

Teaching Global Aesthetics

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We both teach stand-alone courses in global aesthetics. In a brief survey of aesthetics courses, we found few classes in global aesthetics offered in North America, yet these courses offer many benefits. In what follows we provide some reasons for you to teach such a course at your college or university and offer some guidance for how to develop one that works for you and your students.

I.

Perhaps the main challenge in teaching a course in global aesthetics is feeling like you do not have enough expertise to teach it. Neither of us had taken a course in philosophy outside of the European tradition as undergraduates or graduate students. And for both of us, non-Western philosophy lies outside our areas of competence. While this is a genuine challenge, it didn't prevent us from developing successful courses that routinely fill up with students new to philosophy. We found the process of familiarizing ourselves with the traditions we cover in our courses to be rewarding work, expanding our own thoughts about what aesthetics can be.

One challenge is deciding which traditions to include in the syllabus. There is so much great work on non-Eurocentric aesthetics out there—by both philosophers and those in other fields—that it can be difficult to narrow down what specific traditions to focus on. Our approach was to tailor our courses to our research interests. Elizabeth's course is informed by her research on cultural property debates and the aesthetics of everyday life. The topics her course focuses on include: (i) cultural appropriation and the ethics of museums; (ii) the impact of colonialism on artistic practices; (iii) defining art and the aesthetic when engaging with aesthetic practices outside of your own culture; and (iv) what counts as "Western" in Western aesthetics. Brandon's course arose from his research on different ways of experiencing and appreciating music. In it he focuses on: (i) the extent to which individuals can appreciate art and artifacts from traditions other than their own; (ii) the relationship between aesthetic and religious practices; and (iii) music's place in mystical traditions. Our comfort level with these topics allowed us to develop our courses with less apprehension about not being experts.

The process of developing our courses around these topics was impacted by our searches for readings to include in our syllabi. We both found articles that helpfully examine these topics that focus on West African, Aboriginal Australian, South Asian, Japanese, Balinese, and Javanese aesthetic traditions. While some of these articles occur in both of our syllabi, most do not. This highlights the wealth of resources available to anyone interested in teaching global aesthetics. Elizabeth's syllabus also includes readings on Indigenous American aesthetic traditions, while Brandon's includes readings on Korean and Persian ones. Finding these readings was aided not only by the usual resources (Google

Scholar, PhilPapers, and the like), but also by some of the diversity curricula on the ASA website and the list of 60+ BIPOC authors at the *Aesthetics for Birds* blog.

II.

Our institutions' locations and demographics were key considerations when developing our courses. Elizabeth teaches at Florida International University, the largest Hispanic-serving institution in the United States. FIU students are largely from South Florida, and 68% identify as Hispanic. As a result, Elizabeth devotes significant time in her course to aesthetic traditions from the Americas and the Caribbean. Brandon teaches at Knox College: a small liberal arts college in Illinois with a sizable international student population (over 16%) that is overwhelmingly from Asia. Because of this, he devotes much of his course to the Asian traditions mentioned above.

Tailoring your course to your institution's student population has clear benefits. For one thing, it might attract students who would not otherwise take a philosophy class. More significantly, though, spending time on traditions that some of your students belong to will allow those students to draw on their own experiences in the classroom. In Elizabeth's class, students explore aesthetic traditions from the indigenous peoples of their lands in out-of-class projects, while in class they discuss the three short articles from the ASA Newsletter on Indigenous Aesthetics (Vol 38, No. 3, Winter 2019). Elizabeth has found that students who attended K-12 in Puerto Rico have learned about the Taíno people and their aesthetic traditions. However, for many of her students, this is the first time they've been asked to see themselves (or others) through the lens of settler colonialism. Many of her Cuban-American students, for instance, are unaware of the cultural practices of Cuba pre-colonization. Elizabeth frames the class specifically as "non-Eurocentric," because many of the aesthetic practices it covers are not included as part of the Western canon despite being located in the Western hemisphere.

