

Cosmopolitanism, Globalization, and Art
Margaret A. McLaren
mmclaren@rollins.edu
Rollins College

In our current era of globalization, the issue of cosmopolitanism holds special significance. The increasing frequency of cross-cultural interaction through media, cultural representations, travel, and immigration means most people have a familiarity with cultures other than their own. This multicultural familiarity offers a perspective on the world that can de-center one's own ethnocentric worldview. Traditional boundaries of nation-state no longer hold the same significance in our interconnected, interdependent, globalized world. In a prescient comment made in the 1970's Foucault remarked that we invested the state with more significance than it deserved.¹ The declining importance of the nation-state, combined with cultural hybridity, seem to suggest that it is time for a new organizing principle or concept that accounts for cross-border interactions, cultural multiplicity within national boundaries, and individual cultural hybridity. Cosmopolitanism seems to be a promising concept that captures the ideas of going beyond national and cultural borders. Discussions of cosmopolitanism, however, sometimes seem to suggest that in order to be cosmopolitan, individuals must transcend their own culture and all particular cultures by identifying with a common, universal humanity. Correspondingly, if individuals identify with and adhere to their own local culture, they are seen as parochial and anti-cosmopolitan.² Yet cosmopolitanism is also associated with knowledge of difference and familiarity with other cultures. Within the concept of cosmopolitanism there seems to be an equivocation between taking difference seriously, and transcending difference.

In other words, cosmopolitanism embodies two ideals, the ideal of universal moral concern and the respect for legitimate difference.³ In part because of this tension between universality and particularity, cosmopolitanism raises interesting questions about the production, function, ownership, and reception of art. In his book, *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the notion of “cultural patrimony” in relation to art objects from particular cultures. He argues against the idea of art as cultural property, citing problems with the idea of an object belonging to “a people.” He advocates a cosmopolitan view of art that goes beyond this notion of local art and cultural patrimony, and instead requires that we identify with the global community of humanity, and thus share art as widely as possible.

I argue that the two different strands of cosmopolitanism, the task of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity, and the task of transcending culture, what I will call the “universalizing impulse,” are in tension with one another. The latter view of cosmopolitanism is the prevalent view and can be understood as overcoming one’s attachments and allegiances to one’s particular groups—family, ethnic group, culture, country—in order to identify with the human community in general. In my view, this aligns cosmopolitanism with the traditional liberal position in political theory, abstracting from the particularity of identity and community in a move toward the universal. As has often been argued this move masks the particularity of liberalism, which sees itself as neutral and universal, rather than specifically located with its own history and cultural location. The assumption of neutrality by liberalism works to the disadvantage of those with minority identities because it simply takes the dominant position as neutral and universal. When proponents of this type of cosmopolitanism ask

individuals to identify with the human community rather than their local, particular communities it re-inscribes the unequal power that already exists between dominant and minority communities. This strand of cosmopolitanism makes the same mistake as liberalism, viewing universality as the ultimate ethical and political goal. I will not rehearse here the many critiques of liberalism, for instance, the exclusionary nature of social contract theory, its unrealistic notion of the individual as abstracted from social context, and devoid of any particular features, and its focus on negative rights.⁴ This position fails to account for the historical tendencies of colonialism to use reason and moral capacity to exclude women, and non-White non-Europeans from the human community. In fact, these are the very features cosmopolitanism relies upon for a shared human identification. Proponents of this aspect of cosmopolitanism do not seem to recognize that mobility of both people and objects across national boundaries is asymmetrical.

Cosmopolitanism provides a general theoretical framework in which to situate debates about cultural heritage and cultural property because art is both a representation of the culturally specific and appeals to universal humanity. As mentioned, Appiah defends a cosmopolitan view of art (also known as the internationalist position) against the idea of cultural patrimony, also called the cultural nationalist position. The cultural patrimony position, based on UNESCO declarations and other international documents, can be defined in simple terms as, “cultural property [should] be regarded as the property of its culture.”⁵ In 1970 in Paris at the general conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization the “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of

Cultural Property” was adopted; it reads in part: “cultural property constitutes one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture, and its true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest possible information regarding its origin, history and traditional setting...it is essential for every State to become increasingly alive to the moral obligations to respect its own cultural heritage.”

