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# Cosmopolitanism in Silicon Valley: An Analysis of Identity and Community

Gabriela Joseph

## Summary

*The classic form of the nation-state is quickly disintegrating in favor of more fluid forms of cultural identity. Much of this is attributed to the impact of globalization. And in the wake of a hyper-connected global order, there is little doubt that cosmopolitanism is one the most relevant discourses of the coming century. But how is this abstract notion grounded and operationalized? Who are the cosmopolitans? And what does cosmopolitanism look like? This paper hopes to examine cosmopolitanism within the context of Silicon Valley by redefining what it means to be cosmopolitan, presenting the narratives of three individuals, and addressing the classist critique of cosmopolitanism.*

## INTRODUCTION

The classic form of the nation-state is quickly disintegrating in favor of more fluid forms of cultural identity (Tsolidis, 2013; Bhabha, 1994; Reno, 2016; Anderson, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Bammer, 1994; Habermas, 1994). Much of this is attributed to the impact of globalization. And in the wake of a hyper-connected global order, there is little doubt that cosmopolitanism is one the most relevant discourses of the coming century (Calloni, 2012; Gunn, 2013; Binnie et al, 2006). But how is this abstract notion grounded and operation-alized? Who are the cosmopolitans? And what does cosmopo-litanism look like?

This paper hopes to examine cosmopolitanism within the context of Silicon Valley. According to John Collison, an Irish immigrant and co--founder of the payments start-up Stripe, Silicon Valley is a fragile and unique pheno-menon: "It is not the default state of the world." (Manjoo, 2017) Like



other highly industrialized centers, Silicon Valley's industries are reliant on immigrants. But Silicon Valley's start-up mentality relies on foreigners not just as a labor force but as sources for innovative inventions, making the area a magnet for young entrepreneurs worldwide and a diverse environ-ment

ready to foster cosmopolitan sentiments. Despite ar-guments that within urban centers, ethnic commu-nities live side-by-side rather than together, I argue that in

the case of Silicon Valley, residents are still exposed to transnational ways of thinking and framing their identities, creating a cosmopolitan environment.

In this paper, I define cosmopolitanism as a positive attitude towards social and cultural difference. People within Silicon Valley, even

having lived in isolated ethnic communities, are exposed to other cultures that broaden their “imagined communities” to include inter-national ideals and a somewhat positive outlook, if not familiarity, towards foreign cultures. I examine this point through maps of ethnic divisions within San Jose, identifying the limits to how well they can represent cosmopolitanism (or lack of). Next, I present narratives of three individuals, Omar is a university student who recently moved to Silicon Valley from Dubai in the hopes of becoming a 3D modeler, Emili is a mother who moved to the area decades ago from Brazil, and works for Seagate Technology in Cupertino, and Tanya is a masters graduate whose parents decided to move to San Jose from New Delhi, India, allowing her mom to start her own consulting company.

Because these three individuals, while diverse in culture and worldviews, all work within the tech industry, and have the means to travel and live comfortably, I address the classist critique of cosmopolitanism in this paper’s final section. Although it lies outside the scope of my argument—that Silicon Valley’s diversity fosters cosmopolitanism—it is pertinent to further discussions of cosmopolitanism, its capacity, and how the term can be expanded or re-examined.

### *Cosmopolitanism Defined*

The origins of cosmopolitanism are typically traced to ancient Greece and the story of Diogenes, a rebellious free-spirit compelled by no law and bound to no king (McClay et al, 2014). Diogenes was labeled a trouble maker, and the Greeks considered his attachment to the “cosmos” to mean that he had no allegiances at all, that his apparent lack of loyalty signified Diogenes to be a selfish and dangerous man. The Greeks’ skepticism can be taken to mean that the disagreements between locals and cosmopolitans—an observation made all

too clear in the aftermath of the Brexit and the U.S. presidential election—is nothing new.

