



COSMOPOLITAN CULTURE: George Catlin's American-ness

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The concluding line of George Catlin's last book reads: "If I were to [...] bequeath to posterity the most important Motto which human language can convey, it should be in *three words*—"shut-your-mouth" [Catlin, *Shut Your Mouth...*: 91].¹ In its context, which will be discussed later in this essay, that "motto" has a dual meaning. The prevailing sense of the expression lies, however, in a proverb Catlin heard among the North American Indians: "If you would be wise, open first your eyes, your ears next, and last of all, your mouth, that your words may be words of wisdom, and give no advantage to thine adversary" [91]. In the 1830s, George Catlin explored the North American frontier, meeting, observing and painting native people, and later mounted exhibitions that emphasized that proverb's lesson on the importance of receptivity. Always an adventurer, the artist was driven by curiosity, particularly about cultural difference. As he spent his most productive decades as a cultural outsider—beyond the western frontier of the United States, in Europe, and in South America—his case provides an extraordinary study of how one early American perceived and maneuvered cultural identity. Ridiculed and respected during his lifetime as "Indian-loving Catlin" [Sarton: 77], the artist's ability to feel and write himself "at one" with both Native Americans and Europeans gave him a distinctively cosmopolitan nature; his receptive interactions with non-American citizens demonstrate a brand of American-ness that sought to simultaneously explore, permeate, mine and absorb other cultures. Catlin's adventures and the art they produced indicate his belief that American identity could be one driven by an openness to cultural diversity. He hoped that Americans approaching the foreign would seek to learn before pronouncing judgments—that they would open their eyes and ears before their mouths. He knew that his nation had much to gain from the application of that bit of Amerindian wisdom.

¹ Emphasis in original.

Catlin's deep engagement with Amerindian cultures convinced him that there was value in the respectful study of foreignness. Though his political attitudes toward native people were vexed—his Victorian belief in the march of progress meant that he imagined a scale of development from "savage" to "civilized"—his insistence that Amerindians should be allowed to be free of colonizing influences was *avant-garde*. His lifelong association with indigenous peoples provided another layer of differentiation between American and European cultural identities at a time when many American tourists traveled to Europe to become "cultured." With nineteenth-century Americans so self-conscious about the performance of their national identity on an international stage, Catlin's individual example of productive intercultural negotiation demands attention.

Upon his arrival in Liverpool, Catlin's simultaneously bewildered and self-assured reaction matches those commonly described in nineteenth-century travel accounts of Americans touring Europe for the first time, and, indeed, that of any traveler entering a foreign system. As he acclimated to English society, he exhibited his culture shock by complaining of the dirtiness of London [Catlin, *Adventures*: 1:15], falling prey to a scam of street beggars [1:17], and causing an accident by driving on the wrong side of the road [1:28]. Unlike more hapless tourists, though, Catlin learned the ropes quickly, and gained confidence in even the highest circles of society. He opened his exhibit in London in February of 1840, displaying his paintings and giving lectures alongside Indian handicrafts. For the next two years, Catlin showed his collection on his own, aided only by an American assistant. In an effort to draw more and more paying visitors, Catlin also hired English workers, painted and dressed them in Amerindian fashion, and trained them to pose in *tableaux vivants* illustrating scenes from Amerindian life. Two years later, he was joined serendipitously by a group of Ojibbeways who had come to Europe under the dubious protection of an American entrepreneur, and later by two more groups of Amerindians, all of whose performances entertained visitors to Catlin's exhibition in Great Britain, France, and Belgium for several years.

Catlin's two major books describe his two eight-year experiences in the "*Far West*" and the "*Far East*" [1:v]—that is, along and beyond the American frontier, and in Europe. Scholarship on that second book has focused on Catlin's experience as the manager of the Amerindians in Europe. Kate Flint has pointed out that the book's depiction of Amerindian encounters with Victorian society is an intriguing example of a politically-charged "contact zone" [Flint: 508] and called for further investigation of the text as it can provide a glimpse into Catlin's exhibition and the tourism of the Amerindians as a site of cross-cultural exchange, asking not only how European audiences responded to the show but "What did Native Americans bring away from their encounters, and what traces of this legacy passed into the continuing history of cross-cultural relations with Anglos?" [511]. Christopher Mulvey analyzed Catlin's book in the wider context of nineteenth-century American travel writing, comparing its depictions of the Amerindian response to Europe with those in writings of American citizens as well as recovered narratives written by Amerindians themselves, and concluded that Catlin, in serving as mediator between cultures, was able to present the U.S. as an "ideal middle" [Mulvey: 261]. Mulvey attributed that

