

The Political Aesthetics of Detachment: Modernism, Autonomy and the Idea of the Transnational

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STUDIES OF TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FORMATIONS SHARE A COMMON DESIRE TO TRACE affiliations, ‘multiple identifications’, and modes of belonging that transgress real or imagined national borders—formations that are attractive to contemporary theorists because they challenge the coherence of conventional notions of identity and culture.¹ They share with the ‘new’ cosmopolitanism discourse a desire to reassess the politics of identity, not by rejecting the reality of shared identities but by acknowledging a way of living that participates in multiple collectives—or as James Clifford has put it, ‘a continuum of sociospatial attachments’ (367)—that morph and shift over time. With the new focus on multiple affiliations have come new models and forms of representation in both historical and ethnographic scholarship, moving away from the ‘soil and roots’ approach to cultural origin—which often follows a

¹ The conception of the ‘transnational’ in terms of multiple affiliation has been especially prevalent in migration studies, prompted in part by the Economic and Social Research Council-funded project ‘Transnational Communities’ (1997-2003), directed by Steven Vertovec. See for example the programme’s website <http://transcomm.ox.ac.uk>, and also Vertovec’s *Transnationalism*; ‘Transnationalism and Identity’; and ‘Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism’. Also see Kennedy and Roudometof. For a contrasting conceptualisation of the transnational that takes into account both attachments as well as repulsions, from the fields of political and economic history, see Clavin.

territorialised logic of autochthony²—towards shapes that are decentered and non-hierarchical, such as networks or honeycombs (Clavin). This shift encourages a focus on moments of connectivity; on the marginal space of the ‘in-between’; and on the relational, all of which are aimed at de-essentialising identity, and destabilising categories such as ‘society’ and ‘culture’.³

Studies of transnational social formations that combine a specific critical mandate and a desire to reveal affiliations that have been obscured by nation-oriented modes of scholarship tend to emphasise either dislocation and trauma on the one hand, or a sense of overcoming or transcendence, on the other—a sense that despite the migrant experience involving a high degree of alienation and the loss of attachments, other affiliations are forged through necessity or opportunity, either with the members of a particular group (for example, other members of a diaspora community), or with an imagined ‘global’ community. This tendency can be described in terms of what Christien van den Anker identified as the ‘two extremes of cosmopolitan identity’—that is, being ‘at home everywhere’ and ‘being from nowhere’ (79). Far from being polar ‘extremes’ however, both of these rhetorical modes presuppose a desire for associations or affiliations of some kind, and rarely focus on the motivation and effects of the action of deliberate detachment or disaffiliation. Indeed, tracing transnational associations and modes of belonging often seems to take the human desire for affiliation as axiomatic. And while the notion of ‘networks’ provides a great deal of interpretive insight, even they are made up of nodes (of belonging), which are interconnected via axes (of association), favoring connections rather than conscious withdrawals or contrived ruptures, or instances where transnational experiences are deliberately cultivated as a part of the critical technique of defamiliarisation.

By contrast, I would like to attempt to recover a type of transnational experience that does not involve seeking after a sense of belonging, but rather supports a normative aspiration for detachment or withdrawal. The type of transnational experience that supports this aspiration is most often cultivated rather than coerced—cultivated not necessarily for the purpose of expanding the benefits of citizenship to a global humanity (more akin to cosmopolitanism), but rather as a means by which to imagine a radically different form of sociality altogether.

² In describing the tendency towards autochthony in determining which texts are the legitimate objects of Victorian literary studies, for example, Caroline Levine has noted that current practice seems to assume that ‘as long as the author is born in the right space, and the text born at the right time, there is no question of proper belonging’, whether or not the author is a British national, or even lived most of their life in Britain (651).

³ Indeed these terms might be thought of, after Latour, as ‘the name that has been pasted onto certain sections of certain networks, associations that are so sparse and fragile that they would have escaped attention altogether if everything had not been attributed to them’ (Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), cited in Piekut 192).

