

## Looking to the Cosmos: Understanding the Abstract Methods of Black Studies

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*Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers.* By Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006. 224 pp.

*Cosmopolitanism: A Philosophy for Global Ethics.* By Stan Van Hooft. United Kingdom: Acumen Publishing, 2009. 256 pp.

*Cosmopolitanisms: New Thinking and New Directions.* By Robert J. Holton. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 208 pp.

Unlike most traditional disciplines and departments, Black Studies (and most other subjectivity-based departments) is not motivated by the want of establishing a universal method in and of the subject itself. The purpose of cultural studies as an academic field is to establish and explore the intimate experience of the subject. One thing can be certain: the community that Black Studies represents is monolithic neither in voice nor in nature. There are numerous ways to determine how the scholarship of Black Studies presents itself to an audience. Often cited is that Black Studies either expresses itself from a victimized standpoint or relies heavily on “culture” to explain the phenomena that occur in Black communities. I have heard these sentiments expressed negatively. Where one might look for empirical evidence to validate another’s interpretation of his or her experience as a social being, Black Studies continues to collect a pool of experiences and perspectives that helps foster empathy. One could say that empathy trumps sympathy, and both obviously trump insidiousness. This is the gift of Black Studies, and it is in this way that its methods can be understood. Due to the legacy of the Black experience and the abundance of “isms” that plague world history and our increasingly global society, most assuredly, someone out there can “relate.” Alas, if only the human race as a whole were truly capable of suspending categorization through dichotomies and hierarchies.

There is renewed interest and dialogue regarding the promising philosophy of cosmopolitanism. This ancient notion has come to the forefront of conversations, where it is constantly being redefined by the context of contemporary society. I will examine the literature that explores the philosophical roots of cosmopolitanism, starting with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Next, I will use Stan Van Hooft’s *Cosmopolitanism: A Philosophy for Global Ethics* to illustrate how cosmopolitanism is acted out in the context of contemporary society. Finally, Robert J. Holton’s *Cosmopolitanisms: New Thinking and New Directions* will be discussed to reveal the multiple uses of cosmopolitanism in scholarship and to reflect on cosmopolitanism’s appearance in society. Ultimately, by examining these works, we will begin to understand how cosmopolitanism manifests itself and to associate the use and method for universal understanding and engagement—a method that can be seen as a legacy of Black Studies.

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss these notions as naïve, idealistic, even untrained. According to the recently published works of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, skepticism is precisely where one begins to find release from the inclination to dismiss the importance of others. In his work, Appiah reflects on the ways in which abstract ethics, embodied by

cosmopolitanism, are demonstrated and rejected in contemporary society by initially exploring the first expressions of this perspective from its roots in ancient Greece.

In the opening pages of his book, Appiah maps the beginnings of cosmopolitanism from a philosophical perspective, starting with the way in which the term was created and employed. Appiah breaks it down simply by the prefix *cosmo* and the root of the suffix, *polis*. He explains that the ancient Greek concept of *cosmos* referred to a perspective that incorporated the geographical boundaries of the universe. *Polis* referred to the city from which a citizen originated and to which he was loyal. Thus, according to the ancient Greeks, Appiah contends that "...cosmopolitanism originally signaled, then . . . reject[ed]. . . the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities" (xiv). I prefer to think that this view incorporates the relevance of being grounded in individual experiences and social settings, while also acknowledging that the boundaries imposed by a local entity potentially overlap in a world of communities. In essence, cosmopolitanism is transformed from liberal philosophy to an active force that encourages tolerance and an appreciation or understanding of others.

Appiah further illustrates the active and engaging nature of cosmopolitanism, perhaps in one of its most simplistic terms, by correlating it to manners. He explores the ways that, given our proximity to one other, a commonality of values and motivations allows people to agree to disagree on the specific interpretation and manifestation of said values for the sake of harmonious social conditions (57). This overlap of experience and values allows for the flexibility of the cosmopolitan's agenda to be spread, actively acknowledging similar motivations and values. This opposes the emphasis on differences, which yields alienation among individuals and co-existing communities. Furthermore, Appiah discusses the importance of practicing one's own unique culture in contrast to more mainstream standards of living, citing examples like Chinese foot binding, male and female circumcision, and even homosexuality as practices justified by some and denounced by others. The important point here is that those who engage in ways of living different from our own have something to offer—a broader understanding of the world (78).

Appiah asserts that the cosmopolitan perspective is more than a liberal philosophy to be espoused. His illustrations serve to demonstrate the way that cosmopolitanism involves an active way of life. He opens the vaults of Black Diasporic history and explores the ways in which the flows in intraracial dialogues have occurred. Between the slave trade, labor migrations, mass and popular culture, ethnic conflict, and various Pan-African organizations, the global Black community has been forced to face both its similarities and its differences. There is a correlation in the way that Black Studies has grown to reflect cosmopolitan tendencies through scholarship in variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Due to cosmopolitanism's flexible nature, this correlation could prove to be the primary barricade to a specified, imposed method.