balanced status to the book's ongoing comparison of social conditions in "civilized" Europe and "savage" Indian territories; throughout the two thirds of the narrative that deal with the artist's shepherding of the Amerindians around Europe, there is a discussion of the relative moral merits of the two cultures presented via the mutual responses of Amerindians and Europeans to one another. The sum of these comparisons may have led readers of the book to see American society as a middle ground between the refinement and decadence of European culture and the harsh but more natural and honorable realities of the culture then universally called "savage," but it is clear that Catlin thought in terms of a civilization versus wilderness division which placed whites on one side and Amerindians on the other; he never shied from implicating Americans and U.S. policy in the wrongs "civilization" committed against the Amerindians.

I argue that Catlin's between-ness was personal; he himself, rather than his country as a whole, offered an ideal middle ground between what were perceived to be two very different cultures. Catlin presented himself and was generally received by Europeans as a heroic, model American citizen. Throughout his career, though, he remained dissatisfied with his reception in his own country. The symbol of that reception was the failure of the U.S. government to purchase his collection, which he hoped could be used to begin a national museum. To Catlin, that failure was not only a personal one, but also and more importantly an indication of a wider refusal of his countrymen to acknowledge the value of Amerindian cultural heritage to the developing cultural identity of the new nation. His repeated efforts to educate anyone who would listen were not so much advocacy as a sort of indoctrination. If Americans could understand the culture of the indigenes they had displaced, they could both appropriate aspects of the identity of the "noble savage" and do all that could be done to atone for the injustices that had been wrought upon him. Catlin's desire to establish a national museum to display Amerindian culture harmonizes with theories of the imaginative, imperializing appropriation that accompanied the decimation of Native American populations.² Further, the cross-cultural understanding that would enable that appropriation would lead to other opportunities for cultural brokerage, and posit that the identity of Americans on the world stage should be a cosmopolitan one.³

Catlin's first two years in Europe, when he was situated as an American introducing English audiences to Indian-ness in the absence of Amerindians, are thus of particular interest. His descriptions of his earliest London exhibitions at the Egyptian Hall are marked by a response that was characteristic in American accounts of European travel: the disclosure of and (bemused if indignant) surprise at European ignorance on the subject of the United States.

Frustrated by the barrage of questions he deems silly asked by visiting Englishmen, Catlin's assistant, Daniel, generates and posts an "FAQ" with a long list of "answers" such as:

² For a discussion of such theories, see especially Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* and Fiedler's *The Return of the Vanishing American*.

³ My use of the term "cosmopolitan" follows that articulated in Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*.

The Indians in *America are not* cannibals. Mr. Catlin says there is no such thing.

No, there are no tribes that go entirely naked; they are all very decent.[...]

Mr. Catlin *is not* an Indian. [...]

The Americans are *white*, the same color exactly as the English, and speak the same language, only they speak it a great deal better, in general [Catlin, *Adventures*: 1:49].

The comic ignorance attributed to the English in this scene functions to delineate their inferiority in two ways. First, the passage pointedly highlights the common complaint of culture-shocked American travelers: foreigners are not only ignorant of the most basic facts about the United States, but they are also quite confident that their mistaken notions are true. Second, Catlin's position as an expert on a third culture, of which the English are also ignorant, shines an even brighter light on English provincialism. His expertise on a people that his audience imagines as exotic, difficult to access, and appealing thus enables him to invert the usual assumption that it was in Europe that one could access the richest cultural heritage; in the space of the Egyptian Hall, with its extensive display of artifacts from diverse and wide-ranging tribes, it is England that is the backwater. The American, as represented by Catlin, accesses Native cultures, but does not cross into them. Simultaneously, as the final "answer" quoted above makes clear, he displays his easy mastery of English culture.