It is worth noting from the outset that the terms ‘attachment’, ‘affiliation’, ‘engagement’ and ‘association’ are by no means synonymous, and we must be careful not to use these terms uncritically. Equally, their erstwhile counter-terms ‘detachment’, ‘disaffiliation’, ‘disengagement’ and also ‘autonomy’ do not necessarily indicate their opposites. Both ‘attachment’ and ‘affiliation’ give a sense of a bond—such as between parent and child—that lends a veneer of naturalness or inevitability when used to describe the relationship between a citizen and the state (in the same way that ‘naturalisation’ describes the admission of a foreign subject into the rights of the native citizen). Yet there is a difference in that ‘attachment’ can imply a coercive aspect to the relationship it describes, while ‘affiliation’ tends to indicate a more voluntary connection (as does ‘association’, according to their respective definitions in the *OED*). My use of the term ‘detachment’ in my title and elsewhere then, is by no means intended to imply a posture of ‘disengagement’, as we shall see; rather, it involves an active process requiring some kind of effort or conscious decision to withdraw from the coercive bonding of attachment. My preference for the term ‘detachment’ is indebted to Amanda Anderson’s use of the term in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001), where she sketched the term’s potential to draw together certain intellectual practices (such as critical reason, aspirations toward impartiality or objectivity, and disinterestedness) with aspects of style (both literary style and ‘practices of the self’) in the Victorian literary context (7). Despite the fact that the idea of the transnational by itself does not imply a specific ethical stance in the same way as cosmopolitanism, my use of the term detachment here aims to highlight an aspect of transnational experience that does engage a combination of intellectual, ethical and aesthetic practices. Specifically, detachment can indicate a form of aestheticism, and therefore it is of special significance to advocates of aesthetic autonomy. With this in mind, the following will focus on reappraisals of aesthetic autonomy in scholarship on modernism in music and literature in particular, arguing that insights from these reappraisals can illuminate the idea of the transnational in new or under-explored ways.

Recovering the link between cultivated detachment and the transnational involves bringing together ideas from studies of diaspora, migration and postcolonial cultural production on the one hand, and studies of autonomy, cosmopolitan ‘style’ and modernism in the arts, on the other. The potential dialogue between these two literatures is not without its challenges, given that the types of research in the former categories has tended to focus on vernacular forms of cultural production and consumption (particularly in music, though perhaps less so in literature), while the latter has dealt predominantly with ‘elite’ forms. The former has often involved ethnographic study of living cultures (with an awareness of space at the forefront), while the latter has typically been a

historical field, focusing particularly on the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries (with an awareness of time at the forefront). Further to these schematic differences, the former might be said to tend towards examining groups, while the latter tends to focus on exemplary individuals.

Where these two literatures *have* met, the idea of the transnational has typically served as a means to challenge Euro-centric processes of canon-building (for example by bringing into view 'alternative' modernisms of non-European, or more broadly non-Western cultures); as a component of 'East/West Comparativism'; as a lens through which to view the relationship between postcolonial literatures and those of 'high' modernism; or as a corrective to practices of close reading that tend to neglect vernacular cultural forms and the diversity of the patterns of their production and consumption.⁴ These tendencies have proceeded from a latent skepticism toward modernist autonomy, and the scholarly practices that partake of this ideology. Yet while there has been a recent renewal with respect to the claims of autonomy as a viable political project, these developments are yet to see a substantial intervention into studies of the transnational. With this in mind, another way to cast my inquiry here would be to ask what can recent developments in the field of modernism studies, and particularly the reappraisals of autonomy, offer our understanding of the transnational?

The following will suggest that recent reappraisals of autonomy can illuminate the idea of the transnational in a number of ways. First, the cultivation of transnational experiences might be productively viewed as part of a procedure to achieve detachment, with detachment being construed as an epistemic virtue in some areas of the arts historically, as well as in recent humanistic scholarship. Second, the thematisation of transnational experiences in artwork has often extended beyond a work's substantive content, to aspects of style. Third, transnational artistic institutions have sometimes shown a vested interest in supporting certain artistic techniques or styles that are associated with, or have the effect of, deterritorialisation. And fourth, the impact of transnational perspectives on 'style' extends beyond artistic technique, to matters of lifestyle, posture or standpoint in relation to artists themselves.

After extrapolating a little further the limitations with current notions of the transnational that trace affiliations to the exclusion of instances of voluntary detachment, I will then explore the discursive links between aesthetic autonomy and the transnational historically, before outlining some problems and

⁴ These tendencies have been emblemised in reference works such as Wollaeger and Eatough, and Brooker and Thacker, but also elsewhere, such as in Patterson, and Qian, respectively.

potentialities of these claims, and finally suggesting the ways in which taking these claims seriously can illuminate the radical potential of the transnational.

