

“Not to Abandon the Whole”: Cosmopolitanism and Management in *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810)

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Abstract

To read works like *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810), a travel memoir by the Indian Persian scholar Abu Talib Khan, means to be exposed not only to a reversal of perspectives that recovers voices of the counterflow of Indians who entered Britain, but also to the socio-cultural critique of the cosmopolitan stranger. With its wide geographical breadth and cosmopolitan ethos of the world-wide dissemination of knowledge, this travel memoir favors a paradigm of “connected histories” rather than one of Eastern-Western juxtapositions. Xenophilic though this paradigm is, as it traverses ethnic, religious, and national frontiers, it is not devoid of management in the form of censure. A closer look at moments of conviviality in Abu Talib’s account refutes two influential assumptions about cosmopolitanism: that cosmopolitanism is a uniquely Western construct that the West seeks to impose on the rest of the world, and that it is alien to management. This essay shows that, by revising these assumptions, Abu Talib’s memoir redraws the boundaries of the Enlightenment and formulates a cosmopolitan critique in terms of what Walter Benjamin called a “saving critique” that resorts to censure in order to prevent worldwide conviviality from succumbing to multicultural isolationism.

A French traveler residing in early-nineteenth-century London pondered with some puzzlement the relationship between British institutions and their colonial subjects, especially when these subjects returned the visit:

It is difficult to conjecture what idea an East Indian may form beforehand, of the mighty *company* and its august court; but I should think they must experience some surprise as he approaches the foot of his sovereign's throne in Leaden Hall Street. (Simond 208)

The above comment reflects on a Western-Eastern relation that, after coming into being as a mutual commercial endeavor, grew to be asymmetrical and culminated in the governance of two-thirds of the Indian subcontinent by the British Crown.

The quote introduces the main interest of this essay: an unfamiliar gaze that invites a different perspective on cosmopolitanism. It is different from that of the travel accounts that reached British shores during two centuries of intensive trade with India and which were premised on the question: "What does the British travel and trader think of Indians and their country?" These accounts informed, entertained, and instructed readers in their imaginary or real travels to this far and foreign land, but for the most part the investigation was unidirectional. Only recently has the need for mutuality, the need for the Indian's perspective, received attention and set scholarship on a journey of recovery. As Michael Fisher contends, "Most histories of Britain, India, and colonialism, however, tend to neglect these Indians. [...] Yet, a mounting 'counterflow' of Indians entered Britain, living there and producing knowledge in ways that compelled British responses" (Fisher 1).¹ Congenial to this insight, the present essay devotes attention to the testimony of a distinguished Persian scholar, Abu

Talib ibn Muhammad Isfahani (1752-1805), who worked in the ranks of the East India Company, sojourned in Britain during 1800-1802, and, although of no princely lineage, became famous as the “Persian Prince.”² His memoir *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, Europe, during the Years 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, and 1803*, written originally in Persian, was translated into English by the Irish scholar Charles Stewart and published in London in 1810. At the time, Charles Stewart was professor of Arabic and Persian languages at the East India College at Haileybury and had previously taught at the Company’s Fort William College in Calcutta. Almost two hundred years after the publication of Stewart’s translation, Daniel O’Quinn prepared a critical edition of Abu Talib’s *Travels*, a step that contributes to the retrieval of forgotten voices central to a cosmopolitan intellectual history of ideas.

Among the multitude of Abu Talib’s wide-ranging commentaries, I focus on a group of interrelated remarks that create a specific brand of world-openness, one that imagines the local in India, Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere with an eye on the inception and dissemination of worldwide knowledge. I understand Abu Talib’s interrogating presence in these locations as the third position occupied by what Vince Marotta calls “the cosmopolitan stranger” (Marotta 115). As a starting point towards a finer qualification of this position, it is worth specifying the cosmopolitan in contrast to other related but not interchangeable terms. As Galin Tihanov succinctly explains, a cosmopolitan position or outlook is not synonymous with multicultural, transnational or international. The cosmopolitan favors interaction over multicultural isolationism, that is, the disengaged living next to each other of difference and otherness. Cosmopolitanism acknowledges and incorporates difference, but unlike transnationalism it does not insist on value-free frameworks; on the contrary, it is premised on a shared human constitution. Nor does the nation stand as the key defining feature of the subject, as it does in internationalism (Tihanov

134-5). Abu Talib's version of cosmopolitanism, while largely refusing isolationism, evinces a principle of selection, and therefore exclusion, based on the universal primacy of knowledge over linguistic, national or religious borders. Put differently, in his travels otherness is appraised, valorized or critiqued, on the basis of its contribution to this universal imperative that assumes here the valence of a shared human constitution.

For scholars of cosmopolitanism, the concept of colonial counterflow has particular resonance. The recovery, acknowledgment of, and conversation with the knowledge produced by (post)colonial subjects belongs to the tasks of what Walter D. Mignolo has termed "decolonial" or "local cosmopolitanism." Mignolo insists that, without taking into account non-Western responses of cosmopolitanism, "the planetary conviviality" envisioned by Western cosmopolitan projects remains a flawed principle (Mignolo 2000: 721-48). Drawing on Mignolo's contrast between "cosmopolitanism as a set of projects toward planetary conviviality" and "globalization as the set of designs to manage the world," this essay contests this juxtaposition, arguing that the *Travels*' convivial vision is not devoid of management (Mignolo, "Many Faces" 721). I understand conviviality, for which Mignolo offers no working definition, in the terms suggested by Paul Gilroy: "a mature response to diversity, plurality, and differentiation. It is oriented by routine, everyday exposure to difference" (Gilroy 108-9). I first delve into the question of management in Abu Talib's account, mindful that Mignolo writes of managerial global designs and emancipatory cosmopolitanism—its more benign although not satisfactory counterpart—as the two dark sides that undergird European travels, discoveries and lastly Western modernity itself (Mignolo, "Many Faces" 722-3).³ Crucial to Mignolo's critique is that the complicity of cosmopolitanism with managerial designs appears to be a shortcoming exclusive to Western modernity.

Abu Talib's memoir contradicts this view: as a reading sensitive to the notion of knowledge in *Travels* suggests, cosmopolitan attitudes from the other "side of the line," too, can co-exist with certain forms of management that often signify resistance to cultural relativism and, thereby, reaffirm an active cosmopolitan ethos. To anchor this claim, this essay proceeds in three steps. It first argues that Abu Talib's cosmopolitanism is rooted in non-Western practices of writing and conviviality that compel us to think of the cosmopolitan tradition as not uniquely Western. Second, ascribing himself to a non-Western literary tradition that defends the supreme value of the circulation of knowledge, Abu Talib takes on the role of the cosmopolitan critic, especially when stipulating his understanding of ethnic and national stereotypes that hamper conviviality and exchange. This critique unfolds concrete and significant ramifications in his rebuke of the coffee-house culture of Constantinople, which he finds to be "little better than an assembly of brutes" (*Travels* 280). Thirdly, his critical capacity informs Abu Talib's concern, if not anxiety, about the reception of his travel account among his countrymen, the majority of whom he deems to be ill-suited readers. Although both these moments, the critique of the Ottoman coffee-house and of the readers at home, seemingly perpetuate stereotypes of Oriental backwardness, I show that this impression is contradicted by *Travels*' non-essentialist and non-deterministic treatment of national character. Abu Talib's critique refuses a static view of the world and its inhabitants, subordinating local practices to environmental influences that are constantly exposed to and can be modified by a cosmopolitan circulation of knowledge at a local level, by the very kind of knowledge that Abu Talib's travel narrative brings into circulation. Having started out as a reader of the foreign cultures he encounters and developing into a writer and cosmopolitan critic, ultimately Abu Talib seeks to mold the cosmopolitan reader at home. The conclusion of the essay elaborates on his attempts to define the cosmopolitan local reader, attempts that testify to his strong commitment to localist engagement for the sake of worldwide

enlightenment. Aware of the utopian impulse behind his enterprise, he draws confidence from an Arabian proverb asserting that “we are not to abandon the whole because we cannot obtain the whole” (*Travels* 60). This stance makes *Travels* a document of decolonial cosmopolitanism, whereby decolonial cosmopolitanism must be understood not as the Other of the West, but as a trace, or as threads in a web of what Sanjay Subrahmanyam calls “connected histories,” the origins of which can be found neither in the West nor in the East.⁴

Redrawing the Borders of Enlightenment

Abu Talib ibn Muhammad Isfahani (1752-1805) was a prolific Persian scholar and writer of several works that bespeak his Persianate expertise. Exploring a wide range of genres, he authored *Lubbu-s Siyar wa Jahánumá* (*The Essence of Biographies, and the World-Reflecting Mirror*), an account of the kingdoms of Europe and America, *Khulast al-Afkar* (*Purest of Thoughts*, 1791-92), a survey of ancient and contemporary poets, including the most accomplished Hindu poets of the age, *Tafzihul-Gaffilin* (*Exposure of the Negligent*, 1797), a critical history of the Lucknow ruler Asaf-ud-daulah, *Mirj-al-Tauhid* (1804), a treatise on astronomy, and he edited *Diwan-i-Hafiz* (1791), a collection of the poetry of Hafiz Shirazi. To the British public, who referred to him as the “Persian Prince,” he became known as a poet in his own right when a selection of his poems was translated and published posthumously in 1807. Three years later, the publication of *Travels* consolidated his erudition among English readers.