That Catlin was conscious of his transformation from bewildered, fresh-off-the-boat tourist to cosmopolite traveler is clear in his occasional portrayal of his fellow Americans in Europe. His depictions of American naïveté match those often found in nineteenth-century travel writing: the unsophisticated bumpkin, so dazzled by the splendor of Europe that he does not even realize that he is a blundering fish out of water, and an embarrassing representative of his country. Among the earliest—and gentlest—examples of this species Catlin presents us his wife, who grossly underestimates the value of the gold she sees in the Bank of England vaults [1:87]. In this case, Catlin is sympathetic; his wife has not been in England long, and her gaffe is similar to those he himself committed during his European initiation, and readers of the book soon learn that Clara Catlin can adapt to foreign settings along with her husband. After all, having traveled extensively in Indian country, she is no cross-cultural novice.

Catlin has less sympathy for an American businessman he encounters while traveling ahead of his exhibition in Birmingham. Both men arrive late in the city, and the "commercial traveler" is at a loss. Although in the city for the first time himself, Catlin helps the man find a lodging house, where the two agree to share a room. When, not understanding the maid's accent or Britishisms, the businessman's rudeness inspires her refusal to serve his dinner, he complains "'isn't this the darndest strange country you ever saw in your life? Rot 'em, I can't get 'em to do anything as I want it done; they are the greatest set of numbskulls I ever saw'" [2:126]. Catlin gracefully smoothes things over with the maid. As the two are going to bed in the dark, the businessman, never having asked his new acquaintance his name, mentions that he has heard of Catlin's exhibition in London. Catlin remains

quiet when he claims to know the Iowas involved, and even to have mentored the artist. When Catlin wakes in the morning, he discovers that the businessman

Being about the room a little before me, where my name was conspicuous on my carpet-bag and writing-desk, &c., had from some cause or other thought it would be less trouble and bother to wend his way amongst these 'stupid and ignorant beings' alone, than to encounter the Indians and Mr. Catlin, and endeavor to obliterate the hasty professions he had made [...][2:129]

Gentlemanly Catlin treats his encounter with the "commercial traveler" as an amusing incident, but it is hard to miss his presentation of this hapless blusterer as an alternative version of himself. Easily recognizable as an early example of the oft-caricatured "ugly American," the stranger is a variation of the "tourist" so many nineteenth-century American "travelers" looked upon with disdain; his response to foreign culture is a neat opposite of Catlin's. Catlin makes an effort to understand and use the local dialect, but the oblivious stranger fails to realize the dialect even exists; Catlin speaks respectfully to the foreigners he meets, but the stranger barks at them; Catlin sees cultural differences as learning opportunities, but the stranger looks upon any deviations from his norm as inconvenient deficiencies. Catlin is the culturally-sensitive, self-assured cosmopolitan, and the stranger the unthinking, mercantile boor. Accepting Catlin's help, though, that boor seems to recognize the benefits of the more sophisticated approach: "God knows I'm obliged to you. You've got a sort o' way o' getting along ur' these ere darned, ignorant, stupid sort o' beings" [2:128]. Catlin hoped that his "way" would inspire his fellow Americans to revise their approach to foreign encounters.

Always the adventurer, Catlin was not content receiving the praises of his audiences or setting an example for his countrymen to follow. He was used to more exciting cross-cultural forays, and so decided to use his experience in the West to play with the English public's fascination with Indian culture. On several occasions he did so by disguising himself as an Indian. Preparations for these appearances were painstaking, involving the careful selection of costume and props, the application of paint to all visible skin, and the rehearsal of speech, dances, and manners. Catlin attended the Caledonian Ball with his friend the Hon. Charles A. Murray, who dressed as a member of the "Bois Brûlé" tribe, known for interpreting in Indian country, so that he could translate the Amerindian languages Catlin used into English, or, as he said, "Americaine" [1:71]. According to Catlin, the initial fearful response of the elite partygoers to his surprise entrance was quickly replaced by fascinated interest. Unrecognized by even close associates, the "Indians" were a great attraction. Catlin delighted in his contacts with nobility, even when his identity was unknown:

The introductions I had on that night, to lords and ladies, and to dukes and duchesses, as *Na-see-us-kuk*,[...] were honors certainly that [...] I could never have aspired to under any other name [1:74].