The Limitations of Conceiving the Transnational as Attachment

The pre-eminence of tracing attachments—either traumatically lost or heroically forged anew—as a part of the conceptualisation of the transnational in migration studies, is only problematic in so far as it casts the transnational as a mere surrogate for those things that were formerly understood to be delivered by the state, or by other smaller units of organisation. This is most clear in relation to migrant rights protection, where international conventions have been aimed at protecting rights that either the ‘home’ state or receiving state have failed to protect—and as Van den Anker has noted on this point, ‘in practice [Hannah] Arendt is vindicated for holding that the right to citizenship is the only human right of value, as it holds the key to all other rights’ (89). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt argued that there was an inextricable link between the ‘Rights of Man’—a notion that crystallised at the end of the eighteenth century—and the idea of the sovereignty of the people, linking the protection of rights to the degree to which ‘the people’ are self-governing. She showed how because these rights were based on the authority of Man (as distinct from a monarch, or ‘God’s command’) and there was no external authority invoked to ensure their protection, the protection of these rights fell to ‘the people’, whose sovereignty was similarly based on the authority of Man. Given the prevalence of the association between ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ in the period after the French Revolution, Arendt argued, the nation became the source of protection of the supposedly inalienable ‘Rights of Man’, so that when national borders in Europe began to disintegrate in the early twentieth century, masses of stateless people found themselves cut adrift from any external authority that could recognise their humanity:

The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities—but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them. (295-6)

Though the matter of migrant rights protection is of course different from the matter of statelessness, there is still a similar sense in which our response should be to reconstitute or reinstate that which has been lost in the process of losing a homeland. Arendt’s logic clarifies a possible basis for the contemporary scholarly

preoccupation with loss and reconstitution—through international structures or a stronger ethic of hospitality, for example—in recent transnational studies.

The loss and regaining of rights is only one aspect of this tendency to view the transnational as a surrogate for the national. For the composer Stefan Wolpe—a close acquaintance of Arendt’s circle in mid-century New York—statelessness meant the loss of his place in human history. As a Jewish composer who was actively involved in political agitation in Germany in the early 1930s, Wolpe was forced into exile when Hitler took power, settling first in Vienna before being again compelled to flee, first to Palestine, and then finally emigrating to America, settling in New York City in 1938. There he met Arendt at the Eight Street Artists’ Club—a group associated with abstract Expressionism—and collaborated with jazz musicians and political activists, such as George Russell, Charlie Parker and Yoko Ono. In a recent study of Wolpe’s life and work by Brigid Cohen, the composer’s exile has been cast as constitutive of his eclectic compositional style, which together with his writings amounts to a ‘project of testament’ (*Limits of National History* 190). In Cohen’s account, Wolpe’s story is undeniably one of redemption, as he is shown to have harnessed his exilic identity to forge a community of experimental artists and thinkers, drawn together by a shared desire to promote tolerance of difference. Wolpe finds his voice—his individuality—after having been denied it as one of Arendt’s ‘voiceless’ and stateless persons, and he did so by fostering community: ‘Wolpe’s community affiliations, optimism, and “will to connect” worked as stabilizing resources and symbols of identity in the midst of extreme upheaval’ (Cohen, *Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora* 5).

In positioning Wolpe’s art as part of a broader cosmopolitan agenda that issued from his transnational lifestyle, the revolutionary potential of abstract art is merely put to the service of a seemingly integral desire for political participation and self-determination (or ‘self-narration’, in Cohen’s terms). In this account of the transnational aesthetic of modernism—namely the idea that migration was a constitutive element in the development of modernist style—the transnational is thus made to perform the role that the nation should have done but failed to do, leaving the nation still very much at the center (though an absent center) of the study (Collins and Gooley). In so doing, Cohen’s analysis, and others like it, fall foul of what Patricia Clavin described as the ‘tendency in the literature to date to present transnational encounters as consistently progressive and co-operative in character’ (Clavin 423). What follows seeks to further this type of criticism of the current focus on attachments and co-operative connections in studies of

transnational 'communities' by highlighting the role of transnational experience in the cultivation of a negative politics of autonomy and detachment historically.⁵