His travels take Abu Talib on an extraordinary itinerary. Setting out in Lucknow on the waters of the Ganges towards Calcutta, in February 1799 he embarks on a vessel sailing across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar, the Cape of Good Hope, along the shores of West Africa next to the Canary Islands, north to Cork and Dublin, from where, after a short stay, he leaves for London. In January 1800, he arrives in London, where he spends two and a half years, hoping to establish professional connections to the East India Company as a teacher of

the Persian language. He departs from London in July 1802 bound for Paris, Lyon, Genoa, Malta, Smyrna (today Turkish Izmir), Constantinople, Armenia, Mosul, Baghdad and Bussora, before crossing the Persian Gulf to Bombay, and eventually making his way on the waterways of the Ganges back to Kolkata. The gradual changes of scenery and climate, enriched by an astounding panoply of social practices and characters, emerge out of the position of the stranger and the guest whose well-being is precariously dependent on his hosts' welcoming and accommodating efforts. Hence, conviviality is not merely a wish among others, but the very condition that makes the arduous affair of intercontinental travelling worthwhile.

In Dublin, Irish hospitality seems to counteract solitude most successfully. Abu Talib confesses to spending the most agreeable time of his life in Dublin, surrounded by people who know or want to know his country and language, and strive through different "acts of kindness and hospitality" to connect him to a social network that shares his love of erudite sociability (*Travels* 117). Nowhere does he feel closer to home than during the forty four days spent in Dublin, a closeness that one of his hosts, Charles Vallancey, British surveyor of Ireland and antiquary who claimed that the origins of the Irish lay in the East, conveys also as being linguistically determined by "a considerable analogy between the Hindoostany and Irish languages" (117). This linguistic fitness of the Irish acquires a quasi-telepathic dimension in Abu Talib's communication with his landlady's family in Dublin, "who comprehended my broken English, and what I could not explain by language they understood by signs [...] they could even understand my disfigured translations of Persian poetry" (111). Most of his Irish friends consider their linguistic dexterity to be a matter of will rather than a linguistic given. Indeed, in their parting words to Abu Talib, the Irish pride themselves on their willingness to "give themselves any trouble to comprehend your meaning, to make themselves useful to you" (111). Humberto Garcia has convincingly argued that Abu Talib's

affinity with Irish civilization, whose inclusive, generous and philanthropic attitudes towards strangers Abu Talib sees as values of a civilized sensibility that the Irish share with Persianate culture, rests on the colonial history that connects both Dublin and Mughal India to British rule. Garcia stresses this connection to conclude that Abu Talib's xenophilia is not "disinterested love" ("Stranger's Love" 234). The concept of disinterested love is a philosophically thorny one, particularly in host-guest relationships. For the concept of cosmopolitan hospitality, which assumes some common shared ground, hence interest, disinterested love may be an impossibility if not a neutralizer of the very attribute of cosmopolitan. However, Garcia's finding is helpful to foreground the importance in Abu Talib's cosmopolitan ethos of a will to give yourself the trouble to comprehend the stranger's meaning and, thereby, discover what Wordsworth calls "similitude in dissimilitude," the familiar in the stranger (Wordsworth 92). This is the yardstick against which Abu Talib measures everything that follows, as I will show, condemning the exclusion of the stranger in Constantinople's coffee-house culture.

The very praise of hospitality animates the spectre of inhospitality. Indeed, Abu Talib's reflections crystallize in the bedrock of a more or less imperfect hospitality. Nor can Abu Talib, during his travels, embrace unconditionally everything that lays claim to *his* hospitality in the form of otherness, of the unknown, and the uninvited. Derrida's comments on hospitality illuminate Abu Talib's experience, as they affect theories and practices of cosmopolitanism, in particular those inherited from Immanuel Kant's. Expanding on *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784), in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795) Kant argued for a deep and pacifying connection between hospitality and cosmopolitanism, conceiving of hospitality as a universal right of visitation: "a stranger [is] not to be treated in a hostile manner by another upon his arrival on the other's territory" (Kant 82). However, Derrida is troubled by Kant's conditioned right of hospitality as visitation and his reaction

comes with a double movement: he first raises the concept to ethos: “Hospitality—that is a name or an example of deconstruction” (Derrida, “Hostipitality” 364).⁵ Then he goes on to explain that hospitality can never fully embrace the stranger, because it can never be unconditional; it can never be an open door through which the alien, the strange human, the animal, can enter and exit freely; it cannot offer the absolute welcoming that it designates and strives to achieve, without setting restrictions on guest and host alike. The accommodation of the stranger implies hierarchy, that is, decisions made by the host and expectations to be attended to by the guest. As Peter Melville explains, a practice of absolute welcome, that is unconditioned hospitality, would imply the full acceptance and integration of the guest, so that he/she/it is truly at home. But by this very definition, with the welcoming and welcomed party being at home, the difference between the host and guest dissolves and with it the very necessity of anyone being hospitable to another: “Hospitality, if it succeeds finally in making the guest feel at home, cancels its own history. It covers up its tracks, disappearing without a trace” (Melville 14). Underneath the very presence of hospitality lingers a history of failure without which, however, the embrace of the guest and the otherness for which s/he stands would signify their very absorption and assimilation as guests.

In this sense, for Derrida, hospitality is always to come (*à venir*). Although the tense seems to project hospitality in the future, utopian postponement (*avenir* = the future) could not be farther from Derrida’s intention. As with hospitality, democracy and cosmopolitanism, the *à venir* conjures the present as a daily exercise devoid of teleological certainty. Indeed, the only certainty about this exercise is that it is interminable and it can never project a program into the future or obtain its goal (Derrida, “Hostipitality” 15). It is in light of cosmopolitanism to come that I explore the moments of conviviality in *Travels*. I speak of cosmopolitanism because conviviality springs from the desire to know the other. Mostly this knowledge is not used to master the other, but to share in moments of exchange and co-

existence which, nonetheless, are never without struggles of accommodation. Hence, we can speak of moments of unfinished conviviality within the discourse of cosmopolitanism.

One particular moment in *Travels* illustrates the presence of unfinished conviviality in this cosmopolitan-minded text. While in London, Abu Talib records with pride his encounter with Beilby Porteus (1731 - 1809), the Bishop of London, whom he describes as a “philosophic man” who “took pleasure in disputing with me on points of religion” (*Travels* 186). The most noteworthy “controversy” seems to have involved the prophesying of the coming of Mohammed in the New Testament. The two men stand on opposite sides. The Bishop refutes Abu Talib’s premise, but true to Abu Talib’s description of him, the Bishop offers to look into the matter and reconvene with Abu Talib at a later date. What follows at the appointed time is a debate about the verse in the New Testament that announces the coming of Mohammed. They agree that the verse appears in the “very ancient Greek version of the Testament” that the Bishop has brought for them to investigate (*Travels* 186). However, the Bishop contends that it must have been slipped in by followers of Mohammed long after his preaching, to which Abu Talib answers shrewdly:

I replied, that as copies of the New Testament were in hands of every person at that time, it was impossible any interpolation could have taken place without having been noticed by some of the contemporary historians and writers. (*Travels* 186)

Abu Talib adds that the verse cannot be an interpolation because Christians never contested its presence; when Mohammed quoted it to them, they merely rejected the assumption that it spoke of Mohammed as the “Comforter so promised” (186). After this reply, the Bishop “laughed, and said he supposed I was come to England to convert the people to Mohammedanism, and to make them forsake the religion of their forefathers”

(186). The exchange is anything but the result of a casual encounter. On the contrary, it is the sought-after interreligious dialogue between equals, who agree to have their opinions contested and to expose their knowledge to the scrutinizing eye of the other. The scene is one of conviviality: two scholars poring over the same book, and, more importantly, the New Testament, a text that muddles all distinctions between East and West. At the same time, the Bishop's casting of Abu Talib as a skilled missionary harbors the threat of the mutual transgressions and enmity that has marked the history of the two religions. Standing on such contentious ground, the exchange could deteriorate and enter the less benign waters of interreligious conflict. But it doesn't. Significantly, Abu Talib neither confirms nor challenges the Bishop's risky banter. Daniel O'Quinn notes Abu Talib's shrewd tendency to embrace moments of misreading (*Travels* 19), to which this erudite disputation adds the openness of reading. The Bishop's laughter remains without echo. We long to hear Abu Talib's quip but the curtain drops on this unfinished conversation, bespeaking the fragility and the incomplete nature of conviviality.

