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"Now I Fight for Belonging": A Cosmopolitan Refugee Meets Regional Australia in *Constance on the Edge*

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Abstract: *This article addresses cosmopolitan cinema through the figure of a former refugee in an Australian-made documentary,* Constance on the Edge *(Belinda Mason, 2016). Beginning with an overview of cosmopolitanism as a project and a political ideal, as well as its relevance now, I then trace its manifestation in the discourses of refugee advocacy that have been evident in Australia over the last couple of decades. This helps set the stage for a close reading of the film, in which a Sudanese asylum seeker who has been resettled in a regional town with her family is struggling to find a sense of belonging in her new home. I argue that such an instance of cosmopolitan cinema facilitates the audience's capacity to see both similarities and differences in the refugee other, thereby enabling a politics of solidarity that is simultaneously in dialogue with global and national discourses.*

Introduction: Why Cosmopolitanism, and Why Now?

At the time of writing, commentators such as Zoe Daniel (Washington bureau chief of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) seem astonished by the shift in US President Donald Trump's attitude towards the United Nations. The anticosmopolitan nationalist who emphasised cutting funding to the UN at the beginning of his term is now altering his position to suggest that the organisation merely needs reform. Should this be read as strategic engagement with international mediators in the face of a menace like North Korea, or the survival of a cosmopolitan ethos despite recent worldwide resurgence of protectionist tendencies? Those sounding the death knell of cosmopolitanism (as an ideal, and as a project) hail from both sides of the political divide. The conservative backlash, embodied by figures like Trump, views the cosmopolitan elite as the beneficiaries of economic and cultural globalisation, thereby leaving behind vast swathes of the white working class. On the opposite end of the spectrum, those who self-identify as progressive are often in favour of advocating for a shared humanity (within a national or transnational democratic framework), but eschew the language of cosmopolitanism for fear of being alienated by the local political community (Muldoon 238–53). In addition, members of both groups see the focus on "global citizenship" over a more tangible notion of national belonging as abstract.

Since the unprecedented increase in the rate and scale of globalisation from the 1990s, the notion of cosmopolitanism in humanities and social sciences research has become associated simultaneously with the sociopolitical ideal of global justice and peace, and with the lived realities of everyday intercultural encounters and practices. At the same time, the term conjures up a privileged world traveller or a suave inner-city professional in the popular media and cultural imaginary. The challenge for the twenty-first century, then, is not just to reconcile the political ideal and the social reality of intercultural communication. These

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projects also need to account for popular cultural understandings of cosmopolitanism, gauge how these are inflected through the categories of class, race, and gender, and determine their spatial and temporal alignments. This will enable us to understand cosmopolitanism (and the cosmopolitan subject) as a becoming rather than the fixed entity that is invoked by a cursory consideration of popular media and culture.

Amongst other sociopolitical issues with a global dimension (such as climate change policy), the problem of increasing numbers of refugees forced to flee their home countries has forced the most protectionist of regimes to consider regional and supranational solutions. This article, then, is premised on the assumption that there is renewed interest in transcending the borders of the nation-state when it comes to understanding, representing, and ultimately providing a legal and physical shelter to the post-9/11 refugee. In her comprehensive overview of the value of "cosmopolitanism" as a political philosophy and a sociological practice, Marina Calloni comes to the conclusion that "in the new millennium the debate on cosmopolitanism has been renewed and increased over years, assuming a new global valence" (162). She adds that this can be attributed to recent epochal changes which began in the last decade of the twentieth century, such as the fall of socialist regimes, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the expansion of the free market (62). I would add that in the Trump era these epochal shifts have entered yet another phase, this time characterised by a backlash against the free market in the Global North. What does this mean for other by-products of globalisation, such as the movement of people, and popular culture (in various media forms) across borders?