The Relationship Between Detachment, Modernism, Autonomy and the Transnational

Discussions of the transnational character of 'modernism' often proceed along colonial lines, or in terms of various types of East-West or North-South interaction. For example, the fascination of many European modernist artists with the 'oriental', the 'exotic', and the 'primitive', and the central role that this fascination played in the formation of modernist style—including in buttressing a sense of defamiliarisation—is well documented (Barkan and Bush; Born and Hesmondhalgh; Sheppard; Locke). There has also been a great deal of attention given to excavating non-Western responses to the conditions of modernity in the early-twentieth century, proceeding from a desire to expand and pluralise our understanding of the cultural production of this period. In these contexts, transnational mobility is generally viewed as facilitating an encounter with difference—an encounter that serves to engender some kind of change in the self. This change, when it results in an expanded perspective, might be described as a form of cosmopolitanism, and indeed the links between modernist style and an ethics of cosmopolitanism has been the subject of much recent interest (Walkowitz). Yet more often than not, this expansion has been cast as co-existing with a rooted and committed identification with local culture, and rarely is it seen as a process for de-naturalising attachments altogether (Hart; Esty).

By contrast, a different stream of critical literature has sought to extrapolate the various forms of detachment that became influential in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century intellectual life of Europe. This literature proceeds from a revisionist impulse, offering reappraisals of forms of detachment that have been the subject of strident critique in 'postmodern' scholarship, particularly those forms associated with modernist claims towards aesthetic autonomy—critiques that Björn Heile has called 'modernism bashing' ('Darmstadt as Other'; see also Borio). There is a palpable sense in which autonomy might yet have value as a political and aesthetic position, despite its pejorative associations with decadence and elitism in the early twentieth century; with extremist right-wing politics in the mid-twentieth century; with the subversion of liberal democracy and global capitalism in the later twentieth century; and with a lack of social responsibility in contemporary scholarly practice from a cultural studies point of view.

⁵ My terminology here is different from the notion of a 'negative dialectical politics of autonomy and interrelatedness' that Matthew Hart used to describe the experiments of modernist poets in constructing 'synthetic vernaculars', with the tension of local attachments and global concern implicit in these constructs (Hart 5).

In musicology, the paradigmatic modernism ‘basher’ has been Richard Taruskin, who has not only been critical of historical claims that artworks can be autonomous in the sense of transcending their social and political context, or being free from ideology, but also of claims about the autonomy of artists themselves. Citing E.T.A. Hoffman’s idealisation of autonomy in his famous essay on Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (published in 1810), Taruskin made the by-now familiar argument that the idea that it is the

artists as well as the art that achieves autonomy under the Romantic dispensation, was a response to a sudden change in the fortunes of artists, who found themselves socially emancipated—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say socially abandoned—with the collapse of the patronage system. It received another terrific if fortuitous boost from the accident of Beethoven’s deafness, which not only turned the composer’s biography into a drama of struggle and victory, but effectively removed him from this world—that is, the world of daily musical business in which composers functioned visibly as performers—and turned him into a commanding unseen presence. Beethoven’s unsought social isolation became an emblem of the artist’s new station, one that all artists now had to emulate. (167)

Taruskin traced these notions as they were successively embraced by composers and music philosophers for increasingly political ends, culminating in the unlikely and momentary intellectual convergence of Hans Pfitzner, Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno, all of whom at one time adhered to the notion of aesthetic autonomy, though to very different political ends of course.

Taruskin’s acrid and ongoing critique of autonomy (and indeed what has been described as his attempted ‘erasure of modernism’) has come under increasing pressure, effectively propagating the development of various counter-positions.⁶ Even earlier however, there were sophisticated arguments being made in defense of the aesthetic, particularly—and perhaps not without an element of self-interest—from scholars of music theory. For example, Joel Galand, responding to an earlier debate about ‘postmodern musicology’ involving Lawrence Kramer and Gary Tomlinson, argued passionately for a conception of the aesthetic that did not simply polarise the position of an artwork’s supposed autonomy against an artwork’s supposed ‘worldliness’:

⁶ Some of the most persuasive responses to Taruskin’s approach to the issue of modernist autonomy can be found in Harper-Scott, and Gallope. For a suggestion of what the reappraisals of autonomy might mean for musicological scholarship more generally see Currie, and Galand. For an interesting historicisation of Taruskin’s position in this regard see Shreffler, ‘Cold War Dissonance’.