When, after a vigorous dance, the "Indians" paint began to run, Catlin's game was up, and receiving due acknowledgement for his performance, he walked home, unable to find a cab. A quick learner, Catlin did not dance at

the next ball he attended as “Na-see-us-kuk,” and remained undiscovered. He reveled not only in this “joke” he could play on his foreign audience, but also in the authenticity of the knowledge of Indian culture that enabled it. That knowledge facilitated his access to the highest level of London society. Not only did the exotic behavior and appearance of the “Indians” immediately make them the center of attention wherever they went, but it also gained them free admission to exclusive events [Roehm: 207]. His wife accompanied Catlin to the fundraising “Polish Ball” in Indian guise, because she was “inspired to see the splendor of the scene” [1:88].

Going native, however, was not the only way that Catlin could demand the attention of elite Europeans; he resorted to appearing in Indian guise only during the first phase of his sojourn abroad, in order to deal simultaneously with the anxiety of being newly arrived on the European scene and to test his ability to move between cultures. When Catlin was joined by groups of performing Native Americans for whom he acted as interpreter, his role as a cultural chameleon-performer shifted, and he crossed the channel in 1845 as an American artist and ethnographer. His relation of the responses of the Iowas who performed at his gallery to European culture are interesting even if they are second-hand, but Catlin’s ability to mediate between the two cultures is itself a fascinating performance of the appeal of his cosmopolitan identity. The increased foreignness of the French—Catlin had language difficulties⁴—led him to tread more carefully, as if his own unfamiliarity with France made him receive French ignorance with more sensitivity. Still, it was not long before Catlin expressed frustration with French bureaucracy or laughed, along with the Iowas, at the propensity of French women to lead dogs about the streets [Catlin, *Adventures*: 2:220].

Catlin considered his relationship with the French sovereign, King Louis-Philippe, among the most meaningful of his experiences abroad, even if it ultimately proved neither profitable nor likely to aid his *entrée* into Parisian intellectual circles.⁵ His letters reveal that, like many of his fellow Americans, he saw contact with the European aristocracy as triumphal. His letters to family at home reveal the awe and pride he felt at his success as a “greenhorn” and former “go-to-mill boy” in the brilliant courts [Roehm: 157, 234]. In Louis-Philippe, though, Catlin found more than impressive condescension. Half a century before, the future Citizen-King had spent several years in the United States, during which time he made several forays into Indian country and so, according to Catlin, knew “more of the great Western regions of America, and of the modes of its [sic] people, than one of a thousand Americans” [Catlin, *Adventures*: 2:318]. The two men shared a kindred interest in and affinity for Amerindians, and Louis-Philippe’s support meant Catlin and the Iowas were welcomed by the French nobility.

⁴ Catlin had learned French dialects from Canadian traders and Amerindians, and like many American visitors who had studied with non-native speakers, had trouble understanding the French.

⁵ George Catlin significantly prolonged his stay in France in order to complete an extensive second set of paintings commissioned by Louis-Philippe, a decision that became a financial catastrophe when the king was exiled. Not only did Catlin not receive his expected payment, but was forced to leave the country immediately himself, fearful of repercussions of his known friendship with the king. By the time he met Catlin, Louis-Philippe’s increasing conservatism had caused him to lose public support.

Catlin emphasized the King's cross-cultural awareness in his description of their first meeting when the Iowas were invited to the Tuileries:

His majesty in the most free and familiar manner (which showed that he had been accustomed to the modes and feelings of Indians) conversed with the chiefs, and said [...] "Tell these good fellows that I am glad to see them; that I have been in many of the wigwams of the Indians in America when I was a young man, and they treated me everywhere kindly, and I love them for it [...]"

"I am pleased to see their wives and little children they have with them here, and glad also to show them my family" [2:211-2].

Catlin valued the King's frank treatment of the Iowas, as it indicated that his cross-cultural experiences had left him able to see beyond limited social categories, and so demonstrated the transcendent potential of Catlin's own approach to foreign encounters. The distinctiveness of Louis-Philippe's response was further highlighted by the gifts he later sent to the group: a souvenir medal for each man, woman, and child, inscribed with his or her Iowa (not translated) name. This royal gift was a telling cross-cultural exchange; the Amerindians displayed surprise and some discomfort at receiving such individual recognition, as their custom was to receive gifts only collectively, or via their chief [2:240], yet they were much happier with the medals than with their usual gifts from European admirers: bibles, which they could neither read nor sell, and accumulated in great number. The King's appreciation for the Indians led him to appreciate Catlin, as well, and the two enjoyed having discussions of their respective adventures.