It matters greatly to emphasize here Abu Talib's Persianate education and this education's roots in the practices of the Mughal Empire. The ethos of conviviality at the heart of *Travels* draws its essence from the cosmopolitan texture that Persianate culture developed under the pressures of successive empires, and, more particularly, during the Mughal Empire. Of the five imperialist projects—the Savafid, Ottoman, Mughal, Russian, and the European—that traversed Persian literary humanism, the Mughal Empire was the most hospitable. According to Hamid Dabashi, Mughal India became the heartbeat of Persian literary humanism (192). Dabashi equates Persian literary humanism with the very wide ranging concept of *adab*. In Persianate culture *adab* stands for a literary production as well as codes of comportment and moral values. Dabashi argues that upon entering Mughal courts and their religiously heterogeneous territories, *adab*, as both literature and ethos, was to face an ecumenical

encounter, “facilitating a conversation among Muslim-Hindu segments of the empire” (203). It is one of Dabashi’s key claims that Mughal India cultivated a syncretic cosmopolitan humanism of Persian *adab* with consequences that endured from the eighteenth century well into the twentieth (Dabashi 212). I read the encounter between Abu Talib and the Bishop of London to be an instance of the ecumenical conviviality characteristic of the Mughal Persian literary humanism, or *adab*. This encounter works paradigmatically: here and elsewhere in *Travels*, conviviality does not offer itself meekly to be assimilated by the host literary tradition but redirects this tradition, interrogating its realities, practices and self-assurances. Consequently, *Travels*, a document of Persian literary humanism, shows that “contrary to a major train of thought in postcolonial thinking, it is not only ‘Western’ humanism that is capable of worlding itself” (Dabashi 199).

In *Travels*, the foundational feature of conviviality between the foreign visitor and his host culture is textual or generic.⁶ Abu Talib’s account, although emerging from distant shores, shares important assumptions with European travel narratives. The recording of travels is part of the Muslim literary genre of the *rihla*. Originating from the Arabic *rahla* (to set out, to depart, to migrate), *rihla* came to designate travel accounts that combined the pursuit of religious and worldly knowledge. In Persian, these travel accounts, called *safar nama* (travel book), belong to and embody *adab*. The *safar nama* and *rihla* uphold both valences of *adab*, by being literary productions and templates of a cosmopolitan ethos. Stefania Pandolfo describes the *rihla* “as physical journey and existential displacement as the style and possibility of learning [...] The imperative for traveling for seeking knowledge determined the cosmopolitan character of centers of learning, where everyone was a foreigner and everyone belonged” (Pandolfo 315-16). Although not irreducible to classical and later European travel accounts, the *rihla* shares with them ideas about travelling that are present in both Abu Talib’s and European Enlightenment travel writing. The *rihla* foregrounds first, the

importance of leaving one's home in the acquisition of knowledge; it absorbs observations pertaining to geography, history, local mores; second, it celebrates the movement and circulation of knowledge, and, lastly, it gives precedence to knowledge gathered by eye-witnesses and supported by story-telling. The Greek "authority of autopsy," that is, seeing with one's own eyes, corresponds to the Arabic *'iayn*, which stands for unmediated observation (Euben 16). Consistent with the *rihla* and *safar nama* as well as many European travel narratives that, since Pausanias' *Guide to Greece* in the second century AD, elaborate on the pleasures, benefits and dangers that attend a travel's life, Abu Talib offers to readers who may venture in his footsteps advice on the safest routes and means of transportation (*Travels* 78).

The emphasis on knowledge that Abu Talib's *Travels* inherits from the *rihla* and *safar nama* is worth scrutinizing, since it has been a stubborn rather than persuasive assumption that the quest for knowledge as the main motivation for exploring beyond familiar horizons distinguishes Western civilization and fosters its superiority. As late as at the turn of the twentieth century, Jürgen Habermas writes in a much-cited essay that "to gain distance from one's own traditions and broaden limited perspectives is the advantage of Western Occidentalism"; an articulation that crops up in the works of a host of writers, some of them neo-Kantians like Habermas, and is possibly as much a part of the self-perception of the West as Kant is a towering figure of Occidental Enlightenment (Habermas 162).⁷ Crucially, it is also an assumption contradicted by the many English Enlightenment thinkers, writers, radical Protestants, Unitarians, Deists, reconsidered in Humberto Garcia's *Islam and the English Enlightenment 1670-1840*, who sought to revive rationality through a return to the figure of Mohammed as an example of enlightenment and rationality. Their efforts contradict Habermas' presumed gap between "the West and the rest." Indeed, the idea of Enlightenment with a capital E in encyclopedias and surveys of Western literature and culture,

retrospectively synonymous with a particular span of time, philosophy and moment of modernity, monopolizes the very metaphor of knowledge as light, so much so that a diffuse idea of Western civilization (where does it start and end geographically, temporally, symbolically?) circulates as shorthand for a journey from darkness to light guided by a persisting thirst for knowledge.

Reading Abu Talib's *Travels* as a thread in the web of connections helps relinquish such monopolistic fantasies. Neither light nor valorization of knowledge spring uniquely from Western soil. In splendid imagery, involving passages between darkness and light, Abu Talib discloses that his principal reason for travelling to England is employment, namely to prepare future teachers of Hindoostany, Persian and Arabic languages who themselves would not travel but dwell in Britain and instruct employees of the Company who aspired to work in India:

The plan I proposed was, that I should commence with a limited number of pupils, selected for the purpose, who were not to go abroad; but, each of these to instruct a number of others: thus as one candle may light a thousand, so I hoped to spread the cultivation of the Persian language all over the kingdom. By these means I expected to have passed my time in England in a rational and advantageous manner; beneficial both to myself, and to the nation I came to visit. (*Travels* 123-4)

The metaphor of the one candle that lights a thousand links rationalism with illumination and the spread of knowledge, in this case of unknown languages and remote cultures, through contact with someone who has the first-hand expertise of the Greek autopsy or Arabic *'iayn* which the "[British] *self-taught masters*, ignorant of every principle of the science" lack (*Travels* 124). Just to name another example of this metaphor: a poem by Emperor Shah 'Alam conceives of justice and prosperity, in themselves results of a good government, in

terms of all-encompassing light: “illuminate the world with the light of my justice/ [...] let me make hill and plain prosper through my justice/ [...] Since you have made my name shine like the sun throughout the world,/ By my sun illuminate the hearts of friends and foes” (lines 6-18; quoted in Khan 7).⁸ Like the candle that kindles a thousand, the light of just government shines indiscriminately upon friend and foe, familiar and unfamiliar lands. The image conveys the cosmopolitan benefit of enlightened and enlightening sovereignty (although it must be noted here that sovereignty poses problems for legal cosmopolitanism that would exceed the scope of this essay): divine light is imparted to the sovereign to be shared with the world. Similarly, Abu Talib defends his plan of education as an act that contributes to his own rational well-being and a world order of hosts and guests who share knowledge.