It is tempting to dismiss Enlightenment aesthetics on the grounds that it entails a false universalization of subjective experience that verges on an ethics of mastery and possession. But such mastery would involve treating the other as a thing, a tool, a means rather than an end. On the contrary, *the aesthetic intuition that our rational and moral agency might be projected on to others gives us a communicative ground, a free intersubjective space for encounters, for persuasion, criticism, and influence*—in short, for a discussion that, like Kant's reflective judgment, does not depend on a rule. Without saving some space for the relative autonomy of aesthetic experience, not only might we lose the critical function of art, but Tomlinson's sublime vision of a commitment to 'a thousand different musics'—and to their makers—will have given up its role as a regulative demand and become an empty utopia. (Galand 97, emphasis added)

A similar vein of reappraisal has taken place in literary studies, especially across late-Victorian and modernism studies. One of the foremost theorists of forms of 'detachment' in recent years has been Amanda Anderson, as I mentioned earlier. For Anderson, detachment encompasses the intimate relationship between ethos and method, or moral self-conception and procedure, in a way that the term 'cosmopolitan' does less well. It can apply equally to describing historical practices (in her case, from the Victorian context) of scientific observation, social critique, and artistic practice, as well as serving as a critique of current scholarly methods. As such, her project is not only a historically descriptive one, but a polemical suggestion regarding the possibility of objectivity in scholarship, a question that she addresses more directly in her subsequent book *The Way We Argue Now*. Reviving the question of the possibility of detachment and autonomy in these kinds of terms, then, involves challenging the critique of Enlightenment reason that has shaped cultural studies for many decades. Anderson's critique of contemporary scholarly practices resonates with the revival of interest in autonomy within modernism studies more broadly, as well as discussions about the possibility of objectivity, the revival of the aesthetic and the critique of context, criticisms of cultural pluralism and the critique of 'new cosmopolitanisms'—all of which explore, in different ways, the possibility of autonomy or detachment as a posture necessary to participating in meaningful debate about difference⁷—a posture that I am claiming here as a neglected facet or potential of the notion of the transnational.

⁷ For some diverse representations of this emerging tendency and its respondents see Robbins; Clarke; and Goodlad and Satori.

To extrapolate further what is covered by the concept of detachment in relation to the transnational, it is important to note that there has been a historical link between the rhetoric of autonomy and that of the international more generally. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova describes the distinction between ‘national’ and ‘international’ writers, arguing that ‘national writers’ are those for whom ‘literary aesthetics are necessarily neonaturalistic’ (because they are connected with political questions), while ‘international writers’ are ‘cosmopolitans and polyglots who, owing to their knowledge of the revolutions that have taken place in the freest territories of the literary world, attempt to introduce new norms’ (110-1). For Casanova, not only are international authors less politically ‘committed’, but their rejection of political commitment is linked with their modernity—they withdraw from politics in order to withdraw from historical time and pursue a universal ‘literary time’, which is described as a kind of eternal present. Casanova’s international writer, then, is apolitical, modern, experimental and anti-naturalistic. And further, the most powerful resource in the international writer’s pursuit of autonomy, according to Casanova, is the experience of exile. Out of the three methods for creating art identified by James Joyce’s character Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)—silence, exile and cunning—Casanova declares that ‘exile is surely the major weapon of the writer who seeks to defend his autonomy against attack at any cost’, and she writes that ‘for writers from nationalized spaces, exile is almost synonymous with autonomy’ (110).

A similar point has been made by Andrew Goldstone, who sees the notion of global literature itself as a legacy of the modernist notion of autonomy, and who nominates the Swedish Academy—which awards the Nobel Prize in Literature—as the ‘most prominent institution consecrating authors of autonomy fictions from around the world’ (190-1).⁸ By way of example, Goldstone highlights the comments of the 1991 Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer—a member of the African National Congress and anti-apartheid campaigner—in her laureate lecture, where she said that ‘the life, the opinions, are not the work, for it is in the tension between *standing apart* and being involved that the imagination transforms both’ (191, emphasis added).

This point about the capability of the detached imaginary to facilitate real-world transformation is crucial, because it draws a link between the transnational and the cosmopolitical that encompasses a sense of individual agency in a way that is sometimes absent from the transnational as conceived by migration studies. Likewise, the ‘new cosmopolitanism’ tends to view these types of subjectivity as *responses* to the experience of exile or displacement, rather than as postures that

⁸ Goldstone would surely reassess this analysis in light of the 2016 prize being awarded to Bob Dylan, though the exceptional nature of Dylan’s selection does not invalidate the statement as a general observation of past laureates.