For some, cosmopolitanism advocates interconnectedness and the prospect of de-centering values to form a kind of “planetary consciousness” while still celebrating difference (Warf, 2012; Gunn, 2013). Calloni (2012) describes cosmopolitanism as an ideology that overcomes intrinsic borders as well as maintaining a constant renegotiation of boundaries, like the continuous debate between cultural norms and universal rights (p. 155, 160). For Beck (2012) cosmopolitanism means internal globalization, where the individual is open to a pluralization of borders. Personally, this definition feels pessimistic. I grew up believing that I mattered as an individual, that in the grand scheme of things my story matters. But to realize that we are all one species, that boundaries are meaningless and that all individuals irritatingly equal, I would have to accept my own insignificance. So I can understand the hesitance in accepting this kind of abstract notion of transnationality.

Others condemn cosmopolitanism as utopian, Westernized (Tsolidis, 2013; Shome, 2012), and as expressing “the very inability of upper and middle classes to assume their responsibility towards the ‘silent majority’ of those excluded from their wealth and privilege” (Roudometof, 2005). For those with restricted mobility it is hard to imagine “cosmopolitan” cities as anything but elitist. And it is almost absurd to imagine a global consideration towards all of humanity (Steinhoff, 2013).

Both sides define cosmopolitanism as a kind of freedom from the nationalistic mind set, an ideology that gives birth to an awareness and consideration of other cultures. But the definition of “consideration” or “empathy” with regards to cosmopolitanism are also heavily debated.

Pogge and Benhabib consider charity and duty to others a crucial part of cosmopolitanism, but the average person would probably find it difficult to love strangers on the other side of the planet as much as their own inner circle of family and friends. So for the purposes of this paper, I confine my definition of cosmopolitanism to be a conscious “awareness”—the positive attitude and disposition towards social and cultural difference.

Within Silicon Valley these two conflicting narratives can be seen: we witness a global community in the area’s ethnic make-up and an atomized bubble of mobile elites in the area’s corporate businesses. But whether residents live within separate cultural and class groups, the communities within Silicon Valley are still exposed to transnational ways of thinking, making the area “cosmopolitan” in its awareness and disposition towards other nations and cultures.

### *Ethnic Communities Revisited*

Below are two images from Dustin Cable’s 2013 “Racial Dot Map” of the U.S., highlighting ethnic communities in the San Francisco Bay Area<sup>1</sup>. Cable was at the time a Senior Policy Associate at University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, and his map (comprised of over 300 million dots corresponding to a resident’s racial ethnicity) is largely regarded as a snapshot of segregation in many American cities (Haensch and Rorem, 2015).

At a glance, the map suggests that Asian, White, and Latino communities live fairly separate, parallel existences. However, upon further investigation, the ethnic lay out shown is not enough to dismiss the area’s cosmopolitan nature. Firstly, within the ethnic and racial di-

visions are differing cultures. Secondly, while the map shows that people reside in somewhat segregated communities, it represents but a snapshot of residency, not daily experiences where these communities would interact

The Racial Dot Map, according to their website, use the racial labels “Asian,” “White,” and “Hispanic” to encompass the main racial identifications. But “Asian” in Silicon Valley could mean someone of Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Japanese or Korean descent (Simonson, 2015) – six cultures that have distinctly different languages, religions, traditional practices and societal norms. “White” could refer to someone of Canadian, German, French, Irish or Swedish descent. The “Hispanic” or “Latin” label could be referring to Mexicans, Argentinians or Brazilians, countries and cultures with diverse ethnic make-ups within themselves. Neither does the map differentiate between native-born and immigrant residents—people who would represent different ways of thinking and viewing the world at large.

Secondly, measured as an attitude and disposition towards cultural difference, cosmopolitanism is conceptualized through everyday negotiations of cultural diversity which are better examined through daily accounts and experiences rather than residency (Binnie et al., 2006), beginning with the “banal cosmopolitanisms” (Beck, 2012) of consumer goods. In a study on cosmopolitan attitudes in France and the UK, Rahsaan and Desoucey (2016) examined meal offering at various supermarkets and found that the “level of comfort and familiarity with foreign gastronomic products among consumers [in both countries is] a promising indicator of robust cosmopolitanism.” (p. 86)

<sup>1</sup>All of the data displayed on the maps are from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2010 Summary File 1 dataset made publicly available through the National Historical Geographic System.