It is worth noticing that such central valorization of knowledge bears resemblances to Kant’s “sapere aude,” dare to know, that rather reductively has become the motto of Occidental Enlightenment. Much has been written about the entrenched individualistic and abstract rationality inaugurated by Kant’s exhortation, and many critiques of Kantian revivals like Habermasian philosophy redress the solipsism of Western metaphysics, inherent also in a concept of cosmopolitanism obsessed with the rightful boundaries of the ego. In contrast, within everyday life exigencies, such as the necessity to make a living, Abu Talib’s vision of knowledge is grounded in communitarian cosmopolitanism and mutual benefit. Knowledge is acquired to be passed on to others, to cross linguistic, ethnic and religious divides. The metaphor of candles lightening many others conveys the very act of giving that *Travels* performs materially on the page: knowledge gathered, processed and made accessible. Although, or for the very reason that, such metaphors have become part of Western cultural furniture, there is significant value in the discovery of what Subrahmanyan calls “vocabularies that cut across local religious traditions,” and by revealing “ideas and mental

constructs” in flux and circulation, make us realize that “what we are dealing with are not separate and comparable, but connected histories” (748).⁹

It is precisely with a solipsistic economy of knowledge distribution that Abu Talib finds fault, when rebuking the British self-taught masters whose learning and teaching represent in the flesh the misguided self-sufficiency of a civilization that puts more trust in its books, for example, in his view, the inaccurate grammar and lexicons of Persian written in English, rather than the synergetic exchange of knowledge with native scholars. Gulfishan Khan’s translation of (*ustad-i ja’li*), “the self-taught masters” in Stewart’s version, as “the most ignorant pretenders” drives home Abu Talib’s discontent with British scholarly insularity and blind self-confidence, also voiced by Ghulam Hussein, an intellectual and contemporary of Abu Talib, who judged British scholarship on India as suffering greatly from a poor reliance on indigenous savants (Khan 62). Such a propensity for elitist self-sufficiency would culminate in James Mill’s myopic assertion that travelling and empirical knowledge were superfluous: “a man who is duly qualified may obtain more knowledge of India in one year in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India” (Mill 12).

A different kind of disparagement of the knowledge disseminated by eye-witnesses comes from a more recent quarter. The situation of unemployment that launched Abu Talib on his travels, his involvement with the East India Company, and his proposition to the latter for a plan of education in Eastern languages prompted Ronald Robinson to dismiss his memoir as contaminated by colonial will (117-42). Robinson’s dismissal rests on the naïve assumption that there is an inside and outside of the colonial will and that biography demarcates these boundaries. Nigel Leask aptly rejects Robinson’s conclusion, seeing in Abu Talib a witness of “the ideological complexity of his world” and a courageous intellectual who evaluated “the colonizer’s culture at its fountain-head, without genuflecting to the universalist telos of

European progress” (Leask 235). Moreover, it is important, I argue, to read *Travels* as a document replete with representations grounded but also surpassing both the author’s biography and the complicated boundaries of European geographies. Works like *Travels* compel us to remap Eurasian relationships, by moving away from compartmentalizing geography, history and related practices in distinct entities, toward understanding the globe as a fabric of interwoven, tangible and intangible threads: people, goods, institutions and beliefs (Subrahmanyam 735-62).

Abu Talib’s collaboration with the East India Company bears testimony to the multifaceted value of connected histories not as inevitably unifying, but as moments of detached critique. His memoir devotes several passages to investigations of imperialism that contribute to a de-westernization of knowledge: Abu Talib’s scathing critique of the Company’s administration and its aforementioned unc cosmopolitan stance towards education, its commercial approach with no regard for public welfare, the immoral commercialism sweeping over Asia from warring European states, Abu Talib’s moral autopsy of the vices and virtues of the English, his preference of Irish hospitality and denunciation of Irish poverty can be understood as initiating the “delinking” of knowledge, to use Mignolo’s terms, from centers of power (Mignolo, “Delinking”).¹⁰ Hence, it would be wrong to understand Abu Talib’s concept of the acquisition of knowledge for dissemination purposes metaphorically. There is evidence that his advice to his countrymen affected the latter in their subsequent dealings with the Company, inspiring opposition to rather than subordination to Company policy. In 1806, when the Directors ordered the hiring of two Indian teachers (*munchi*) at the lowest salary paid at the Company’s college at Haileybury, the Hindu and Persian scholars in question insisted that they be paid the salary proposed by Abu Talib in his *Travels*. Their terms were accepted and their work was remunerated with a salary 20% higher than that of the highest paid British professor, Charles Stewart the translator of *Travels*, and

three times higher than the salary negotiated by an Indian scholar who had applied independently some years previously (Fisher 114-15).¹¹ At the same time, however, Abu Talib perceptively registers that the travel's desire to acquire and disseminate knowledge must plug occasionally into networks of power, into some kind of economy of production and distribution (Mignolo and Gastambide-Fernandez 205-206).¹² He regrets, for example, in a passage omitted in the first edition of the translation that, due to the lack of financial support and patronage, his *Travels* cannot enhance the reader's comprehension with visual illustrations of the written descriptions such as maps or drawings of places, objects, and people (*Travels* 60).

Abu Talib understands the urge and need to travel and disseminate the impressions gathered on one's travels as springing from a view of the shared human passion for "curiosities and wonders" (58): "such a passion," he insists, "has been implanted by nature in every human breast, as an honor and an ornament to the species" (60).¹³ If, as Tihanov clarifies, cosmopolitanism "has always, explicitly or tacitly, built on the assumption of a shared (and accessible if not necessarily immediately transparent) human constitution that is being mobilized, or at least addressed," the cosmopolitan premise of *Travels* rests on the passion for shared knowledge, "new discoveries and inventions" (Tihanov 134). Moreover, aiming "to add to the stock of his [the reader's] knowledge" and inspire "imitation" of foreign discoveries, *Travels* participates in reconfigurations of home and the familiar through a cosmopolitan circulation and adaptation of knowledge that triggers recalibrations of political, economic and cultural powers (*Travels* 60, 59).¹⁴ There is a point of contact between Persian and British travels and readers in this valorization of the passion for "wonders," "new discoveries and inventions." Thus, what Barbara M. Benedict writes about early-modern European culture, namely that "[c]uriosity became the trademark of progress itself," also holds true for Abu Talib's *Travels* (Benedict 1). Stating the value of curiosity at

the outset of and sustaining it throughout his account with a panoply of architectural, scientific, botanical, zoological, and ethnographical descriptions, Abu Talib endorses the emphasis on *aj'aib* (the strange, marvelous, and unusual) that is a central convention of the *rihla* (Euben 115).

Attention to the scientific developments that Abu Talib experiences as works in progress aligns him with the networks of European and American philosophers and scientists that Thomas Schlereth calls “the world brotherhood of knowledge,” a cornerstone of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism (Schlereth 25-46). Abu Talib’s vision of “imitation” clearly exceeds observation and, consequently, the passivity of “spectatorial cosmopolitanism” (Robbins 17). Gesturing toward borrowed and adapted knowledge, Abu Talib’s memoir also redraws the boundaries of Enlightenment, refusing to abandon it to European hands and geographies. Nor is the European classical yardstick of artistic achievement as profit and delight alien to Abu Talib’s approach to novelties. Repeatedly, when describing in detail housing and architecture, he holds in greatest admiration constructions of comfort and beauty: “utility and ornament,” “elegance and utility are so happily blended” (*Travels* 102, 129). It is important to stress this point against Bernard Lewis’s othering of Muslim curiosity and the quest for knowledge as the unscientific and unstructured Other of Western curiosity (Lewis 208 280).¹⁵ Abu Talib’s vigilant estimations of the advantages and pitfalls of technological progress refute such hierarchized distinction. When discussing a manufactory of needles or a spinning engine, he carefully surveys the relation between the division of human labor and machines, surprised that the making of a basket of needles requires only two people, each of them responsible for one segment of the process, and the spinning of threads only a few women and boys. Heightened speed, Abu Talib notices, is the greatest benefit of these new technologies: speed for the production of thousands of tools, for “mincing meat and cutting onions,” maximizes profit (*Travels* 166-7).

Abiding as his fascination with the technological progress is, it is also checked by a critique of a future spun out of control, detrimental to both moral and physical life. Speed is singled out as one of the most dangerous aspects because it breeds impatience. According to Abu Talib, impatience, the source and product of an accelerated pace of production, is responsible for inferior products, as in the case of English muslin, which due to its “over-twisted” threads does not wear or wash as well as the manually-spun equivalent in India (*Travels* 166). The over-twisted thread figures synecdochally the uncontainable excess attending the Western scientific boom. Obsession with speed betrays the haste of Western progress (*Travels* 167), a feature of scientific development condemned later in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), where Victor deliberately selects big body parts for his creature to accelerate the process with no regard for the difficulties a giant would face in the outside world. More importantly, as Abu Talib notices, this is an excess that predicts the degradation of the social and moral habitus in unacknowledged unc cosmopolitan ways. Prosperity and luxury, “the bad consequences of which have not yet appeared,” foster, among other defects, “a contempt for the customs of other nations and the preference they [the English] give to their own; although theirs, in fact, may be much inferior” (*Travels* 218). This contempt, he notes, can take the shape of “obstinacy and prejudice in favor of their own customs” (217). Not referring to British condescension toward Indian customs exclusively, but towards other nations in general, Abu Talib presents his critique from a third perspective which interposes “a third interconnecting culture” (Delanty 67). This articulation, in which the Other is not evaluated merely through references to the self or the nation, but a multitude of nations and selves, springs from “the abstract category of the world as a form of third culture” (Delanty 70). Fittingly, Abu Talib’s advised remedy against the moral disintegration of the English is rooted in cosmopolitan education. Abu Talib attributes redemptive potential to the reading of history, which like a mirror reveals the vices responsible for the downfall of

powerful civilizations, whereby Occidental or Oriental histories hold equal places: “the subversion of the Roman empire in Europe, and the annihilation of the Moghul government in India” (*Travels* 217).