are cultivated for ideological reasons, as we saw in the example of Wolpe. This tendency is undoubtedly productive with respect to excavating the ethics of quotidian experiences or the activities of marginalised intellectuals and artists—as well as avoiding the ‘top-down’ implications of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism—but it also tends to present a victimised image of ‘actually existing’ cosmopolitanisms, and obscures the skeptical core of cosmopolitanism (as it originated in the tradition of the Cynics and continued through Nietzsche and others).⁹ This tendency may be explained with reference to a prevailing skepticism of assigning transformative power to ‘elite’ cultural forms, in preference for unearthing the social significance of vernacular or popular forms, or of forms that become objects of transnational consumption on the commercial market. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, in her study of the role of the classical music industry on European-American political relations, observed this skepticism in the following terms:

cultural historians have minutely retraced the international influence of Anglo-American rock, pop, jazz, and hip-hop music abroad [...] but they remain curiously reluctant to retrace foreign (as opposed to immigrant) ‘highbrow’ influences on American culture, particularly music. [...] To write about classical music is not the politically correct thing to do in an age skeptical of the influence of elites, notably the influence of white European males. (12)

In a related criticism, Goldstone noted the tendency to view the disjunctions in modernist style as mere reflections of exilic experiences rather than as deliberate stylistic critique, reading a redemptive aspect into exilic literature, and obscuring the role of voluntary expatriation in enabling aesthetic autonomy. Goldstone highlighted how voluntary expatriates such as James Joyce and Djuna Barnes fashioned their lives and work in terms of being in a ‘writerly exile’ (110).¹⁰ This type of exilic activity was undoubtedly a minority experience, and one that might be viewed as privileged and indulgent, but this view again diminishes the radical potential of the posture of detachment, and the very real sense of alienation and displacement involved in an aesthetic lifestyle. For writers such as US-born Barnes, the conscious agenda of detachment was a matter of intensive labor:

These freedoms, however, do not settle magically on the artist as soon as she steps off the boat to Europe. In Barnes’s writings, they are secured only through the exhausting, lonely performance of the

⁹ For an outline that opposes the cynical and Nietzschean tradition of cosmopolitanism against the Stoic, Kantian, and liberal line of cosmopolitanism, see Leung.

¹⁰ Goldstone notes that writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Gao Xingjian who were genuinely exiled and pursued autonomy, had a greater level of authority in this regard (110).

aesthete role; to forge a literary style, to gain a foothold in the file of international modernism, she must also insist on a certain lifestyle, that of the detached cosmopolitan writer who refuses group affiliations and political solidarities. (111)

Goldstone's analysis points to the fact that for a number of modernist artists, a transnational itinerant lifestyle was designed to support an aesthetic mandate, rather than the other way around.

Practices of detachment have certainly been criticised for their inherent elitism, though many of these critiques seem to assume that these practices are based on a real belief in the possibility of objectivity. In Anderson's historical study of Victorian writers, however, she has shown how detachment can be understood as a productive 'temporary vantage, unstable achievement, or regulative ideal', to which one might aspire as part of a critical process (Anderson, *Powers of Distance* 32). Many also assume that the cultivation of detachment implies a belief in universal features of human nature and therefore an ability to abstract human experience from its historical and cultural setting. Yet there is also a line of thought that views detachment as a 'stance' or strategy that can itself be historicised without invalidating its usefulness as a critical resource: 'it represents an aspiration more than a certainty, one connected to the ongoing achievement of many social and political goods, including knowledge of social conditions and ills, and practices of deliberative democracy and cosmopolitanism':

The cultivation of detachment involves an attempt to transcend partiality, interest, and context: it is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity. The norms through which that aspiration finds expression may be situated, the aspiration may always be articulated through historically available forms, but as an aspiration it cannot be reduced to a simple form of illusion, or a mere psychological mechanism. (33)

Anderson associates such practices with certain literary forms and intellectual developments of the nineteenth century—particularly with novelistic realism and literary criticism—but these practices only intensified during the conflicts of the twentieth century. For example, while in 1947, Jean-Paul Sartre made a plea for writers to engage with the most pressing international concerns of the post-war period through what he termed 'committed literature', Adorno refuted Sartre's strategy and defended the critical cultural function of autonomous art, arguing that it was only by rejecting the conventions of description that art could hope to effect a change in consciousness that could help guard against the passive consumption of nationalist propaganda. Adorno's valorisation of