The above shift not only calls for a renewed consideration of cosmopolitanism, but also a much-needed endeavour in terms of distinguishing it from globalisation in the popular parlance. According to Calloni, both phenomena have one feature in common, which is the aim to "criticize the politics of barriers and to support the freedom to move" (162). However, the similarities stop here as they are based on starkly different principles:

> In the case of globalization, the free market is given priority over a fair distribution of common resources. At the same time, the idea of social justice linked to a national welfare state has gained a more general connotation in terms of global justice where everyone (ideally) has equal access to resources and opportunities. (Calloni 162)

In other words, the time seems right to dissociate cosmopolitanism from its elitist connotations, especially the ones that suggest the free movement and wealth of those benefitting the most from the geopolitical order created by financial globalisation. Rather, the cosmopolitan project now needs to be redefined so that it stands for the absence of barriers to the understanding and application of social justice, access to material and social resources, and availability of opportunities to realise a universally accepted definition of human dignity. This would make it distinct from the no-barriers approach applied to the movement of goods and capital for profit and consumption.

As part of the renewal of cosmopolitanism and its separation from globalisation, it must also be recognised that there is "no grand unifying theory of cosmopolitanism, but rather a wide array of principles and moral-ethical dispositions that are central to its variants and, at times, at odds with each other" (Christensen 2410). In this sense, it is most useful to conceive of the term as implying a "culturally open disposition", which Miyase Christensen defines as "an invitational stance and hospitality to the world and to the Other" (2410). At the same time, this disposition should not be conflated with the mere existence of, and access to,

the means of movement across space and time. That is, merely travelling to a culturally distinct place or consuming media set in a different location do not guarantee the cultivation of a cosmopolitan disposition. This is evidenced by the coexistence of strains of racism with genuinely open intercultural encounters. As Christensen puts it,

> The rise of racism and xenophobia (in Europe and elsewhere), and the human suffering due to illegal immigration and wars flout the visions of hope and fusion that accompany some versions of globalism. Meanwhile, "Big Media" often fail to convey a cosmopolitan imagination. Yet, through alternative circuits of visibility, solidarity, and connectivity at the cultural and intersubjective levels, the absorption of cosmopolitan dispositions remains possible. (2411)

Given that the "alternative circuits" that enable a cosmopolitan disposition are still a possibility, we now need to pay attention to their particularities. This includes the specific forms they take, and how they adapt to particular cultural contexts while maintaining a global orientation. For the rest of this article, I will attempt to do this by exploring the discourses of refugee advocacy in Australia, how they deploy cosmopolitanism, and their manifestation in a recent refugee-themed documentary, *Constance on the Edge* (Belinda Mason, 2016).



Figure 1: Poster for Belinda Mason's *Constance on the Edge*. Constance on the Edge Pty Ltd, 2016.

Refugee Advocacy in Australia: National or Cosmopolitan?

Akin to the response to asylum seekers in most of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, the public debate on the issue in Australia has been vexed and polarising. However, what distinguishes Australian policy is that despite being a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, "it is the only country where there is mandatory immigration detention for all unlawful non-citizens" (Brown). Additionally, according to the Refugee Council of Australia, mandatory detention is used as more than a risk-management tool as until recently, "asylum seekers arriving without authorisation were detained for the entire time it took to determine whether or not they were refugees—regardless of whether they posed any health or security risks to the community". In terms of the political and public response, sociologist Klaus Neumann writes that there has been consensus across the political spectrum that "asylum seekers pose a threat to the integrity of Australia's borders or to its social fabric, that fear of asylum seekers is legitimate, and that a policy of deterrence is an appropriate response". This sociopolitical context to a large degree explains the above-mentioned interpretation of the policy of mandatory detention. Neumann adds that this policy of deterrence is occasionally questioned when the courts insist that it must not violate Australian law, and when the public sporadically shows compassion for individual asylum seekers, especially children. In the most recent of such cases, the Victorian Supreme Court approved a $70m compensation payout to current and former Manus Island asylum seekers over their illegal detention in dangerous conditions (Doherty). This has been reported to be the largest human rights class action settlement in Australia, though it has not impacted government policy.

Given the above, the power of narrative to provoke a response to the asylum seeker issue, however fleeting, amongst the Australian public merits particular attention. However, the public's responses often amount only to a feeling of empathy or compassion for humanitarian reasons, and seldom cross over into the realm of responsibility or action. This has led cultural studies scholar Carolyn Pedwell to conclude that empathy "has become a Euro-American political obsession … within the contemporary 'western' socio-political sphere, empathy is framed as a 'solution' to a very wide range of social ills and as a central component of building cross-cultural and transnational social justice" (ix–x). Therefore, similarly to Sara Ahmed's postulation on happiness, Pedwell suggests that in many contemporary narratives of global social justice, empathy can become an end-point, and a conceptual stoppage in terms of carrying on a conversation or analysis (ix–x). In this way, many refugee-themed narratives (in Australia and elsewhere) grapple with the problem of evoking the compassion of their audiences by calling on the discourse of a "shared humanity", while also trying to ensure this affective response is not transient and/or depoliticised.