Abu Talib’s critique of British bigotry and ethnic prejudice, strategically embedded in essays on the vices and virtues of the English which read as a list of national stereotypes, raises the question of criticism. Thus, perhaps, the criticism most resonant with a postcolonial global world grows out of Abu Talib’s denunciation of the British addiction to “a luxurious manner of living, by which their wants are increased a hundred-fold,” that turns to be both an engine and justification for their discoveries and inventions (*Travels* 211). His clairvoyant critique of the “expenses incurred to pamper their appetites, which, from long indulgence, have gained such absolute sway over them, that a diminution of these luxuries would be considered, by many, as a serious misfortune,” anticipates a critique of capitalist consumption and complacency (*Travels* 211).

Yet for the cosmopolitan-minded travel or dweller it raises a problem: if cosmopolitanism is endorsed as an ethos that seeks to preserve and valorize difference, how should it face the unwelcome, the morally (even though always and only subjectively) suspect or reprehensible? Must the citizen of the world embrace difference indiscriminately in order to remain true to a vision of universal inclusiveness? Perhaps the question comes down to what criticism stands for: is it a sign of hostility or can we better capture critical cosmopolitanism under Derrida’s notion of hostipitality (blending the hospitable and the hostile), a conditioned and necessarily censoring embrace of the other (Derrida, “Hostipitality” 356-420)? Can “a saving critique” (*rettende Kritik*, that is, “saving” in the sense of “rescuing”), an approach associated with Benjamin, inscribe both conviviality and censure in the form of a minimal managerial kernel within an ethical concern for close and distant others (Arato and Gebhard 205-207)? Or to return to Gilroy’s definition of conviviality as “a mature response to

diversity, plurality, and differentiation” (Gilroy 108-9): what qualifies as a mature response? In the last section of this essay, I address this question as I consider the evaluation of the coffee-house culture in *Travels* to elaborate the complicity between cosmopolitan commitment and managerial necessity. The coffee-house, a locale of urban conviviality, triggers Abu Talib’s conditional appreciation of otherness and his critique of mere multiculturalism in the name of a shared cosmopolitan economy of knowledge.

The Cosmopolitan Critic

A comparison of Charles Stewart’s 1810 preface with that of the French translation in 1811 reveals a greater interest on the part of the French translator in this text’s non-Europeanness. The French translator not only emphasizes that the target readership of *Travels* was not European, but goes on to enthuse over its representations of territories in the Ottoman Empire (Khan, *Les Voyages* xii). Such a focus that wonders not only about the Indian Other, but also that Other’s Other, emerges also in the review of *The British Critic* (1810). Less insular-minded than Stewart’s preface, which centers on the memoir’s connection to Britain and Britons, this review comments on Abu Talib’s journey from Constantinople to Bagdad and his visitations of tombs and sacred places, illustrating his interest with an excerpt about the Ottoman habit of smoking. This excerpt is reproduced frequently throughout the nineteenth century, cementing the stereotype of the indolent and tobacco-addicted “Turks,” who light their pipes even “while riding at a brisk pace” on horseback (*Travels* 281). Yet, to my knowledge, nothing has been said about this stereotype’s incorporation in the setting of the Ottoman coffee-house. Indeed, modern commentators, like Stewart, more often than not have reflected on Abu Talib’s gaze on Britain or British subjects rather than on the larger cosmographic map of *Travels*. As I hope to demonstrate, the coffee-house functions as a

cross-national and cross-ethnic trope that prompts readings of Abu Talib not just as a witness from the other side of the line, that is, as the Other of the Western reader, but as the cosmopolitan stranger formulating a critique from a third position, as the Other's Other.

The coffee-house is a cultural construct of sociability that intrigues Abu Talib at several locations during his travels: in Britain, France, Constantinople and Baghdad. By virtue of the interconnections beyond national and ethnic boundaries established through this trope, representations of the coffee-house enact a key procedure of "methodological cosmopolitanism" (Beck 30). The first description of the English coffee-house appears in a section that links this construct to print culture and dissemination. Here, Abu Talib writes of the "Utility of the Art of Printing," to which, among other productions,

the English are indebted for the humble but useful publication of Newspapers, without which life would be irksome to them. These are read by all ranks of people from the prince to the beggar. They are printed daily, and sent every morning to the houses of the rich; but those who cannot afford to subscribe for one, go and read them at the coffee-rooms or public-houses. (*Travels* 157)

He goes on to state that the information circulated by newspapers in the coffee-houses ranges from events, conflicts and victories at home and abroad, Parliamentary debates, information on food prices, the economy, births and deaths among the powerful, to details on cultural events and entertainment (157-8). His perception resonates with the description of an eighteenth-century British observer who conveys the idea of a public sphere that gathers around different bodies of the *demos* and is energized by newspapers and coffee-houses as platforms of circulation of information and knowledge: "Coffee-houses make all sorts of People sociable, the rich and the poor meet together, as also do the learned and the unlearned. It improves arts, and merchandize and all other knowledge; for here an inquisitive man, that

aims at good learning, may get more in an evening than he shall by Books in a month” (Houghton 15:461; quoted in Ellis xii).

When we turn to Abu Talib’s assessment of French coffee-houses, all references to newspapers or the circulation of news disappear: “In Paris, the coffee-houses are innumerable, but in general are very filthy; and as many of the French smoke *segards* or *cheroots* in them at all hours of the day, they smell shockingly of tobacco. A person is also much annoyed by beggars at these places” (*Travels* 242). Beggars in search of benefactors and consumption of tobacco rather than daily updates on internal and foreign affairs are the sole markers of Parisian coffee-houses. We need to compare this experience to that of the coffee-house in Constantinople to gauge the implications of Abu Talib’s tacit omission of print media.

In Constantinople, his dissatisfaction with a consumptive, sedentary, leisured coffee-house goes crystallizes:

The coffee-house and barbers’ shops in this city are innumerable. The Turks, though very indolent, are not fond of retirement or solitude: they, therefore, immediately after breakfast, go to one of these places, where they sit smoking, drinking coffee or sherbet, and listening to idle stories, the whole day. Their conversations are carried on in a loud tone of voice, and sometimes eight or ten persons talk at the same time; it is therefore impossible for a foreigner to understand what they are saying; and, in short, the societies of these coffee-houses are little better than an assembly of brutes. The rooms are also exceedingly dirty and seldom afford any thing but thick coffee, and tobacco cheroots or pipes. (*Travels* 280)

The French and Ottoman coffee-houses resemble each other: they are dirty and full of tobacco-smoking customers. So are the ones in Baghdad, echoing Abu Talib’s bad experience in Constantinople: “Baghdad abounds with coffee-houses, and rooms for smoking tobacco; but are even darker and filthier than those of Constantinople” (315). It is noteworthy, then,

that the resemblance between French and Turkish coffee-houses rather than between French and English ones, posited by the third position of the cosmopolitan stranger, explodes the idea of a monolithic West. The same effect arises through the comparison of musical traditions during Abu Talib's short stay in Genoa: "I here acknowledge, that the Indian, Persian, and Western Europe music bears the same comparison to the Italian that a mill does to a fine-tuned organ" (263). Thus, the coffee-house experience and aesthetic considerations provoke a reshuffling of expectations that undo a Western-Eastern cultural organization of Eurasia.

Such reshuffling at the time of Abu Talib's journey is topical. In 1802, when Abu Talib sets foot in Constantinople, the long-lasting and infamous alliance between France and the Ottoman Empire had only recently come to an end. Entered into in 1522, between Francis I and sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the alliance was meant to counteract the powerful Habsburgs, whose territories had come into contact with the Ottoman Empire in Serbia. The alliance that involved exchanges of embassies, trade, religious agreements, and technological mentorship ended in 1798 with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, the campaign that should have established French presence in the Middle-East. A year later, the Ottoman Empire found a new ally in Britain, but only until 1806 before it resumed its long alliance with the French. The alliance would break in 1809 upon Napoleon's failure to return promised territories to the Ottoman Empire. Filling the void left by France, Britain again became a viable but secret ally. Although 1802, when Abu Talib visits Constantinople, and 1810, when *Travels* was published in London, are years of the British-Ottoman alliance, the alignment of Paris and Constantinople through similar coffee-house practices directs our attention to the traffic of cultures, finances, and interests determined by the Franco-Ottoman collaboration. The alignment of such a locale of sociability surreptitiously attests to the fractures within the geographical and ideological construction of Europe and what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

calls “Persianate Europology” (35). Mirrored in the heart of the French capital, Constantinople’s coffee-houses also confirm Ephraim and Inari Karsh’s conclusion that throughout and after the Napoleonic storm, the Ottoman Empire remained “essential to the European status quo” (Karsh 17).