The cultural patrimony position lends support to cases in which the art or artifact is central to a cultural group’s understanding of themselves and their history. Moreover, in many (but not all) cases contested objects were acquired under less than ideal (although not always illegal) circumstances such as war, invasion, or imperialism. Even when cultural property is acquired legally, there may be compelling ethical reasons to return it, especially in light of the history of imperialism. For instance, it seems justified to return cultural artifacts from the Global South that became the property of European countries through invasion and war.

Appiah presents three lines of argument to justify his position: first, he argues that the term culture is ambiguous; second, he point out that social groups lack continuity and nation-states are unstable; third, he believes that those best situated to preserve art and artifacts ought to do so. In spite of recognizing the historical trend of the wrongful acquisition of cultural artifacts and objet d’art, Appiah problematizes the notion of cultural patrimony, arguing that it is based on a conflation of “culture.” On the one hand, culture simply means cultural artifact, a product of human creativity that gains significance through social conventions and historical context, i.e. the way we use arts and culture. On the other hand, culture refers to the specific social group to which the

artifacts belong, e.g. the French, Kenyans, Chinese, etc., i.e. the way an anthropologist might use culture.

Appiah believes that art should be seen as the “cultural patrimony of humankind.”⁶ He bases his argument for cosmopolitanism on a universal human community, stating the connection to art “neglected in talk of cultural patrimony, is the connection not through identity, but despite difference.” Ultimately, Appiah argues, the “connection [to art] through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity.”⁷

Appiah’s second line of argument questions nation states legitimacy to claim ownership of cultural property that was (1) created prior to the existence of the nation state, or that was (2) produced by a group of people that no longer exist, or that was (3) produced by a specific ethnic or cultural group that is not co-extensive with the nation state. He points out that many cultural artifacts were produced before the emergence of nation states, and so he believes it makes little sense to claim that a cultural artifact produced by the Vikings belong to Norway, or to the Norwegians since Norway did not exist when the object was produced. Likewise with the infamous Elgin marbles, he points out that the Athenians made them prior to the existence of Greece. So, he concludes the notion of cultural patrimony is problematic because art and artifacts created prior to the instituting of nations would end up belonging to groups that did not actually produce them. In some cases, art or artifacts are produced by indigenous groups whose membership is not co-extensive with the nation state and for whom the significance of the object may be integral to those in the community. Because of the instability of nation states, the lack of continuity of social groups and the sub-groups within nation states,

Appiah believes that the idea of art as cultural property is problematic because it gives *nations* the power to regulate the export of art and artifacts. Because of this, Appiah argues that rather than the idea of cultural patrimony, art should be circulated as widely as possible, creating a “cosmopolitan aesthetic experience.”⁸ The cosmopolitan or internationalist position on cultural property does not fully address the third case, which questions nations right to control cultural property of indigenous peoples not so that it can be controlled by world museums, but so that the indigenous people who created it have control over it. In contrast to the internationalists (cosmopolitans) and the nationalists (cultural patrimony position) Joe Watkins calls this third group the “cultural intra-nationalists.” Cultural intra-nationalists are distinct groups within a larger governmental body galvanized by social, cultural, religious or other factors.⁹ Cultural intra-nationalists feel that they should have the right to control their own property, just as the nationalist do. Indigenous peoples are often marginalized: “The interruption of land tenure by colonizing interlopers, the suppression of native language by a dominant society that seeks to integrate dissimilar cultures into a singular ‘homogeneous’ one, the perception by their ‘conquerors’ that indigenous people are an inferior race, and the social and economic marginalization of the group as a whole all contribute to the ongoing perception of Indigenous populations as second-class citizens.”¹⁰ Oftentimes the nationalist position overshadows the intra-nationalist position by constructing a homogenous national identity, or by appropriating indigenous artifacts from their original locations to a central location, such as the archeological objects in Mexico City’s National Museum of Anthropology. Yet the logic of the nationalist position—control of

cultural property by its creators--supports the intra-nationalist position in a way that the internationalist (cosmopolitan) position of world heritage does not.