Wong (2006) argues that Chinese immigrants who live in Silicon Valley are all able to create transnational social networks through their professional careers within the tech-industry. The social networks and daily lives



that the Chinese immigrants Wong observed were “totally different from the traditional ones” (Wong, 2006). Wong’s findings are

one example of how

localism is significant within communities in Silicon Valley, especially immigrants and second-generation, but so too is globalization. Even residing among other Chinese people, what they experienced was still foreign and allowed for transnational connections.

I think that people within Silicon Valley, even having lived in isolated ethnic communities, are exposed to other cultures that broaden what Benedict Anderson termed “imagined communities.” He used the phrase to describe nationalist sentiment, but I think the concept can be used to describe any big city or area. There is no way for a single person to meet every other member of their society, Anderson (1991) explains, so the connection we feel towards those around us is purely imagined. We fabricate similarities to feel like a coherent group. Being exposed to other cultures, if only superficially, help to develop a broader understanding of who “us” could encompass.

### *Narrative Accounts*

Omar, 21, moved to San Jose from Dubai two years ago to study at Cogswell Polytechnical College, an almost satirical representation of Silicon Valley. The ‘campus’ is a one-story building nestled between Cisco Systems branch offices, the Palmer College of Chiropractics, and Samsung, whose fluorescent logo shines “like the Bat Signal” at night. Cogswell provides its 700-student body with a dozen majors relating to digital animation, audio tech

nology, game design and virtual reality, which is perfect for Omar. “I came here, to Silicon Valley specifically, for the tech industry,” he explains. “Back [in Dubai] there’s just architect and business [related jobs] so as a 3D modeler, this is the place for me.”

Omar currently lives with three other Cogswell university students in Crescent Village Apartments, a newly constructed complex of over 1,000 apartment suites 10 minutes walking distance from campus. The apartment complex contains a park, gym, pool, and most notably (at least for the Cogswell students) is the recent addition of Curry Up Now, an Indian restaurant known for authentic gourmet street food. Their menu has traditional items like the Marwari kachori chaat alongside modern creations like the “hella vegan burrito bowl” and “the American punjabi,” making the food a strange blend of conventional and radical, much like the people eating it.

When asked what the transition was like, going from Dubai to Silicon Valley, Omar explained:

[Dubai is] similar to this. But people were more closed off in Dubai because of cultural reasons, I think. The city is diverse for the area, meaning there’s lots of people from different Middle Eastern countries and some Europeans, but they are more guarded towards each other. When I go back I feel like people are closed minded. There’s still certain things, like the LGBT community, that just aren’t accepted. And now when I go they think of me as an American. They say I sound different, like, I have a California accent now.

Before moving to San Jose, Omar was told to be conscious about the stereotypes people in America might have because of his Middle Eastern background. But after moving into his apartment and meeting other Cogswell students he

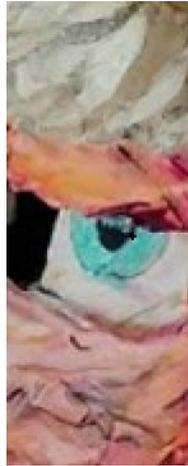
found that “not a lot of people were like that,” and confessed to feeling more at home in Silicon Valley than Dubai. Living in a multicultural environment, he says—working at Cogswell, living with African American and LGBT roommates, and general day-to-day interactions with the community—has helped him see other viewpoints. By being in contact with the “others” of his life growing up in Dubai, Omar created a sort of empathetic connection to these groups, allowing for transnational ways of thinking and cosmopolitan sentiments to take hold.