A recent instance of the limits of empathy—often evoked as a feature of some iterations of "cosmopolitanism"—is when at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe in September 2015, ABC Radio National's *Life Matters* program featured a discussion on the latest events in the crisis. This conversation focused on the emotional response evoked by the photograph of the drowned Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi. While a couple of panellists and most callers called for an empathetic response that extended beyond politics, Klaus Neumann, who was an interviewee, suggested that an emotional reaction is likely to be fleeting, and we need to go deeper. One of the callers who stood out was a high school teacher who also teaches the children of refugees. She suggested that we need to arrive at a point where we realise that refugees are like us. Indeed, she added, "they are us". This

sentiment is symptomatic of the conceptual stoppage and depoliticisation that often occurs when "empathy" is expressed in a presumably cosmopolitan narrative with settler subjects rather than refugees themselves as subjects with agency.

In this article, I argue that the study of films with refugee-related narratives and the discourses that underlie them and are generated by them has a role to play in effecting the kind of sociopolitical change that could materially alter perceptions of refugees and refugee issues in Australia. Examining film portrayals of refugees and their experiences and viewers' engagement with them is important because in the absence of wider community interactions with recent refugee arrivals, public opinion on refugee-related issues is largely reliant on impressions gleaned from the media (Wright, *Visual Impact* 99). There has been considerable discussion in the public domain about strategies of dehumanising refugees and limiting journalists' attempts to individualise them, as a means of managing public perception. According to a speech delivered by Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia, challenging negative media coverage of refugees and acknowledging positive representations are both key to building accountability and community engagement. This presumes that screen representation really shapes public perception, and therefore has an important role in informing political responses to refugees in Australia and, indeed, globally. It is, therefore, genuinely crucial to examine the precise means by which film narratives generate public attitudes to refugees. This is crucial not just for policymakers and scholars, but also for communicators, including journalists, filmmakers, and film curators and exhibitors, as well as the wider public.

For the advocates of refugee solidarity, the discourses employed draw on cosmopolitanism in different ways. According to James Goodman, most NGO campaigns and advocates either fall into the national solidarity camp, or express their support through a global appeal. Further, he adds that, "[w]hile national refugee solidarity appeals to the nation, global refugee solidarity appeals to shared humankind and to shared freedom" (279). Given this point of difference, the cosmopolitan ethos described earlier is more explicitly evident in the global solidarity approach in that it upholds the aspiration to and assertion of individual freedom as a direct and inherent right, and not as a conditional offer (Goodman 279). At the same time, campaigns of this kind are often against any form of state power, thereby harking back to critiques of cosmopolitanism as impractical and abstract. According to Goodman, what the two approaches do have in common is that they both seek to transform the political community, even though the frameworks differ:

> National approaches seek to embed cosmopolitan norms in a national context, while global approaches seek to demystify the nation, shocking people into humanitarian consciousness. Where the first recruits the refugee to the task of nation-(re)building, the second recruits the refugee to the task of transforming globality … Although they differ as to the vehicle required to achieve these objectives, it is possible to view humanitarian nations and humanitarian globality as mutually reinforcing. There are also tactical complementarities with expressive politics creating the agenda, and instrumental politics carrying it forward. (284)

It is the above dialogue between national and global appeals to refugee solidarity that could be the key to creating better representations, moving audiences beyond simplistic empathy, and reframing the cosmopolitan project to serve the needs of the current epoch. In the subsequent sections, I will examine how this takes place through the trope of a refugee film as a form of "cosmopolitan cinema".