The coffee-house episodes make it impossible to draw a line between Eastern and Western pathologies. They reveal, however, Abu Talib’s assessment methods of local cultures and their subjection to a notion of hospitality that combines individual and collective benefit. According to Abu Talib, in spite of their indolence, consumers in Constantinople share a socializing propensity that aligns them with consumers of coffee-houses in London and Paris. However, their activities of smoking, drinking and “listening to idle stories the whole day” convey the idea of stale conversations lacking in orientation and purpose that contrasts with the experience of the English consumer, who visits the coffee-house with the intention of socializing over information updated daily by newspapers. In comparison to the structured but vibrant circulation of news within and beyond national borders in the English coffee-house, the Ottoman’s “idle stories,” exchanged boisterously and among several people simultaneously, exclude the foreigner. This milieu corroborates Abu Talib’s early observation in the context of Dublin’s sociability, namely, that profitable, inclusive conversation suffers in the presence of noise and interruption (*Travels* 118). Hence, the coffee-house in Constantinople depicts the very opposite of the ethos Abu Talib experiences and endorses in Ireland, where hosts take upon themselves “the trouble to comprehend your meaning, to make themselves useful to you [the foreigner]” (111). Constantinople’s coffee-house fails to promote a commerce of ideas between people of different languages, striking the experienced narrator of *Travels* as an inhospitable place, “an assembly of brutes,” enclosed in a loop of story-telling to which the foreigner cannot contribute.

Had this been the account of a Western travel, it would only confirm the Saidian paradigm that sees representations of Oriental backwardness produced by the prejudices of Western observers. But this is not the case for Abu Talib's travel memoir. His account draws on a different paradigm that proposes a way out of an East-West polarization of perspectives. If we read *Travels* as *adab*, that is, a literary form and codes of conduct, then the trope of the coffee-house functions as a *hikayat*, an exemplum, a central strategy through which the literary form *adab* transmitted *adab* as social conduct and advice. The exemplum in *adab* consists of opposite pairing, contrasting representations of the same trope that standing as a synecdoche ushers in the need for moral intervention (Kia 288, 291). In the trope of the coffeehouse, the contrast drawn between inclusive and objectionable sociability illustrates a moral standpoint and as *hikayat* aims to enact a moral transformation. Hence, Abu Talib's critique must be read within the paradigm of *adab*, which builds on cosmopolitan values because it foregrounds again and again the flow of knowledge between strangers and remote parts of the world. It is in this respect that Abu Talib's finds the coffee-houses in France, and more explicitly those in Constantinople and Baghdad, flawed. There is a sense that the foreigner in the setting of the Turkish coffee-house is reduced to visibility and ornament: foreigners are seen, but cannot participate. Their muted presence and denied ability to steer the traffic of knowledge questions the utility of the coffee-house as a promoter of conviviality that involves dialogue among cultures, a practice Bryan Turner terms a "cosmopolitan virtue" that counteracts the isolation of multiculturalism (45-63).

The idea that the foreigner is useless in this coffee-house and that the sociability of the coffee-house is of no use to the foreigner can be appreciated if we recall the high rank that utility holds in Abu Talib's appreciation of novelty. We already saw the recurring praise of architecture or customs in terms of complementariness of ornament, hence aesthetic pleasure, and utility. A few lines after the observations on the coffee-house, the "Turkish costume" is

judged in these very terms. It is depicted and admired as an epitome of cosmopolitan collaboration: “composed of the choicest manufacturers of various nations,” of “European broad-cloths and satins,” Indian muslin, Persian embroidered silk and shawls (*Travels* 281). Yet, this collaboration results in heavy clothing, layers heaped upon layers that make movement difficult and foster indolent habits. Only few years later, Lord Byron would flaunt at dinner parties his Albanian costume, embodying the pleasures, albeit not only, of exhibitionist and exotic cosmopolitanism. Abu Talib’s version of the Turkish costume registers the aesthetic value of the cosmopolitan product, but subordinates it to the same category of utility and comfort that also guides his appreciation of architecture, coffee-house culture, discoveries and, broadly speaking, achievements of human endeavor. Both his knowledge of the provenance of the disparate parts of the costume (European, Indian, Persian) and its inscription in the activities of ordinary life dispel the aura of exoticism that surrounds Oriental clothing in the West, of which Byron’s Albanian costume is perhaps the most famous example. Furthermore, the costume as a patchwork of national differences materializes within the frame of Ottoman imperialism, hinting at the dark side of cosmopolitanism’s conviviality with colonization and indolent consumption. As I have argued elsewhere, the passage unfolding at Ali Pasha’s court in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, proposes two positions: the history-informed cosmopolitanism of the narrator and the protagonist’s spectatorial cosmopolitanism (Steiner 139). Abu Talib’s feeling of foreignness resembles Childe’s bewilderment in front of the Albanian dancer-warriors at Ali Pasha’s court. Abu Talib’s discontent, however, is formulated from the position of strangers lacking the luxury of translators who mediate between them and a culture that excludes the foreigner. He also refuses to aestheticize spectatorship to cater to his readers’ appetite for the exotic. While in Byron’s *Childe Harold*, the exotic serves a linguistically-determined exchange

between Byron and the British readers at home, Abu Talib contests such esoteric economy of knowledge.

Abu Talib's stereotype of the "indolent Turk" deserves attention, as it is indubitably a troubling pronouncement that challenges the understanding of this passage as a cosmopolitan assessment. For this reason, it must be noted that indolence is a vice that Abu Talib does not restrict to the Ottomans. Indeed, *Travels* opens with the dejected reflection on "the want of energy and the indolent dispositions" of Abu Talib's countrymen, that is, the very readership of his Persian original (*Travels* 59). Later he identifies indolent disposition with India itself, elaborating also on his own fatigue and frequent desire to repose while living there (*Travels* 114-15). The dichotomy that might suggest itself here between Eastern indolence and Western alacrity starts to dissolve first, when "desire of ease, and a dislike to exertion" (209), the dissipative use of time thrown away "in sleeping, eating, and dressing," and the urge to "pamper their appetites" appear in Abu Talib's essay on British flaws; and second, when moral character is linked to climate (115).¹⁶ First, desire of ease and idleness seem the symptoms of subjects living in the greatest contemporary empires: the British and the Ottoman. Second, an environmentalist explanation of character brings Abu Talib in close proximity to European Enlightenment, in particular Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* (1750), which argued that climate and modes of living affect morals, manners, and consequently modes of government.¹⁷ The last decades of the eighteenth-century registered the culmination of climate-theory in Britain: during these years, "Britons discussed human differences" by way of "frequently linking the condition of the body to the development of the mind" (Wheeler 242). Abu Talib's own experience discards notions of ethnic essentialism. Arguing that the human body can adapt to diverse geographical conditions, he pictures identity as moveable and modifiable. For example, he illustrates adaptability and climacteric contingency through his own experience of adaptation: although raised in India, subdued

easily by a one-mile walk, even when dressed in light fabric, and accustomed to sleeping several times a day without feeling refreshed, in the cold Irish weather, Abu Talib covered in heavy clothes would walk seven to eight miles daily and sleep less than in India without feeling fatigued: “on the contrary, I had a keen appetite, and found myself every day get stronger and more active” (*Travels* 114). Such a view of human “cosmopolitan fitness” guided thinkers like Montesquieu but also philosophers of the American Enlightenment, against another model of climate/humoral theory that defended the essential incompatibility between certain kinds of constitutions and climates (Schlereth 34; Wheeler 263).¹⁸ More importantly, the discourse of adaptability grounds Abu Talib’s national stereotypes in a larger frame of universal human constitution that could serve as the very basis for a cosmopolitan critique.