Appiah's book works well in forming the shell of cosmopolitanism's appearance, while Stan Van Hooft's *Cosmopolitanism: A Philosophy for Global Ethics* helps identify the way cosmopolitanism manifests itself in contemporary society. Using the backdrop of a globalized society, Van Hooft demonstrates how cosmopolitanism can be transformed from liberal philosophy to a statement of socio-political organization and action.

Van Hooft's book illustrates the ways in which cosmopolitan individuals conduct themselves through the lens of global citizenship in an evolving and increasingly intimate world. He suggests that a cosmopolitan individual grounds himself in three positions: first in *individualism*, where the ultimate units of concern are humans, rather than a social categorization

of humans; second in *universality*, where the unit of concern applies equally to all individuals; and third in *generality*, which Van Hooft refers to as “global force”—that is to say, cosmopolitanism fosters concern for others. In this way the cosmopolitanism agenda rejects such forces as nationalism and racism—mechanisms of human oppression (5).

Van Hooft uses the term “human rights” to show how cosmopolitanism is exercised. He cites international constructs like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the formation of the United Nations to illustrate global and political acknowledgement that human rights are inherent, regardless of their social context and how they may or may not be defined (55). He further distinguishes between the process of justifying human rights and the process of how human rights are legitimized. As he states, “The legitimation of [a] human... is a political process involving public debate and historical struggle directed towards establishing a list of human rights that will be effective in influencing political decisions both nationally and internationally” (59). The mere act of conversation, with the intention of protecting those who are otherwise vulnerable and subjected to oppressive forces, is a way in which cosmopolitan philosophy translates into direct action. Van Hooft continues, asserting that a “cosmopolitan individual’s commitment to justice... must seek expression in political action” (109).

The attempt to force a unified way of thinking, no matter how progressive the subject of conversation, is a form of oppression. Any individual who has felt oppression understands this. Through the lens of cosmopolitanism, it is understood that not all individuals feel compelled to extend empathy and ethics to “others” or follow the cosmopolite’s way of life and thinking. It is by demonstrating such characteristics as ethics (as Appiah refers to it) or benevolence (as Van Hooft describes it) that a cosmopolite embodies the philosophy of reaching out to “others” if there is any hope of appealing to more individuals. Interestingly, the beauty of expression, indeed the practice and the preaching of cosmopolitan values, will reflect the dynamics of scholarly and ultimately social exchanges.

An example of the relationship between scholarship, philosophy, and social exchanges is found in Robert J. Holton’s *Cosmopolitanisms: New Thinking and New Directions*. Holton is a sociologist, and as a consequence his work is one of his discipline’s approaches to the use of cosmopolitanism in social and academic research. He divides cosmopolitanism into two sections. The first part of his book focuses on the theoretical, conceptual, and historical issues regarding the philosophy of cosmopolitanism. He approaches the philosophical roots of cosmopolitanism by stating that it not only offers a way of life, moral principles, political ideologies, a form of governance, and a strategy of survival, but also improvement in the human condition and the creation of a better world. The second half of his book studies the application of cosmopolitanism in socio-cultural and legal/political research. In an attempt to add dimension to how cosmopolitanism is practiced, Holton illustrates the different methods of employing cosmopolitanism in an empirical display, citing a range of scholarship.

What is most interesting about this work is Holton’s contention that the overwhelming majority of multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship brandishes the concept of cosmopolitanism to explain a variety of subjectivities in humanity in general as opposed to privileging one over the other. Thus, scholars from a variety of backgrounds are actively being cosmopolitan by shedding light to the benefit, form, and essence of such a compelling philosophy or culture. For instance, Holton cites Paul Gilroy’s classic, *The Black Atlantic*, to emphasize the way in which Blacks exercised agency and mobility to create dialogue through media, scholarship, and expressive culture.

In essence, these three volumes demonstrate that one of society's greatest challenges to overcome is the skeptical association of cosmopolitanism as a luxury of the wealthy and the educated. However, the purest sense of the word does not have any classist denotations. A true cosmopolite would reject a social hierarchy resulting from the imposition of classist mentalities. A perfect example in which cosmopolitan values are purported occurs within the realm of Black Studies and within the historical Black Diasporic community. The struggle for freedom, equality, and justice is how Black people have charted their progress or, as is sometimes the case, their lack thereof. The want for universal and human rights is not credited to race alone but occurs because of drives inherent in humanity. In this way, the method of developing Black Studies can be understood and applied by many who seek the same treatment or can relate to past experiences.