Appiah's third line of argument to support cosmopolitanism is the economic argument. He claims that because all humans have an interest in preserving the cultural heritage of humankind, art and artifacts should stay in places where they can be best cared for and preserved. Practically, this means that contested objects will most likely stay in the museums or the private collections where they are currently held. (This is sometimes called the retentionist, as opposed to the restitutionist position.)

However, his position leaves many issues unexamined. For example, the well-known controversy about the Elgin marbles reveals that the cosmopolitan approach to art that Appiah advocates will often come down on the side of the powerful.¹¹ Since the early 1980's the Greek government has requested that the British museum return the Parthenon sculptures. However, the British Museum refuses to do so claiming that, "the Parthenon sculptures are integral to the Museum's purpose as a world museum telling the story of human cultural achievement."¹² Appiah explicitly agrees with this position, "However self-serving it may seem, the British Museum's claim to be a repository of the heritage not of Britain but of the world seems to me exactly right."¹³ To be fair, he does say that if the British Museum serves as a repository of world heritage, then it should make this heritage as widely accessible as possible, through traveling exhibitions, books and the web. It seems unlikely, that at least in this case, the Parthenon Sculptures will travel. They are displayed in three custom-made very large rooms; they are heavy and fragile. So, the best the British Museum can do to share this human heritage as widely as possible is to remain free and open to the public. But who has access to the British

Museum? Those who have access live in Great Britain, or have the financial resources to travel there. This does not seem like a compelling argument for any one country or museum to claim that they are best situated to be “a world museum telling the story of human cultural achievement.”¹⁴ This is further reinforced because for those with the financial resources to travel, and the socio-economic privilege to get an education, museums may provide part of the incentive to travel to a certain destination. This perpetuates the inequities among countries, e.g., if part of the justification that the British Museum gives for keeping the Parthenon sculptures is that it is better suited to preserve them because of the economic and material resources it enjoys, keeping the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum means that Greece does not have the opportunity to raise revenue from its world famous contribution to human heritage. This means that the history of colonialism and imperialism perpetuates itself. Stronger, wealthier countries that have the resources to buy and preserve art from less well off nations continue to assert their right to tell the story of human cultural achievement, with wealthier countries appropriating the stories of less wealthy nations.

A second problem arises with the universalizing view of cosmopolitan art. If art speaks to our common humanity, this implies that it is judged by universal standards. But as pointed out above, the presumed neutrality of universal standards has been criticized as reflecting the Euro-centric dominant view. In fact, universality has often been used as the criteria to define art, and to distinguish it from crafts, or cultural artifacts.¹⁵ Defining art as cosmopolitan and universal may inadvertently serve to perpetuate the status quo, judging artistic merit on previous styles and traditions in the mainstream art world. Carol Jacobsen calls this “covert censorship”—“the kind of

ensorship oppressed groups experience, where no one bans the work, exactly, it's just that it's not good enough to be published, or not appropriate for this gallery, or not the kind of job our print shop wants right now."¹⁶ An approach to art that neglects the struggle over the standards for and definition of art runs the risk of simply retelling the human story in the same way, from the same perspective of the dominant ruling class. This is the risk associated with Appiah's version of cosmopolitanism.

At first glance, Appiah's cosmopolitan approach to art as a creative human enterprise that is international in its inspiration, universal in its appeal, and unfettered by national borders is attractive in many ways. He addresses historical and cultural issues of the continuity of a people and subsequent right to ownership, noting that in cases of Antiquities the creation of the object was prior to the nation. And he rightly points out that oftentimes, art is created by an ethnic group whose membership is not co-extensive with the population of a nation. He also addresses economic issues, claiming that in cases where countries are unable to properly preserve and display their art and artifacts, it serves all of humanity (including the country in question) better for another country to buy these objets d'arts and put them in museums. While in particular cases this may be true, I believe that Appiah's cosmopolitan approach to art exhibits what I have called "the universalizing impulse." He uses cosmopolitanism as the great equalizer, as a concept that stands for our common denominator, humanity. But this overlooks the possible costs to nations and peoples who hold less powerful, non-dominant positions, both in terms of preserving art and creating it.