This is relevant to his scathing depiction of Constantinople’s coffee-house: apart from being a discouragement to foreign travels, whose understanding and voice are drowned in the din of local conversation, could this depiction also stand for “a saving” cosmopolitan critique? And if so, on what idea of sharedness is this critique based? One possible avenue in this area of reflection is opened by Abu Talib’s repeated engagement with indolence as the Other of the motivation that compels him on his long journey in search of employment: cultural, scientific, and spiritual knowledge (the last part of his tour is a pilgrimage). Strikingly, this juxtaposition between indolence and knowledge, although sharpened by his experience of the Ottoman coffee-house, germinates in his critique of the English “desire of ease and dislike of exertion” as a defect that “prevents them from perfecting themselves in science, and exerting themselves in the service of their friends” (*Travels* 209-10). Indolence curtails that curiosity for knowledge that Abu Talib deems “an honour and an ornament” of the human species alone, a common passion planted in everyone that awaits to be cultivated through exertion (*Travels* 60). This is the shared propensity at the foundation of Abu Talib’s

cosmopolitanism, very similar one might add to the propensity endorsed by the British Enlightenment which, as Barbara Benedict shows, “reconceived curiosity as the very identity of mankind, the mark of our difference from both beasts and angels” (Benedict 22).

It must be emphasized, however, that I am suggesting points of convergences rather than Abu Talib’s cosmopolitan ontology being modelled upon a Western version or his treatment of curiosity as a replication of Western longing for knowledge. His anthropocentric valorization of curiosity as “an honour and an ornament” is redolent, for instance, of Wollstonecraft’s in *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), where curiosity is ascribed the power to “fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them [humans] to rank as lords of the creation” (Wollstonecraft 65). I understand this convergence to testify to simultaneously shared views by people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as to a common eagerness to think about what makes humans human and the shared properties among them that give rise to countless particularities. In other words, such convergences bear testimony to a desire to think of a shared origin and constitution, if not calling.

For Abu Talib, his travels confirm and cultivate a prior belief in a commonality preceding and surpassing ethnic or national properties. His account proposes itself as a narrative of inter-civilizational dialogue of which comparative criticism is a marker of reflective engagement with otherness and a remedy to cultural isolationism and relativism. In such a light, a critique of imperialistic gluttony (British and Ottoman), at work in both sedentary and over-productive economies that undermine the quest for knowledge either by abandoning it or by perverting its utility to commercial benefit, can be a saving critique as long as this critique seeks to preserve the shared propensity. As Gerard Delanty, I believe, rightly propounds: “Cosmopolitanism cannot be entirely separated from the normative vision of an alternative society and [...] this imaginary is also present as a cultural model within the

cultural traditions of societies as a form of immanent transcendence” (Delanty 64). Put differently, cosmopolitanism cannot be unconditioned hospitality, but inherently censuring “hostipitality.” In Abu Talib’s travel account, the juxtaposition of de-essentialized indolence to knowledge-seeking curiosity and the dissemination of achievements, rendered in the metaphor of one candle that lights a thousand, follows a defining trait of the cosmopolitan imaginary. It is a symptom of this sensibility—as well as of the power of metaphorical thinking—that the coffee-house in Baghdad is the worst because it is the darkest.

As mentioned earlier, the recurrence of the coffee-house in four different geographical and ethnic settings exemplifies procedures of methodological cosmopolitanism. Ulrich Beck coins the term methodological cosmopolitanism to describe “an experience ‘at ground level’” and “bodily materialized” grappling “with the complex realities of the ‘excluded others’” (Beck 31). The cosmopolite must be in a state of fluctuating moments of association and dissociation, in which a question such as “who are we as a nation or ethnic, religious group?” is increasingly replaced by “who am I as a person because and despite my roots in a certain national, ethnic or religious group?” (Beck 31). It is telling that such fluctuations occur during his stay in Turkey, Abu Talib’s place of origin by descent, and during his frequent encounters with Muslims and Indians. This is the segment in his *Travels* with the strongest identity shifts and moments of elitist dissociation that destabilize anticipations of a homogenous East or Oriental identity. He declines, for example, introduction to a group of Indian Fakeers, residing in a monastery in Constantinople, on the assumption that they must have been an “assemblage of low, ignorant people, smokers of opium” (*Travels* 287).¹⁹ A little later, his Muslim companions take offence at Abu Talib’s preference of the comfortable house of a Christian (the English Consul at Constantinople) over the arrangement suggested by a Mohammedan of Pasha’s rank, a decision that Abu Talib explains as a choice between “the uncomfortable mode of living of the Turks” and “the hospitable reception” of the

English (*Travels* 335). Complex reconfigurations of ethnic varieties in the regions of the Ottoman Empire, foreshadowed already in France and Italy, seem to call forth Abu Talib's desire for England, its cleanness, structures, comforts, and hospitality. In an amicable but important altercation due to his impatience (in his book, ironically enough, an English flaw) to return home, he reproaches the representative of the East India Company in Bussora of having "forgotten all his English principles," to which the man replies that, "spoiled by the luxuries and attention of the people in London," Abu Talib has become "impossible to please" (*Travels* 342). It is almost as if a process of Anglicization takes root as the Indian travel approaches home. Such confused boundaries of ethnic character between the Indian who cannot have enough Englishness and the Englishman who thinks the Indian has had too much of it is not only ironic but also symptomatic of the complexities to which a burgeoning literature on cosmopolitanism tries to do justice.

Despite these instances of dissociation from local cultures, ascribing to Abu Talib aloofness—a marker of Diogenes's cosmopolitan renouncement of the polis—would underappreciate all the encounters that enrich him with a sense of a shared humanity where least expected, especially in the form of hospitality and conversation, like his stay with a learned and religious Sunni Muslim (Abu Talib is a Shiite), the head of a multi-ethnic household (*Travels* 334). At a certain point, even an anthropocentric ethos relaxes when animals are mentioned as agents of help and included in the company of co-travels that have made Abu Talib's journey easier. Lending spiritual flavor to the idea of utility in his praise of the perseverance of Arabian horses, Abu Talib writes: "we ought to be grateful to every person or thing that has been useful to us" (*Travels* 309). Indeed, this thickness of identification invalidates the (Neo-)Stoic view of the cosmopolitan self as encapsulated by concentric circles of identification, with the closest circle being that of the immediate family and the farthest representing an allegiance with the world community. The messiness of

(dis)associations, especially in this part of *Travels*, bears out the “cross-cutting allegiances”—whether ethnic, racial, religious or interspecies—that do not fit in the concentric model purported by the Stoic tradition (Connolly 184). In this respect, Abu Talib’s cosmopolitanism complicates this model, proving its fundamental instability against the test of lived experience.

The Cosmopolitan Local Reader

The critique of particular practices exemplified by the case of the coffee-house in Constantinople couches Abu Talib’s great investment in the local. In a telling episode that meditates on the life of a rare bird of the South Atlantic Ocean, Abu Talib puts abiding faith in some sort of rootedness, writing: “It is said that these birds never go to land, but form nests of weeds and the scum of the sea and bring forth their young; but this story appears very improbable” (*Travels* 91). The passage conveys an image of home that is attached to land, and more loosely to settlement. The floating eggs that Abu Talib treats with incredulity function as embodiments of what Rosi Braidotti calls “nomadic cosmopolitanism,” a specific feminist figuration of being in the world (Braidotti 5). Nomadic cosmopolitanism germinates in such cultural figurations of physical mobility as the gypsy and the wandering Jew, but as Braidotti explains, not literal travel is a prerequisite of nomadic cosmopolitanism but a performative metaphor of travel that enables “otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge,” through a “sense of intensive interconnectedness” (Braidotti 5-6). At the start of his five-year tour, Abu Talib seems to distrust the figure of the perpetually floating nest. So closely is land associated with home that after three months at sea he admits: “the sight of land brought tears into my eyes” and his account ends with a return to “native shores” (*Travels* 76, 352). Yet his sense of

cosmopolitan interconnectedness materializes on these native shores, an unbounded synecdoche for home, where he records in writing the impressions stored in memory about the foreign cultures and customs, flora and fauna encountered during his journey on three continents.

Strikingly, his book also starts with an address to his local readership: an address imbued both with a desire for conviviality and necessity of criticism. In itself, the written shape of the encounters made available for his countrymen expresses Abu Talib's stubborn belief in the endurance of conviviality. However, it is a belief fraught with a nagging apprehension of defeat. He fears that the worth of the knowledge provided by his narrative will be seized on, disseminated and adapted only by very few of his countrymen. There is a risk that it may not even exceed the circles of like-minded friends so that his work may turn up being little more than preaching to the already converted. The reason for such misgiving harks back to the aspect of national character, in particular: "the want of energy and the indolent disposition of my countrymen, and the many erroneous customs which exist in all Mohammedan countries and among all ranks of Mussulmans" (*Travels* 59). Nonetheless, although indolence in *Travels* will be later linked to climate theory, Abu Talib parts way with a deterministic view of national character in the style of Montesquieu, who had inferred humoral predispositions from climate and from a predisposition for ease the attraction of peoples living in torrid locations to despotic forms of government (Sebastiani 26); or, in the words of Oliver Goldsmith in *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774): "The warmth of their climate entirely influences their manners: they are slothful, submissive, and luxurious: satisfied with happiness alone, they find no pleasure in thinking, and contented with slavery, they are ready to obey any master" (Goldsmith 1: 371).