aesthetic autonomy as an appropriate response to the post-war international political landscape generally, and his support for atonality in particular, paved the way for the high degree of cultural prestige attributed to forms like musical serialism—a technique about which Adorno eventually became ambivalent, but that as an ideal type involves a high degree of pre-compositional restrictions intended to efface the role of the composer's individual subjectivity. As the polar opposite to the rousing and populist musical products of Socialist Realism, musical serialism became associated with Western neo-liberal ideals of independence (because it was viewed by some as being somehow apolitical) and equality (because it involved compositional procedures that, in some cases, mandated the equal use of pitches, among other things), providing the crucial link that saw the idea of autonomy in music enjoying unprecedented cultural and political esteem as a means of transcending national boundaries and ideology in the second half of the twentieth century, despite the fact that many of these musical techniques remained inextricably bound to national cultures that prided themselves on the perceived universality of their values.¹¹

Posture and Agency vs. Structural Conditions

Despite these strong rhetorical links between ideas about aesthetic autonomy and the transnational, to then suggest that transnational experience can support an ethics of detachment (as I am attempting to argue here) is problematic in a number of ways. The problem is compounded in historical study, because detachment seems directly antagonistic towards historicism. This problem exists both at the level of the scholar and at the level of the historical subject. At the scholarly level, the transnational usually describes a set of material conditions—namely, either the actual or imagined movement of people, objects or ideas across borders, or the type of consciousness that arises from this movement—whereas detachment is a standpoint or category of self-understanding that implies a sense of individual agency, and acknowledging this type of agency might be seen as a rejection of historicism. Equally, at the level of the historical subject, detachment involves a degree of hubris—or what Casanova called a 'peculiar blindness' (34)—in its claim of autonomy from historical conditions, as we have seen. This claim is clearly illusory, because the withdrawal from politics is itself a political act, and to imagine that aesthetics can be separate from politics involves all the same problems that have been raised in the sustained critique of Enlightenment universalism (and 'old' cosmopolitanisms).

We might be accustomed to thinking of the transnational in terms of structural conditions, whereas the notion of detachment seems more a matter of individual standpoint or ethos (an idea more familiar perhaps to studies of

¹¹ For a critical extrapolation of this cultural phenomenon see Shreffler, 'Ideologies of Serialism'.

cosmopolitanism). It is my contention, however, that standpoint should be considered alongside matters of structure in order to recover a sense of individual agency in the process of instantiating systematic change. This claim is partly in affirmative response to criticisms of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) that cast it as being too deterministic for reading into structural conditions of New World slavery a collective cosmopolitical ethos, which has the effect of obscuring the lived crisis of individuals within the structure.¹² Equally, a commitment to standpoint may be seen as an overly subjectivist enterprise, though scholars such as Lauren Goodlad (drawing from Manu Goswami) have shown how standpoint can be historicised in relation to the structural conditions which gave rise to, or rose from, these types of self-understanding. Goodlad is aware of the problems with this approach, though notes that 'if this critical starting point makes it harder to disentangle ethics from geopolitics, it also makes it necessary to theorize standpoint, agency, and singularity in light of structural processes' (403). Investigating a type of transnational experience that supports the aspiration of detachment would involve just this type of historicisation, taking into account the close relationship between structural conditions and modes of self-understanding.

It is important to note that what Goodlad is proposing here as a 'geopolitical aesthetic' is different from the notion of 'transnational aesthetics', which more readily refers to forms of cultural expression that arise in *response* to the conditions of migration and exile, involving modes of cultural hybridity, stylistic markers of memory and nostalgia, and fragmentation or juxtaposition within cultural forms.¹³ The possibility of a 'transnational aesthetics' is compelling, though like Van den Anker's emphasis, it often assumes a one-way correspondence between materialities and expression.

Pnina Werbner has been particularly alive to this tendency in the concept of diaspora, where she has worked to shift the conventional separation of 'the empirical realities of ethno-transnational connections' and 'questions of diasporic consciousness and subjectivity', arguing instead for a recognition of the 'constitutive relations among intellectual creativity, diasporic quotidian culture, subjective consciousness, and political action':

Diasporic subjectivities invoked by creative artists (or religious leaders) are shaped *in tension with* prior or more widespread hegemonic diaspora discourses and modes of institutional

¹² See for example Goodlad, 'Cosmopolitanism's Actually Existing Beyond', who cites the criticisms of Neil Lazarus in *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (1999); and William Boelhower, 'The Rise of the New Atlantic Studies Matrix' (2008).

