects cultural uniformity as an ideal. The third and final cosmopolitan commitment is a general endorsement of transcultural engagement, the view that the cosmopolitan should actively seek to engage other cultures in a manner informed by the prior two commitments—i.e., in a way that recognizes and appreciates the particularity and distinctness of these cultures while observing one’s moral obligations to all involved parties.

Appiah, Nussbaum, and Aboulaflia all argue that transcultural engagement is a crucial activity for the cultivation of good “world citizenship”: among other goods, it facilitates greater inclusiveness, understanding, tolerance, and empathy across cultural lines.⁶ Appiah states: “if we care *about* others who may have commitments and beliefs that are unlike our own—we must have a way to talk *to* them”.⁷ As I’ve characterized it here, the aesthetic cosmopolitan project, informed as it is by this deliberately thin conception of cosmopolitanism, may take a variety of different forms and be motivated by a variety

of different considerations and goals. However, it will always be characterized by one consistent mode of activity: an engagement with other-cultural artworks that endeavors to treat such an encounter as a kind of “transcultural conversation”. In what follows I’ll consider what it might mean to appreciate art in this way, as well as what might be involved in doing it *well* (in both aesthetic and moral terms).

It may be most helpful to approach this question of how to pursue the cosmopolitan project well by considering first how things might go wrong. Let’s consider a pair of case studies of would-be aesthetic cosmopolitans:

Rose is a music lover who is very well versed in Western classical music, being not only conversant with most of its canonical works and composers, but also knowledgeable of some of its musical theory. Having cultivated a sophisticated and authoritative taste in this sphere of music, Rose strikes out for lands unheard in the pursuit of the cosmopolitan project, motivated by a seemingly genuine desire to develop a better understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures via their music. So as to not spread herself too thin, she decides to focus her attention on a small handful of specific forms—gamelan, Tuvan throat singing, 1970’s hard rock, and contemporary country music. Rose approaches all of this music with the same concentration and close attention she has always applied when listening to Mozart, Schubert, or Stravinsky, with an ear to harmonic and thematic development, structural complexity and integrity, clarity and precision of performance, etc. Though, in order to be an informed cosmopolitan listener, she duly studies the cultural context of each kind of music, learning about the particular ways in which it is listened to and appreciated within its “home” culture, when it comes to listening she practices

the particular mode of listening she has cultivated over years of listening to Bach and Brahms.

Rose finds, unsurprisingly, that her efforts are rewarded with varying degrees of satisfaction: for example, Tuvan throat-singing is fascinating and exotic, at least on a conceptual level, but in actually listening to it she finds herself either bored or annoyed by its meandering quality; most of the 70's hard rock she encounters (Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Uriah Heep) she finds plain moronic and crude—both musically and textually—though some of the more “progressive” artists (Jethro Tull, Rush, occasionally Led Zeppelin) she finds to have at least some more sophisticated grasp of form, rhythm, and harmony (even if most of the lyrics are still juvenile rubbish). In most cases, she complains that she is just not able to “get it” —she just does not hear what is supposed to be appealing about these musics. She comes away with the general impression that, though these styles may each be of some cultural value to their respective listener communities, on the whole none of them present the listener with the kind of rich and profound aesthetic experience found within the great works of the Western classical canon.

Patrick is also a long-time music lover, one with tastes informed by various kinds of contemporary rock, pop, and some jazz. The cosmopolitan project he takes up is rather more focused than that of Rose: he endeavors to develop an informed and rich appreciation of hip hop music—specifically, a brand of appreciation akin to what he believes to be experienced by members of the African-American community (or at least certain subsets of it). Patrick, a white University of Chicago student and resident of Hyde Park, a racially diverse neighborhood on Chicago's south side, is motivated to adopt such a project partly out of a desire to develop a better understanding and empathy for some of his African-American Hyde Park neighbors. He

diligently throws himself into the project, learning as much as he can about the history and culture of hip hop music and its significance within African-American communities, especially those living in urban areas like Chicago, and listening broadly and deeply across the range of the hip hop canon: Grandmaster Flash, N.W.A., Wu-Tang Clan, Dr. Dre, Missy Elliot, Jay-Z, et al. In doing so Patrick cultivates an authoritative taste for the aesthetic values that the music can offer.