Catlin's reaction to one of Louis-Philippe's stories provides a key to his perspective on the import of their relationship. Catlin writes that while listening to the King's anecdote of returning to Philadelphia from the (then) frontier, he

Surprised his Majesty a little, and his listeners, and seemed to add a fresh interest to his narrative, by informing him that I was a native of Wilkesbarre, in the valley of Wyoming, and that while his Majesty was there I was an infant in my mother's arms, only a few months old [2:285].

To casual readers, Catlin's interjection may have seemed a charming comment upon the mysteries of fate. Who would have guessed that the paths of the humble American and the French royal would cross in two such different settings—that the sovereign entertaining and patronizing an artist in his palace may have, long ago, as a poor exile, stopped for refreshment at a wilderness cabin housing that very artist as an infant? In part, this is the kind of quaintly arresting, it's-a-small-world moment travelers often seek when getting to know new acquaintances; the effort to establish connections with those perceived as foreign is instinctive. Taken in the wider context of Catlin's writings and career, though, his revelation signals his belief in the power of his cosmopolitan enterprise. His presence in the French court, and the future King's presence in the backwoods of Pennsylvania affirms the potential of America as a powerfully unifying global force. To Catlin, American destiny was cosmopolitan. The discovery that the King and the mill-boy (may) have closed a circle in coming together to study the Amerindians demonstrates that cultural identity is fed, not diluted, when

individuals cross culture lines, and that facility for cross-cultural exchange can allow Americans to subvert entrenched social limitations. Just as it had allowed Catlin to transcend the circumstances of his birth, cosmopolitan culture-crossing could lead to broader American success.

Initially, Catlin profited materially as well as philosophically from his royal connection, as the King purchased copies of several of his paintings. He commissioned more, but Catlin did not have time to deliver them—or receive payment for his work—before the King’s family was forced to flee the country, never to return. As suggested by J.L. Rieupeyrou, who has pointed out that Catlin’s critical reception in Paris was not as roundly approving as he implied in his book, Catlin was, indeed, a greenhorn in the vibrant and politically-charged Parisian cultural scene, where dissent was brewing against the King’s policies. Were it not for the interference of George Sand and Charles Baudelaire, he may never have had enough visitors to his gallery to attract the notice of the King in the first place; Catlin’s naturalistic paintings went against fashionable schools of art, which called for more classical themes and settings [Rieupeyrou: 200]. Catlin’s lack of familiarity with European art and limited ability to read in French probably kept him unaware of these negative opinions of his artistic merit. Moreover, in his mind, his art was inextricably linked with his subject; he sought to record and display external subjects more than express his own imagination.

Catlin recorded his encounters with Sand only briefly and with Baudelaire not at all, but the two liberals—like the King—recognized a kindred spirit in the work of the American artist. The originality of his subject (European artists likely painted their “savages” in classical settings because they had no idea how to do otherwise) and the lifelike use of form and color struck Baudelaire as appealingly bold, demonstrating a respect for individual expression and natural reality [202]. Sand arranged a meeting with Catlin, fascinated by the cultural difference on display, and hoping to learn more about Amerindians. Acknowledging their meeting in his book, Catlin regrets that their intercourse was limited by his embarrassingly limited ability to speak French [2:245]; surely, had the artist not been preoccupied with the care of the Amerindians, the demands of his creditors, and the health of his family, he may have become more deeply involved in the dynamism of the Parisian cultural scene. Be that as it may, Sand and Baudelaire published their approval and support of the exhibition, and in so doing not only helped to keep that exhibition open, but also to found the lasting European infatuation with the American west [Rieupeyrou: 204]. Even if he was not aware of its implications, Catlin’s association with these two luminaries points to the iconoclasm of his endeavors. Just as Sand and Baudelaire sought, respectively, to revolutionize social realities and poetic art in France, Catlin sought to model a different kind of cultural sophistication to his contemporaries.