¹³ The idea of a 'transnational aesthetic' has often been cast in overtly thematic terms, involving, for example, multilingual characters or characters who occupy transnational spaces—migrants, refugees, smugglers—and themes related to the global market (Halle).

organization; they are never simply a response to exile and alienation per se or to the sense of marginality and cosmopolitanism these engender. (Werbner 6-7, original emphasis)

While Werbner's account is illuminating in the sense of demonstrating the performative force of aesthetics, the link that she draws between the imagination and 'real' politics is still one based on the idea of representation and ownership—namely, the idea that diasporic communities are created and re-created through the appropriation of a variety of high and popular transnational cultural forms that are transformed into markers of distinction and authenticity for that community (Werbner and Fumanti). In other words, her point is that a particular type of subjectivity results in particular modes of consumption and experience that then become recognised as representative of a particular community, thereby creating the basis for 'real' transnational structures.

But what if there was a different way in which structure and expression might be conceived as being mutually reinforcing? Rather than viewing displacement as the basis for a transnational aesthetics that can forge a sense of shared community (as both Werbner and Cohen do), we might also consider how the notion of 'transnational aesthetics' can refer to the way in which a cultivated sense of displacement has served as a strategy to maintain artistic independence. On this point, once again, Goldstone cites the example of author Djuna Barnes, whom he claims '*makes an expatriate lifestyle function as part of a literary claim to autonomy [...] Her personal and narratorial detachment from national and sexual identities, from coteries and communities, is not a consequence of alienation but a chosen literary position*' (112, original emphasis). Goldstone is extremely careful to negate the suggestion that there is some kind of redemptive aesthetic value to the lived trauma of exile (a point made very forcibly by Edward Said in 'Reflections on Exile'), but rather he highlights a type of literary sensibility that is predicated on detachment—a sensibility that is actively practiced as an embodied ethos:

Barnes's cosmopolitan style does not conform to the models of cultural and political cosmopolitanism that have recently been widely discussed in modernist studies and beyond. The 'new' or 'critical' cosmopolitanisms seek to connect literary themes and styles of transnationalism with a political-ethical project of reform and solidarity on a supranational scale. Whereas earlier scholars of international modernism like Richard Ellmann and Hugh Kenner celebrated writers' exilic disengagement from political conflict, the value of modernist transnationalism would, for a new school of thought, lie in its engaged, 'cosmopolitical' vision; the virtue of modernist style would be that it can also serve as a political ethos.

Though Barnes also depicts cosmopolitanism as an always imperfect, socially specific practice rather than a state of perfect detachment, in her work the expatriate aesthete faces a choice between a relatively autonomous artistic practice and the solidarity of political community. (112)

Here, as in Amanda Anderson's work cited above, the impossibility of ever achieving complete detachment does not diminish the lived effect of the critical activity involved. Casanova concedes that the denationalisation of Paris was used for explicitly political ends by the French state, and she constantly makes reference to the fanciful nature of conceiving of the literary world in autonomous terms. For example, she refers to the 'fable of an enchanted world, a kingdom of pure creation, the best of all possible worlds where universality reigns through liberty and equality' (12), and seems to admonish the believers in literature as 'naively committed to a pure, dehistoricized, denationalized, and depoliticized conception of literature', who have been responsible for 'misunderstandings and misreadings', and 'ethnocentric blindness' (23). Yet Casanova also makes a compelling argument for the materiality of this imaginary realm as a symbolic resource that engendered 'measurable effects' (24). She notes, for example, how the mythical status of Paris as a bastion of liberty and asylum had a performative effect in that it attracted foreign artists and political refugees, resulting in a genuine openness to experimental lifestyles and diversity:

Faith in the power and the uniqueness of Paris produced a massive stream of immigration, and the image of the city as a condensed version of the world (which today appears as the most pompous aspect of this rhetorical tradition) also attests to its genuine cosmopolitanism. (30)

The causal connection linking the myth and its 'measurable effects' suggests how a desire for autonomy and artistic independence can help cultivate transnational structures, rather than cultural forms merely reflecting or responding to these structures and experiences.

The suggestion that transnational experience may be sought as a part of a process of willful defamiliarisation need not be construed as celebrating a 'blind' or 'mistaken' aestheticism, nor as claiming that autonomy or withdrawal from political participation are achievable postures. Rather, it registers the fact that practices related to the cultivation of autonomy can indeed have 'measurable effects'—a point that suggests the potential of detachment with respect to transnational experience as a valuable political position.

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