However, he does not come to appreciate these various elements of hip hop as merely formal features of the music that may be valued by any acculturated music listener; Patrick's project is to try and appreciate them as features that have certain kinds of significance for members of the community he seeks to understand. He tries to "get inside" this culture—to perceive, interpret, and appreciate these features as he imagines a member of this community would. Patrick comes to feel that he is "down" with this particular community of hip hop listeners, that he hears and understands and values this music *just like they do*. He believes that he is able to directly "tap into" the experience of a listener that interprets the music in light of her daily struggles with being black and poor in America. Confident that he has come to identify with the experience of this community on a deep level, Patrick feels that he has attained a significant degree of empathy and understanding in the process, a form of truly stepping into the shoes of the other.

I have chosen to present these two particular examples in order to illustrate a crucial tension that emerges from the conditions of this project, one that may be expressed roughly in the following way. First, in endeavoring to engage in transcultural appreciation of artworks, the cosmopolitan is faced, on the one hand, with the challenge of placing herself in a certain appreciative position that is appropriate to the artwork,

a position that may be seen, ideally, as akin to that of a member of the work's "home culture", a task that will generally involve the adoption, to some degree, of certain modes of appreciation that are unfamiliar to the appreciator. On the other hand, it seems likely that the cosmopolitan will be often faced with cases in which there are practical or moral constraints on this endeavor - i.e., cases in which it seems that she either *cannot* occupy such a cultural perspective, or *should not* even try to occupy it. In the terms I will come to favor throughout this paper, the cosmopolitan must endeavor to find a virtuous way to negotiate this tension between *coming close* enough to the culture in question, while also keeping a proper *distance* from it. Both Rose and Patrick fail to do this in different ways.

I will argue that avoiding errors of the kind committed by Rose and Patrick involves taking up a posture of appreciation that may be characterized as one proper to a participant in a conversation: a posture that is open and responsive to, and seriously engaged with, the other-cultural artwork and/or community involved, while remaining mindful and respectful of the difference and distance between oneself and one's "interlocutor".

Rose's problem is not simply that she fails to like the music (it should not be incumbent on the cosmopolitan to like everything she encounters, if her engagement is to be serious and critical); it's that she fails to put herself in a posture of engagement that would facilitate a brand of appreciation appropriate to the cosmopolitan, one that could serve as a form of transcultural conversation. In short, Rose never successfully steps outside of her own accustomed mode of listening as a classical music connoisseur, regardless of whether or not that particular mode is appropriate to the object of her listening. This posture of listening is attentive and contemplative (that appropriate to the concert hall patron), one that seeks out and attends to certain

musical features (e.g., motivic and harmonic development, formal structure, etc) and tends to either discount or outright ignore others (e.g., timbre or texture of sound, the more visceral impact of features like danceable rhythms, noise, or high volume). It also tends to downplay the importance of a given piece's sociocultural meaning or function—in short, what might be referred to as its “extra-musical” significance—focusing primarily on its “purely musical” formal features instead.

In contrast, many of the styles Rose explores here are built around these neglected features (e.g., timbre in the case of throat-singing, volume and noise in the case of metal), or demand a mode of engagement more participatory or physical (e.g., metal and country), or are only fully appreciated in the context of their extra-musical function or significance (e.g., the ritualistic and court functions of gamelan, throat-singing's role in an animistic communion w/ the sounds of nature, etc). Yet Rose, working always within her one-size-fits-all classical listening mode, doesn't engage with any of this music on its own terms (or even meet it halfway), or strive to participate in, or learn from, another listening culture. As diligent and serious as she has been in her musical “travels”, the terms of engagement have firmly remained her own. We may even go so far as to characterize Rose's appreciative method as a form of *aesthetic imperialism*. All the musical artifacts she encounters are treated reductively as candidates for appreciation according solely to the criteria and categories of her home culture, whatever value they yield in these terms then being “mined”, if you will, in order to satisfy her particular musical interests.