Refugee Narratives and Cosmopolitan Cinema

Moving away from celebratory narratives of crosscultural cinema that emphasise the "shared humanity" characteristic of certain interpretations of "cosmopolitanism", Felicia Chan has come up with a more nuanced model in her recent book, *Cosmopolitan Cinema: Cross-cultural Encounters in East Asian Film*. In this account, she uses Tihanov's work to suggest that cosmopolitanism could be used as a methodological tool to address the "open wounds of transition, the ruptures and apertures of difference" that occur during border-crossing (5). Further, she sees cosmopolitan cinema as neither completely local, nor entirely universal. This is because Chan's interest in "cosmopolitan cinema" is not intended as a semantic substitute for "world", "transnational" or "global" cinemas (2). Rather, her approach is one that sees cosmopolitan cinema as a recognition of similarities as well as differences:

> [it] enables an articulation of encounters with difference that simultaneously resist fragmentation (into endless proliferations of difference) and coalescence (eradicating difference altogether) … Cinema is as much a practice and a process as it is a product; it is also an affective experience that can hold in tension a multiplicity of perspectives, and consequently allow it to speak to the multiplicities of cosmopolitan debate. (6–7)

Previous work on "crossover cinema" distinguished it from "transnational cinema" on the grounds that it is crosscultural in its very conceptualisation, and is therefore more likely to cross borders in terms of its production and reception (Khorana). "Cosmopolitan cinema", as I am using the term here (following Chan), takes the hybrid origins of crossover cinema a step further by deploying an ethical approach to representing difference (that is, not denying or misrepresenting it). In effect, there may or may not be an intercultural encounter that is immediately gratifying for all parties concerned, even though they may be willing to persevere, listen, and witness.

The representation of refugees in the Australian media—especially their mediation through news discourses—has been the subject of a good deal of critical attention since the early 2000s (Pickering 169–86; Gale 321–40; Klocker and Dunn 71–92). In the context of refugee-themed screen narratives, Szorenyi examines the practice of collecting photographs of refugees in "coffee-table books" and concludes that the format and accompanying text tend to produce readings that lean towards spectacle (24). In a similar vein, Wright's investigation of media images and fiction films based on refugee stories uncovered that the former have origins in Christian iconography, while the latter conform to the visual conventions of the road movie genre ("Moving Images" 53). The last finding is also echoed in Australia-based refugee film, *Lucky Miles* (Michael James Rowland, 2007), focusing on male asylum seekers, which, Jon Stratton argues, results in it "making the Australian government appear less hostile, less morally culpable, and therefore enabling white Australian audiences to feel better about themselves and the government that represents them" (640). However, there has been a marked shift in the production and distribution practices of such films, led by Heather Kirkpatrick's documentary *Mary Meets Mohammad* (2013), with its ethical focus on refugee participation in these processes and emphasis on community screenings (Khorana). In the wake of this, there has been a spate of refugee-themed documentaries produced and released in Australia. These include *Freedom Stories* (Steve Thomas, 2015), *Chasing Asylum* (Eva Orner, 2016), *Constance on the Edge,* and *Cast from the Storm* (David Mason, 2016). All of the above films are classified as documentaries, and have links to community screenings (in varied forms) on their official websites. Can

these productions be considered under the above-mentioned rubric of "cosmopolitan cinema"? I will consider one of these films, *Constance on the Edge*, as exemplary of a kind of cosmopolitan cinema due to the agency of the refugee subjects, and the narrative's constant interplay with local and global issues.



Figure 2: Constance Okot (centre) with her family in Belinda Mason's *Constance on the Edge*. Constance on the Edge Pty Ltd, 2016. Screenshot.

Constance as a "Cosmopolitan Refugee": Fighting for Belonging in Regional Australia

The film begins with the audience being informed that Constance, a middle-aged woman of Sudanese descent, was resettled in Wagga Wagga (a regional town in the Australian state of New South Wales) eight years ago, and has been living there with her family since then. This is followed by a close shot of Constance saying to camera that while she was in a refugee camp, she was fighting for human rights, but now her struggle seems to be for belonging. This opening is pivotal in terms of framing the film itself as a meditation on the issue of belonging for those who are rendered stateless (even if only temporarily), and for casting a refugee woman as a nuanced subject with agency. This is reinforced in the subsequent sequence when Constance recounts her determination to study counselling at TAFE, a further education college, at the beginning of her time in Wagga Wagga. Later in the film, she is shown suffering from depression triggered by the struggle for belonging in her new hometown, rather than by the trauma of war in the country of her birth. The narrator's voiceover also mentions that while at a refugee camp in Kenya, Constance interpreted for FilmAid as she speaks four languages. This representation defies conventional understanding of the refugee as deprived in terms of cultural capital, or "too ethnic" to fit in. In effect, Constance embodies a "cosmopolitan" refugee, and her fight for belonging is exacerbated by being in a community where such cosmopolitanism may be at odds with a local or national emphasis on "fitting in".