Emeli first came to the U.S. in 1991, and much later in life. Before that she had lived her childhood and a portion of her adult life in Campinas, Brazil, a metropolitan city just Northwest of Sao Paulo. She and her husband, at the time working as software engineers in Microsoft, received an offer to transfer to a different branch office in San Jose. Emeli currently resides in Scotts Valley, in a newly built cul-de-sac walking distance from Scotts Valley high school in the West and overlooking lush foothills and valleys to the East. Everyday, while her husband commutes to Mountain View for his job at Google, she drives to Cupertino, where she works as a program manager for Seagate Technology LLC.

Seagate is bordered by a Trinethra Indian Supermarket, the Cupertino Library, advertising Chinese tutoring centers, and St. Joseph of Cupertino Parish, a Roman Catholic Church whose origins trace back to a tiny village in Southern Italy now called “Copertino.” Within the company, Emeli describes her friends and coworkers as “diverse,” saying that she now knows immigrants from Germany, Russia, Colombia, and Japan, and has consequently become more familiar with their different cultures. Despite having lived in Campinas for the majority of her life, and her dedication to visiting family at least every 2 years, Emeli now describes herself as feeling American as

well as Brazilian. Like Omar, she considers her newfound life in the Silicon Valley tech industry “home.”

To me home is where you resonate with the people around you. So, for me I would consider my home to be here [in Silicon Valley] with my family, because I feel safe and in good company. And I know my kids, since they were born here, definitely identify ‘home’ as being in Scotts Valley and California in general.



Tanya’s story is slightly different. She was born to Indian parents who came to the US in 1995 and settled in San Jose because of the abundant job opportunities. Currently her dad manages supply chain manufacturing at Apple, and her mom owns a software consulting company. Tanya explains that “it would have been extremely difficult, close to impossible really, for [her] mom to have built her own consulting company if she and Dad had decided to remain in India.” Tanya grew up in a predominantly Indian and Christian neighborhood in South San Jose. Through elementary and middle school, she attended Challenger, a school known for having a majority Asian population and upholding “Tiger Mom” standards of school work.

Now 23, she studies astrophysics as a graduate student at the University of Illinois and is a rabid fan of anything Star Wars related. Like Omar and Emeli, she describes herself as American and says that her parents, even having lived most of their lives in India, “definitely would describe themselves as American.” Like the Chinese immigrants Wong (2006) describes, the cultures Tanya was exposed to growing up were neither inherently Indian or American, allowing for a more transnational viewpoint.

All three individuals share a sense of cosmopolitan sentiment after living in

Silicon Valley's multicultural environment. But while the three people I interviewed were of diverse cultural backgrounds, they all represent a group of people with high mobility and the means to pay for a higher education and job training.

### *Discussion*

This paper has examined Silicon Valley's ability to foster cosmopolitan attitudes through a discussion on the localism of ethnic/immigrant communities and the narratives of three individuals. Here I feel obligated to recognize the people left out of this discussion, namely those who live outside of Silicon Valley's tech industry, and the low-income residents struggling with the area's rising home prices (Stone, 2015).

In looking at the cosmopolitan nature of urban centers like Silicon Valley, it's important to be conscious of the "bubbles" we all inhabit. What feels diverse on the inside may be interpreted as aristocracy to the excluded. If, as Douthat (2016) claims, the great battles of the coming century really will be fought between nationalists and internationalists, then there is a deep need for cosmopolitan communities to recognize those that feel excluded and to not be bubble-blind. There is a need for a middle path between rigid nationalism and xenophobia, and the extremes of open borders and existing as international elites (Benhabib, 1999; McClay et al., 2014; Polson, 2009). Contrary to popular belief, I believe that globalization and localization go hand in hand, and the concepts of family, community and nation inseparably interconnected. (McClay et al., 2014; Wong, 2006)

The people of the United States are in gridlock, not because of cultural differences, but economic disparity. Each view of the world is consequently changed, with communities in San Francisco and Palo Alto more likely to identify with cities like Paris, Dubai, or London. It seems that those with higher education and mo-

bility prefer like-minded people half-way around the world than to interact with those outside of their "bubble." The question for the future is not whether someone has a positive attitude and openness towards cultural difference, but whether they can positively interact with income and value difference. 

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