This would seem to be a problem for *any* appreciator, but is an especial problem for the cosmopolitan: Rose's aesthetic imperialism constitutes a failure on her part to engage in anything we might be tempted to call a “conversation” with these other musical cultures. There doesn't seem to be

anything like an exchange here between her and some kind of “interlocutor”. It seems unlikely that Rose will come away from this with any increased understanding or empathy regarding these cultures—all she has learned is how her own way of listening and liking applies to a new set of cultural objects.

I propose that, unlike Rose, the virtuous aesthetic cosmopolitan lets her cultural knowledge of the art in question *inform* her appreciation; she doesn’t just *know* things about the other culture, she *participates* (to some extent) in it. This would seem to require that the cosmopolitan be open-minded and flexible enough to try on new modes of listening to, looking at, or reading artworks, and to be open to the possibility that the experience may *change* her to some degree: in terms of her taste, her beliefs about art or aesthetic value, or perhaps even in her customary appreciative practices.

So, one thing a conversational mode of art appreciation might require is this: That one appreciate the object at hand as if it were offered by an imagined interlocutor who makes certain recommendations as to how it may be appreciated (e.g., “Here, look at it this way”, “Try attending to these features”, “Put it in this context”, “Here’s what it means to us”, etc) and that one be willing to try out this recommended approach. This interlocutor could be either the author (or authors) of the work, or a member of a community that either produced the work or appreciates it in a culturally specific way (for the purposes of the cosmopolitan project, I propose it will often be the latter).

Patrick, on the other hand, is clearly *not* falling into Rose’s error: whereas Rose fails to “come close” enough to truly engage with her target cultures, he *is* engaging in a culturally-informed appreciation that may enable him to understand and appreciate not only a new form of music, but a new cultural perspective as well. He does not simply approach new music with his old acculturated listening habits, but strives to learn new modes of

appreciation appropriate to the music and its cultural context. But Patrick seems to have gone “too far” somehow. There seem to be two worries here, an epistemic and a moral one: First, his claim to be able to appreciate hip-hop *just like* the members of this community seems epistemically immodest, to the point of being brash or presumptuous. Second, his project seems invasive somehow, as if there’s something morally wrong with him even *trying* to achieve such a goal (regardless of whether or not it’s attainable). I will look more closely at each of these errors in turn.

Patrick’s claim to appreciate music “just like they do” clearly seems epistemically unjustified: he is implicitly laying claim to a kind of aesthetic authority or “cultural capital” here that just doesn’t seem to be his to claim. “Cultural capital” in this kind of context normally consists of various forms of knowledge and skill deployed in the process of listening to the music in question, expertise that can underwrite the fine-grained distinctions and well-informed judgments we expect from authoritative musical tastes. But in the case of Patrick’s claim, other forms of “capital” seem to be necessary. To be justified in claiming to appreciate the music *just like they do*, he may actually have to *be* a member of that community, to have a personal history as a member. Whatever the relevant membership conditions are here—identifying as African-American, claiming south Chicago as an origin, occupying a certain socioeconomic class, etc – Patrick clearly doesn’t satisfy them.

However, even if it *were* possible for Patrick to be epistemically justified in his claim, there is still the moral worry: that he is being *invasive* somehow in trying to take up this perspective, trespassing in a cultural sphere that is not *for him*, one to which he has not “earned” access, in a way. If we suppose that the kind of aesthetic appreciation Patrick wishes to share in is normally informed by one’s firsthand experience as

a member of a marginalized community, then he clearly seems to be trying to have such an experience “on the cheap.” He is trying to indulge in an experience engendered by a certain kind of strife, or even suffering, without undergoing that experience himself. This seems to display a lack of respect for, or at least recognition of, several things: of the difference between himself and the other; of the distance between their respective social situations, or levels of privilege; of the particularity of the other and her personal history, or of her right to claim certain cultural identities or goods by virtue of that history.

One may object that this moral problem seems to be more based in an asymmetry in power or privilege between Patrick and the other, rather than in any tension inherent to the cosmopolitan project itself. Such an asymmetry is certainly not inevitable in the project, even if it may often be an issue. So, what if there is no such asymmetry between appreciator and other, or what if the asymmetry goes the other way? Would the claim to experience an artwork “just like” the other does still be morally problematic?