By perceiving herself as both a survivor and a victim, Constance invites the audience to identify with a "humanity" that is simultaneously comforting and threatening. In my email

correspondence with the director of the film, Belinda Mason, this duality, and how its highlighting of the lead character's multiple dimensions is evident:

> Constance and the women around her are inspiring role models. She, and other people from refugee backgrounds, are both victims and survivors—as Constance says in the film. They bring with them entrepreneurial skills, global perspectives and a real empathy for others who are struggling. All these qualities they bring and share are strengthening communities around Australia, and in my eyes, represent the resilient spirit that defines us as Aussies.

In this instance, Mason does not see Constance's "global perspective" as being at odds with the national discourse about community and resilience. While this reframing might be important to connect with a wide range of audiences within Australia, it is my contention that the film succeeds precisely because the national framework doesn't overpower the global/local story.

Constance is later shown smashing computers at the Centrelink office (a Department of Human Services centre) as a result of her depression and her anger at Centrelink's failure to help her troubled son, Charles. This incident nearly gets her incarcerated, but she is given a good behaviour bond by virtue of her work in the community. The scene illustrates the effect of war and refugee camps experiences starkly: the fear and outrage of the usually stoic Constance demonstrate the emotional toll of her experiences and their incomprehensibility to those of us who have not lived them. The addition of this contextual information in the film doesn't disavow their difference, but puts it on display to complicate our empathy so that it is not patronising. According to Mason, Constance herself was invested in bringing the less palatable aspects of her story to the fore:

> Constance is tough, funny, charismatic and is not scared to challenge the status quo. That's what I love about her and audiences respond to. If she sees injustice or racism, she'll speak … She's also flawed, she makes mistakes like all of us. A couple of her mistakes were big ones. They're understandable, as she was trying to protect her son, however, they almost got her incarcerated. She says that she made the film because what she and her family struggle through is common to many people from refugee backgrounds. She was committed to telling the "warts and all" story.

The "warts and all" story of the distant or proximate other could be another way of conceptualising "cosmopolitan cinema"—that is, it could be understood not just as a reading practice, but a production choice that confounds audience expectations of privileged/marginalised, local/global, survivor/victim and other binaries. This is in line with the definition of "crossover cinema" in that it addresses production choices that are always-already hybrid. "Cosmopolitan cinema" has the added dimension of explicitly addressing current global political issues (such as the ongoing precarity faced by asylum seekers).

Apart from Constance and her son Charles, other members of her family also embody the tension between resilience and victimhood. One of these is her niece Mary who was abandoned by her birth mother, brought up by her grandparents, and miraculously found her way to Australia. At various stages of the narrative, she emphasises finding paid work as the key to belonging for her. Towards the end of the film, she falls pregnant and is keen to be the mother she never had. We see her at a knitting club with older Anglo women in Wagga Wagga, and this is one of the most syncretic moments of the film as the tension between the

local and the global mutates into a mutually beneficial association. As Constance herself puts it, both parties are benefitting as the women are patiently teaching Mary how to knit, while Mary is satisfying their need for care and community, especially from the young.

One of Constance's daughters, Vicky, is studying hard, and hopes to be a paediatrician. Her motive for doing so is that she wants to be able to offer valuable services to people in Third World countries. Later in the film, Vicky is shown taking pictures of Constance. She says to camera that she is working on an exhibition that displays the strength and beauty of African women (like her mother and aunts). Another syncretic scene in the film unfolds when some of her artwork is displayed at a local gallery, and a number of women from her family are in attendance. The mingling occurring in this space suggests that a cosmopolitan disposition can be facilitated and performed in particular contexts, even in regional areas that may otherwise be seen as parochial.