Abu Talib's analysis retains nothing of this climate-induced determinism but opts instead for a socio-economic autopsy of Indian society stratum *per* stratum: the wealthy and leisured

members, although financially endowed with means to promote knowledge, are “intoxicated with pride and luxury” and imprisoned in the provincial circuit of “scanty achievements”; the resources of the poor are exhausted by the sheer struggle to make a living, so that little time remains to nurture curiosity; while the large mass of readers, who derive from reading no other benefit than entertainment, “under pretence of zeal for their religion,” will dismiss a book that mediates foreignness (*Travels* 60). Abu Talib’s discontent with the rich, his justification of the poor, and his critique of the mass of readers who read merely to stay in the entertainment loop find numerous echoes in contemporaneous British critics of print culture, in particular opponents of the novel genre, who complained of an undiscerning and sensation-seeking bourgeois readership. Significantly enough, Abu Talib targets a taste diluted by “Tales and Romances” (60). Once more, his critique is double-edged and cuts across the Eastern-Western divide. An opinionated and self-complacent elite, poverty, religious fanaticism and a reading culture oriented toward consumption can obstruct the circulation of a book that, due to its immersion in experiences of alterity, Abu Talib admits, requires “more than a first glance” and “a little time for consideration” (*Travels* 60). By indicating deficiencies in his readership’s approach, Abu Talib pegs down the key trait of the cosmopolitan reader: patience and perseverance that surmounts the estrangement of the first glance without which curiosity either wanes or succumbs to exoticism; patience that traverses the distance imaginatively and, thus, substantiates Braidotti’s performative metaphor of travel.

As the writer of *Travels*, a *safar nama* about an extraordinary journey, Abu Talib reminds his readers that curiosity without perseverance, engagement, or “consideration” produces no knowledge. And where there is no knowledge, appreciation of otherness drifts in the shallow waters of exoticism. As Tzvetan Todorov brilliantly observes: “knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others: yet

praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be” (Todorov 264-5).

Although the fear of slow change looms largely over Abu Talib’s expectations, his substantial travels are eventually related in written form, because the horizon of his expectations for his country’s future is not framed by immutable indolence and submission to despotism (as Montesquieu and Goldsmith speculate). On the contrary, the potentiality of knowledge being acquired, circulated and put into practice motivates the careful recording of his account and its preparation for dissemination by the contemporaries mentioned in Stewart’s preface.

Indeed, the possibility of change through Abu Talib’s testimony rings as real as its completion impossible, when Abu Talib takes comfort in that Arabian proverb that could inform a decolonial vision of cosmopolitanism, whether understood as a personal ethos or a political, legal, and economic option: “We are not to abandon the whole, because we cannot obtain the whole,” the proverb goes (*Travels* 60). The whole, the world conceived as a dwelling of sociable, unperturbed and unconditioned conviviality, free of censure and management, may be unattainable, but this impossibility does not translate into a premise of surrender and justified indolence, to refer a last time to a vice that Abu Talib sees as both a source and excuse for negligence. Ultimately, unsaturable success implements an incentive to hone the local eye to view home as a structuring pattern of the unfinished but interconnected whole.

Notes

¹ Fisher considers his study to be a timely continuation to Rozina Visram’s pioneering study.

² Hereafter cited in the text as *Travels*.

³ Mignolo offers the following distinction and alternative: “Narratives of cosmopolitan orientation could be either managerial (what I call *global designs* – as in Christianity, nineteenth-century imperialism, or late-twentieth century neo-liberal globalization) or emancipatory (what I call *cosmopolitanism* – as in Vittoria, Kant or Karl Marx, leaving aside the differences in all of these projects), even if they are oblivious to the saying of

the people that are supposed to be emancipated. The need for a critical cosmopolitanism arises from the shortcomings of both.” It is not clear, however, how critical cosmopolitanism can keep clear of managerial moves.

⁴ I refer here in particular to Mignolo’s insistence to propose decolonial cosmopolitanism as fundamentally anti-Western, and very often cosmopolitanism itself as a uniquely Western preoccupation. Carl Raschke, for example, argues that Mignolo tends to disregard the divergences, trajectories and re-appropriations of Western and non-Western knowledge by local (decolonial) cosmopolitanism. A similar counterargument is mounted by Gerard Delanty, who suggests that even at what we take as its inception among the ancient Greeks, cosmopolitanism was not a Western construct but the coalescing of Western and Eastern influences. Jacques Derrida’s concept of the “trace” helps exit the maelstrom of the inception of cosmopolitanism, by defying the concept of origin itself, because the trace “is not only the disappearance of origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 66).

⁵ On the impossibility of hospitality that deserves its name, see p. 386. In several interviews, Derrida calls unconditional hospitality “pure” hospitality.

⁶ In “Managing the Translation of *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*” (currently under review), I discuss the English translation of *Travels* as an act of unfinished conviviality, arguing that Charles Stewart’s modifications and omissions unfold the ambivalence that cosmopolitanism and translation have in common. Stewart explains his decision to translate *Travels* as being in the spirit of Abu Talib’s commitment to the dissemination of useful knowledge. Comparing Stewart’s decisions and introduction of Abu Talib with Victorian reviews of *Travels*, I conclude, that although not devoid of managerial efforts to domesticate *Travels*, Stewart’s translation does not mount the aggressive, disciplinary Orientalism of mid-nineteenth century reviewers.

⁷ Pratap Banu Mehta critically addresses the currency of this conceit (638).

⁸ Cited in Khan, *Muslim Perceptions*, p. 7. Shah ‘Alam’s *Diwan-I Aftab*, Bodl. Persian MS. Ouseley 94.

⁹ Subrahmanyam considers the coexistence of millenarianism in Europe, Asia and Africa to be a trigger of modernity and the basis for the ambition of a universal kingdom underlying imperialist conquests, European and other. Thus, millenarianism qualifies as a cosmopolitan impetus, albeit a not uniquely Western one. Neither are its implications in imperial practices uniquely Western.

¹⁰ For Abu Talib's critique, see also Khan's commentaries drawn from the original manuscript (Khan, *Muslim Perceptions* 251).

¹¹ The Directors of the Company asked specifically for Abu Talib to fill one position, but after detailed inquiry, it became known that Abu Talib had passed away a couple of months previously.

¹² Mignolo explains this restricted and temporary participation in dominant structures to be compatible with delinking attitudes, insisting that this is no surrender.

¹³ Abu Talib's words echo Frances Bacon's in *New Atlantis* (183-4).

¹⁴ Tihanov calls cosmopolitanism a "marker" of "recalibrations" of the polis, where the polis includes not only the demos of the nation-state, but also sub-nationally and transnationally formed communities (Tihanov 134).

¹⁵ The centrality Abu Talib accords to curiosity is in sharp contrast with Lewis's insistence on a lack of curiosity among Muslims: Abu Talib, too, voices dissatisfaction with his countrymen's uncultivated curiosity, however, making this contingent on socio-economic factors.

¹⁶ The British come away from the text looking somewhat less indolent than the apathetic "smokers of opium of Hindoostan and Constantinople," but the comparison implies an underhanded virtue (*Travels* 210).

¹⁷ A prominent expounder of climate-theory was the German anthropologist Johann Blumenbach, who in his *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775) maintained that different developments of the human skeleton are due to climate and conditions of living, but that these distinctions are not profound enough to suggest polygenesis.

¹⁸ Schlereth mentions Thomas Jefferson who, on the grounds of this "cosmopolitan fitness," justified the mission of human kind to explore and found new societies all over the earth; a line of thought that reveals the proximity and entanglements of cosmopolitanism with imperial ambition/mission.

¹⁹ There are other moments that echo similar dissociations from "the assembly of low, ignorant people," for example, Abu Talib's treatment of servants who accompany him on his travels and, mentioned only in passing, are left out of his vision of conviviality. The subject deserves separate attention, but as a preliminary remark, one could argue that such exclusions confirm this essay's claim that Abu Talib's conviviality is conditioned on the circulation of knowledge. However, other instances of appreciation of help, not least, the help of the Arabian horse, make it difficult to speak of an unambiguously elitist bias.

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