To respond to this objection, we can return to the example of Carl Wilson and Celine Dion, a case in which this asymmetry does not appear to be present, at least *prima facie*. I contend that, if Wilson made the immodest Patrick-esque claim to appreciate Dion’s music *just like* her fans do (a claim he is actually at pains to disavow in his book), this would still be a moral flaw in his project, even without an asymmetry in social privilege. To return to the conversational metaphor: It seems that to make such a claim is to presume to speak *as* or *for* the other, as opposed to speaking *to* or *with* her. This is an improper posture for someone engaged in a conversation—it seems more akin to an act of spokespersonship or, worse, ventriloquism. One thing clearly necessary for holding a conversation is recognizing and maintaining the distinctness between oneself

and one's interlocutor. The point is to *engage* him, after all, not to *become* him. As we noted above, Patrick does not seem justified in claiming membership in this community, and so is not justified to speak *as* a member. But even if he could come to attain membership somehow, the project would seem to have changed: it would no longer be *transcultural* engagement, but now *intracultural*. It should probably be expected that new cultural identities or affiliations may be incidentally forged in the course of pursuing the cosmopolitan project, but this is not its primary goal (at least as I've outlined the project herein).

Speaking *for* the other is also presumptuous on Patrick's part. One cannot simply *claim* the authority or right to speak for the other, even on the basis of great knowledge or expertise; it must be *granted* to one (either directly or indirectly) by the one for whom one would speak. This deferential aspect of speaking for another is reflected in the way we often preface the act: "*If I may speak for so-and-so...*" What precise form (implicit or explicit) such granting would have to take in either Patrick's or Wilson's case is not clear, but it doesn't seem to have occurred in Patrick's, at any rate. But again, *even if* it were granted, the project would have then changed: cultural ambassadorship is *not* a goal of the cosmopolitan project. Dialogue is again being replaced by a monologue here, as if the other were absent or unable to speak for herself, somehow.

So, where Rose failed to come sufficiently close in her appreciation, Patrick has failed to "keep his distance." This has manifested not only in his epistemic immodesty, on the one hand, but also (and perhaps more crucially) in his moral failure to recognize and respect the difference between himself and his interlocutor.

So, how may one avoid Patrick's error? To return to our conversational model of appreciation, we should ask how should one respond to our imagined interlocutor's recommendation

to appreciate the offered object in “this way.” One’s figurative response should ideally reflect the modesty and respect that are lacking in Patrick’s case: something like “Here’s what I get when I listen that way, does it square with your experience?”, or “I’ve tried, but I don’t hear it – or I don’t see the value in it – am I missing something?” In other words, the spirit of one’s appreciation should be deferential and open-ended in this way, the way a good conversationalist responds to her interlocutor in a manner designed to keep the conversation *going*, not to bring it to a hasty conclusion. Patrick seems to be trying to do the latter with his declaration of, “There, I’ve gotten it, I can appreciate this *just like* you do!” He tries to rush his transcultural conversation to an unwarranted end, whereas Rose never seems to start hers. In the end it seems that this tension I have been exploring within the aesthetic cosmopolitan project has its source in the conversational nature of the project itself. It is a tension that the conversationalist and the cosmopolitan alike need to manage carefully if they are to carry out their respective projects well.

NOTES

- ¹ Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, 33 1/3. (New York: Continuum), 2007.
- ² *Ibid.*, 155.
- ³ I use the term "culture" here in a broad sense, one that encompasses communities constituted according to nationality, region, language, ethnicity, religion, or even just particular tastes or preferences (e.g., fans of Céline Dion's music). Being an aesthetic cosmopolitan will thereby involve engagement with art that is more or less culturally "proximate" to one, depending on just how much one has in common (in the relevant senses) with members of that community.
- ⁴ Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (E. N. Zalta. Stanford, CA, Metaphysics Research Lab).
- ⁵ Pauline Kleingeld, "Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth Century Germany", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (July 1999), 507.
- ⁶ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapter 5, and *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), especially chapter 2, and Mitchell Aboulafia, *Transcendence: On Self-Determination and Cosmopolitanism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
- ⁷ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 222.