Cosmopolitanism bases ethical obligations on sameness and commonality and opposes ownership and control of cultural property by the group that created it or the

territory in which it was found. It does not give credence to social group differences, and the differential positions that individuals or groups may hold on the basis of a particular social group membership. This makes it hard to address the systemic forces that perpetuate social inequality, such as cultural imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class based oppression. Without serious examination of the systems of oppression and exploitation, it will be difficult to truly fulfill our ethical obligations. Moreover, recognition of the real differences of social locations and histories of both individuals and groups makes it less plausible to make our commonalities the basis of our ethical concern. More often than not, social justice requires instead the recognition of difference and the addressing of past harms.

¹ *Security, Territory and Population*, 109.

² Here I am using these terms to express contrasting worldviews or attitudes. Sheldon Pollock contrasts cosmopolitanism to the vernacular in his alternative historical exploration of cosmopolitanism, “Cosmopolitanism and the Vernacular in History” in Breckenridge, et. al.

³ Appiah, xv.

⁴ For an argument about the exclusion of women from the social contact see Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, for an argument about the exclusion of people of color from the social contract, see *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills. There are many feminists who address this issue, see for example, Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other.” The locus classicus of this argument can be found in Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.”

⁵ Appiah, 118.

⁶ Appiah, 125.

⁷ Appiah, 135.

⁸ Appiah, 124.

⁹ See Watkins, p. 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹ The Elgin marbles, so called because in the early 19th century Lord Elgin removed them from Greece, are sculptures that adorned the Parthenon. These marble reliefs were originally intrinsic parts of the Parthenon, often on pediments or along entablatures and usually depicting a story. The Parthenon itself has a complex history. Originally built almost 2,500 years ago as a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena, it was subsequently the church of the Virgin Mary, and then a mosque, before falling into disrepair and becoming an archeological ruin. By the time Lord Elgin, British

Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, began removing the sculptures in 1801, only half of the original sculptures remained. In 1816, the British Museum acquired the sculptures from Lord Elgin, and since 1817 the Parthenon sculptures have been on permanent public display. While sculptures from the Parthenon can be seen at 8 different countries in addition to Greece, the majority of the sculptures are split between Britain and Greece.

¹² The British Museum, pamphlet on The Parthenon Sculptures, January 2008.

¹³ Appiah, 130.

¹⁴ British Museum pamphlet, January 2008.

¹⁵ For example, at one time First Nations people in British Columbia, Canada were arrested for participating in potlatch ceremonies. During the raids, several works of art were confiscated, turning up later in museums or as part of a private collection. However, later the Vancouver Art Gallery and other institutions refused to buy the work of First Nations artists who used traditional styles, saying it was anthropology, not art. Yet at the same time, the Vancouver Gallery was buying work by white artists who used traditional First Nations forms and imagery in combination with European styles. This example is taken from an essay on art and censorship, "Kiss and Tell" in the *Feminist Philosophy Reader*, 215.

¹⁶ Quoted in "Kiss and Tell," 238.

References

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in A World of Strangers* (Norton: New York, 2006).

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Whose Culture Is It?" in *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 53, No. 2 February 2006.

Bailey, Alison and Chris Cuomo, eds. *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 2008)

Bar On, Ami and Ann Ferguson, Eds. *Daring to be Good: essays in feminist ethico-politics* (Routledge: New York, 1998)

Breckenridge, Carol, et. al. *Cosmopolitanism*. (Duke University Press: Durham, North Carolina, 2002).

Gutmann, Amy, ed. *Multiculturalism* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1994).

Lugones, Maria. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Rowman and Littlefield: New York, 2003).

Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (Routledge: New York, 1997)

Watson, Joe. "Cultural Nationalists, Internationalist, and 'Intra-nationalists': Who's Right and Whose Right?" in *International Journal of Cultural Property* (2005) 12:78-94.