Like any serious traveler with a deeply cosmopolitan bent, Catlin was tangibly affected by his exposure to foreign cultures. He was eager not only to learn about other ways of life, but also to extract those features of foreign cultures that impressed him, adapting them into his own cultural identity. As a foreign visitor among the Amerindians, unencumbered by the constant

logistical considerations he faced in Europe, he moved beyond passive observation to active learning. This deeply personal engagement taught him the potential for self-development offered by cross-cultural exchanges, a lesson he often applied practically. Sometimes, the benefits of that application were immediately apparent, as when, traveling with the Puncah, Catlin despairs when pain in his exhausted feet cause him to fall behind. Told by a sympathetic “half-breed” that he “must ‘turn [his] toes in’ as the Indians do” [Catlin, *Letters and Notes*: 1:219], Catlin takes the advice immediately, and happily walks with the foremost in the group the rest of the journey. A footnote on the same page signals a broader insight he gained from the successful experiment: “man *can* walk with his toes turned out if he chooses, if he will use a stiff sole under his feet, and will be content at last to put up with an acquired deformity of the big toe joint.” Such reflection indicates that Catlin’s cultural receptivity went beyond a cosmopolitan respect for cultural difference; he was willing to engage in real exchange by adapting his own practice in accord with lessons learned from foreigners. Persistence in one’s own ways when adaptation to those of another would be an improvement is an option—but it leads to bunions. Catlin’s hope was that Americans would not be so painfully obstinate.

The above illustration was not the only Amerindian custom Catlin preferred to those he was born to. His last book—quite seriously titled *Shut Your Mouth and Save Your Life*—was an argument for white adoption of Amerindian breathing and sleeping practices. Catlin used anecdotal and statistical evidence to assert the absence in Amerindian cultures of many ailments that plagued Euro-Americans: consumption, pneumonia, tooth decay, back pain, insomnia, snoring, and even lunacy. He then attributed all of these to habits of mouth breathing and improper sleep positioning, telling his own story along with illustrations from various Amerindian tribes. Just as he (re)learned to walk from Amerindians, he learned to sleep and breathe through his nose, and so enjoyed better health. The science contained in the book may be dubious, but its overall message—that much can be gained by cross-cultural exchange—is in line with Catlin’s life work. The revelation that Amerindians refer to whites not only as “pale faces” but also as “black mouths,” in reference to the habit of mouth breathing, which seems fearsomely unattractive and exposes often-decaying teeth [Catlin, *Shut Your Mouth*: 49] is meant not only to touch readers’ vanity, but also to surprise them into paying attention to foreign perspectives. He refers specifically to Amerindian cultures when he declaims:

In order to draw a fair contrast between the results of habits amongst the two Races, it is necessary to contemplate the two peoples living in the uninvaded habits peculiar to each and it would be well also, for the writer who draws those contrasts, to see with his own eyes the customs of the Native Races, and obtain his information from the lips of the people themselves, instead of trusting to a long succession of authorities, [...] when the original one has been unworthy of credit, or has gained his information from unreliable, or ignorant, or malicious sources [5].

Catlin’s main assertion here is the long failure of Americans to engage culturally with the Amerindians. The underlying plea is for more meaningful cultural exchange. The potential for improved health is but one

example of the benefits of such exchange and the opportunities missed when it is neglected; Catlin was well aware of its moral value as well, as demonstrated by the claim that those who perpetuate stereotypes are "malicious." He is, of course, the writer who has, in his lifetime of extensive travel, "contemplated" different cultures, and so, the one who can fairly compare them.

Catlin's visits to Amerindian lands and to Europe occasioned novel and multi-layered cross-cultural encounters. Combining his skills in observation with an adventuresome willingness to transcend boundaries, he provided an alternative model for how his contemporaries in the new nation could live as culturally "American." Since it lacked a deep history, American-ness was an identity that seemed unformed or unstable, particularly when confronted either domestically or abroad with the foreign. Too often, that instability resulted in anxiety that inspired xenophobic responses. Catlin had direct experience with this when his efforts to make his countrymen recognize the inherent value of Amerindian culture were rejected. As an American citizen living among Indians and Europeans, and negotiating their mutual understanding, Catlin's approach to other cultures modeled his notion of how Americans should conduct themselves, and that his Americanization included interaction and exchange with foreigners is a reminder of the multicultural sources of American identity.

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