Towards the end of the documentary, Vicky finds out that she has been accepted into a nursing programme at Charles Sturt University. Constance is very happy and says that she is digging the road to university for others in her family to follow. She also charts the possible futures of her other children, remarks that they are growing up, and adds that they will "fit like Australians". She then jokes that this means they might develop racist attitudes towards new immigrants in the future. In this way, what appears at first to be a straightforward account of refugee integration with Vicky's university admission turns into a multidimensional tale from Constance's perspective. While she does applaud her children's success, she is acutely aware of the parochialism of the society they have settled in, as evidenced by her quip about the possible drawbacks of the full integration of the present generation of refugees.

Constance's engagement with the town of Wagga Wagga and its community is conveyed through two main sequences. In the first, she attempts to be a bridge between the refugees and the police, and is invited to the police station by a female officer called Sandy. Constance mentions that the local Sudanese community is having trouble with the police (largely due to the latter's perceptions). She adds that this is in contrast to what the African-origin refugees were told about Australian police officers being very friendly. After introducing Constance to her colleagues, Sandy remarks that she feels a lot of empathy for Constance, and adds that most refugees have a "fight or flight" reaction to the police due to their prior experiences. Later in the film, we see Constance's affective relationship with the regional city itself on display as she walks down the main street, looks through clothing stores, and dons bangles. When asked by a counsellor present at an African community event to complete the sentence, "I feel at home when I am...", Constance replies that the answer for her is seeing colour at second-hand shops. This encounter with the spaces of the town is as important as the ones with its residents to manifest belonging and embed it in the local, albeit through a connection to Constance's history.

The film ends with Vicky moving into her university accommodation, while Constance goes to a cultural fusion event in Wagga Wagga, and says that she is going to dance there. This segment could be read as yet another celebratory take on Australia's multiculturalism, which has often been conflated with the availability of a wide variety of foods and the proliferation of cultural festivals in popular and policy discourses (Patel). On the one hand, this is viewed as a superficial engagement with a palatable version of the other, and therefore not genuinely cosmopolitan in its ethical orientation. At the same time, there is a substantial body of research that suggests that migrants and their community organisations

actively use notions of multiculturalism to advocate for socioeconomic programs (Pardee and Lee 297–316), and that multicultural arts can be seen as a set of practices informed by diverse agendas (Khan). In this light, Constance's enthusiastic dance at the local multicultural festival, with adults and kids from many other ethnic groups joining in or cheering on can be read as both an assertion of cultural pride and also the marker of a cosmopolitanising community. "Cosmopolitan cinema", as embodied in this scene, is unequivocally exhibiting difference rather than watering it down. However, it is also hinting at a transition for all parties concerned—a firmer footing in the local for Constance and her family, and a somewhat more global orientation for those who have inhabited Wagga Wagga for a little longer.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on the renewed interested in a cosmopolitan disposition, and used this as a springboard to understand cosmopolitan cinema through the situated case study of the asylum seeker advocacy movement in Australia. Most literature on refugee advocacy assumes there are two distinct approaches—national and global—and that these two are not in dialogue with each other. The national discourse is centred on the shame felt by the self as a citizen of a particular nation, and advocates for acting in favour of refugees so that this self-image can be restored. The global discourse, on the other hand, appears to disavow the nation altogether, and instead appeals to the humanity shared with those suffering in detention centres, refugee camps, or forced to jump onto leaky boats. In this discourse, compassion and empathy are the dominant emotions, but this focus tends to elide cultural difference altogether.

In an alternative approach, cosmopolitan cinema, as exemplified in this article by Australian-made, refugee-themed documentary *Constance on the Edge*, exemplifies a more nuanced form of advocacy. This take on cosmopolitanism strides the boundary between local/national and global belonging without putting either on a pedestal. In this kind of cosmopolitan cinema, the filmmaker does not smooth over difference, but rather puts it on display. At the same time, this difference is employed to empower the individual and their community, while telling a "warts and all" story that does not expect the refugee other to constantly perform the part of the stoic survivor. Such a multidimensional account may evoke feelings of ambiguity in the encounter with the other (including amongst self-identified refugee advocates). However, embracing the discomfort thereby generated is more conducive to facilitating a cosmopolitan disposition that is not hampered by the need to belong.

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