Representation of the sort just described can have a profound impact on students. As Sherri Irvin discusses in her article "How and Why to Teach Inclusively in Aesthetics" from the ASA Newsletter (Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2016), courses like ours may be the first time aesthetic practices from a student's own tradition are discussed in the classroom. Students have reported that our courses helped them to recognize that the Eurocentric lens is just one among many. Additionally, we have seen students become more interested in their own heritages and traditions after realizing that they are legitimate topics of academic study. In Elizabeth's class, one project encourages students to engage oral histories of family members surrounding an item from their cultural heritage. Often this is a familial dish—a favorite recipe. This simple act of connecting a student's background knowledge to their academic study can be the nudge that encourages them to pursue issues related to their heritage as their main area of undergraduate study. It also has the ancillary benefit of drawing upon the wealth of different aesthetic traditions (often) unfamiliar to the instructor. Students begin to see themselves as co-collaborators in the classroom, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Getting to share information about their histories makes abstract philosophical principles concrete and showcases the wealth of knowledge students bring to the classroom.

III.

Helping your students cultivate epistemic humility is a further benefit of teaching global aesthetics. In any aesthetics course you teach you'll invariably confront some students who believe in the hyper-subjectivity of aesthetic experience and anti-expertise in art appreciation. Many think that they can determine whether an artwork is good or bad without needing to know anything about its artist, the historical context in which it was produced, and so on. They also believe that judgments of this sort vary from person to person and so there isn't anything more to be said about their judgments beyond merely stating them.

In a typical aesthetics course, it can sometimes be difficult to disabuse students of this attitude. But we've found that our global aesthetics courses significantly temper it. In trying to understand an artifact or practice from an unfamiliar tradition, students realize that there is a lot of context they're missing. Students can only begin to appreciate, say, masks

of the Nso people of West Africa, Aboriginal Australian paintings, or Javanese gamelan music if they recognize their limitations as outsiders to those cultural traditions. Students seem to get the message that more knowledge about an artistic practice and a culture leads to deeper appreciation and thus one person's interpretation is not always as good as another's. We've found that it's easier for students to recognize this when they're outsiders engaging with unfamiliar objects and practices than when they're dealing with objects and practices from their own culture.

In addition to focusing on a limited set of objects, many of the texts included in a standard aesthetics course treat aesthetic experiences as fundamentally distinct from our everyday experiences. Kantian disinterestedness and aesthetic attitude theorists, for example, focus on the ways in which our aesthetic appraisals are different from other sorts of valuing practices. In contrast, teaching students about Yoruba, Japanese, or Aboriginal Australian traditions, to name a few, provides another model by which to engage with the aesthetic. The aesthetic plays an important role in our funerary rituals, the etiquette and respect we pay to others, and in the origin stories our religions tell. When we include more traditions in our courses, we move further away from static art objects as the paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience. No longer will your core examples be found in museums. Instead, you'll get to talk about masks, mosques, religious ceremonies, songs, dances, gardens, gift wrapping, gamelan ensemble competitions, and much more. And while it is easy to slip into disinterested contemplation when discussing abstract art, it is much harder to look at any of the preceding examples through that narrow lens. Instead, they showcase how the aesthetic is embedded within the most important elements of our lives.

IV.

In conclusion, we hope that you will consider creating a global aesthetics course of your own. Even if you don't have the time or resources to develop a full course, these strategies will be useful for globalizing your existing aesthetic syllabus. You could add new units on particular traditions or assign particular readings in units you already teach. If you teach a unit on formalist theories, consider supplementing it with Ajume H. Wingo's "African Art and the Aesthetics of Hiding and Revealing" or Elizabeth Burns Coleman's "Appreciating 'Traditional' Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically." If you teach a unit on everyday aesthetics, consider using Yuriko Saito's "Japanese Aesthetics of Packaging." If you teach a unit on art and emotion, perhaps include Kathleen Marie Higgins's "An Alchemy of Emotion: Rasa and Aesthetic Breakthroughs." If you teach a unit on cultural appropriation, have your students read Kwame Anthony Appiah's "The Postcolonial and the Aesthetic" or Matt Strohl's interview with Native American writer Sterling Holywhitemountain at *Aesthetics for Birds*. Whatever specific direction you go, diversifying the canon by using a variety of aesthetic objects, practices, and theories benefits not only our students, but also our discipline at large.

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