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Confessions of *The Critical Shusterman*

Richard Shusterman interviewed by Crispin Sartwell

In the context of contemporary philosophy, Richard Shusterman occupies a singular position. As one of the most influential figures revitalizing and extending the pragmatist tradition into new domains of aesthetic, somatic, and intercultural inquiry, his work has not only reinvigorated longstanding concerns with embodiment, perception, and the art of living, but also expanded the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy into dialogue with performance, education, design, and popular culture. His contributions have opened new avenues of research across philosophy of mind, art theory, cultural studies, and global philosophy, establishing him as a central interlocutor in ongoing efforts to conceive philosophy as an embodied, critical, and transformative practice.

His most recent book, *The Critical Shusterman*[1] – a collection of sixteen texts on decisive themes of his intellectual trajectory – prompted the following interview, which was conducted by the editor of the book, Crispin Sartwell, over a month of shared writing and reflection. Sartwell's insightful questioning invites Shusterman to articulate the origins and implications of his philosophical commitments with rare candor. In a deeply personal and intimate tone, the conversation ranges over a wide variety of topics, from the formative experiences that shaped his early interest in aesthetics and the development of somaesthetics to the complex interplay of eros, embodiment, lived experience, and philosophical reflection; from his ambivalent relationship with modernism and postmodernism to his decisive shift from analytic philosophy to pragmatism; from his engagement with multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and the politics of cultural appropriation to his evolving reflections on Jewish identity, intercultural exchange, and the global reception of his work; from his critique of rigid gender binaries to his explorations of eroticism and performance art as later sprouts of somaesthetics.

The result is thus not simply a commentary on ideas previously published, but a reflection on how a life of thinking evolves through its romantic, aesthetic, somatic, political, and multicultural encounters. In tracing this evolution, the interview provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the motivations, transformations, and aspirations that have shaped and continue to animate Shusterman's philosophical project, offering a vivid portrait of a philosopher for whom theory remains inseparable from embodied practice, beauty a driving force of inquiry, and eros the very motor of philosophical thought.

Marta Faustino, Editor

CS: You've written richly, over decades, about the relation of philosophy to life. Tell us a little about how you see your philosophy as having emerged out of your experiences, especially early experiences. For example, what would you say was the origin of your interest in art and aesthetics?

RS: Given the tricks of memory and our understandable tendency to reinterpret the past in terms of the present, this is a difficult question to answer, especially if it's

1) Richard Shusterman, *The Critical Shusterman*, ed. Crispin Sartwell (SUNY Press, 2025).

a matter of very early experiences, including those of early childhood where one's memory is particularly obscure and perhaps repressed or distorted. Although your Introduction to the critical reader insightfully explained how the aesthetic is perhaps the key leitmotif in my philosophy, I believe my interest in those two realms emerged from different experiential sources and valences. I think my interest in philosophy derived from being unhappy, confused, and essentially lonely as a teenager in high school. Having skipped a grade and being a late adolescent, I was (and uncomfortably felt) much younger, less confident, and awkwardly different from my classmates.

This was compounded by a troubling summer experience when I got a special summer scholarship to Choate, the elite prep school that JFK attended. I was only 14 but already in my junior year, and my mom had me apply to a program that let smart city kids have a summer prep school experience, where they could take classes with more privileged prep school students, most of whom needed the summer classes for remedial work because of bad grades. I felt even more out of place there, which is where I first encountered antisemitism, though it wasn't directed at me.

I describe this in detail in a biographical sketch called "Regarding Oneself and Seeing Double" that appears in a collection of essays on philosophy and autobiography edited by George Yancy.[2] In retrospect that painful experience of racial prejudice made me disillusioned with America's claim as the land of pluralist freedom from ethnic discrimination and sent me looking elsewhere for better places to find my home and find myself. That summer at Choate, I took my first course in philosophy (which was based on the Great Books), and like most troubled adolescents I was attracted to dark, critical thinkers like Dostoyevsky and the often bitterly mordant social criticism of Nietzsche. Of course, I was later taught at Jerusalem and Oxford that neither of those thinkers, nor their literary ilk, counted as genuine philosophers.

As for aesthetics, I suppose the roots are even earlier and more banal. Like many children, I loved my mother deeply, even if it was without explicit awareness that what I felt was love. I seem to remember how happy I was with her, particularly when we were alone, and how all my senses reveled in her presence. I remember that in the first

2) Richard Shusterman, "Regarding Oneself and Seeing Double: Fragments of Autobiography," in *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 1–21.

grade, I would occasionally just walk home at recess instead of going back to the classroom, and that she would take pity on me and let me stay with her a bit before taking me back to school and apologizing to my teacher. My father, a successful lawyer who worked long hours, was a remote figure in my early life. I admired him, but feared him too, as he had a special talent for sensing one's weaknesses and secrets, especially when they involved failure or wrongdoing, and then compelling one to confess those failures or misdeeds through skillful questioning and cross examination. I'm sure he loved me in his way (and I grew to love him in my way). But he remained my sternest and most persistent critic, and he was equally critical of my two brothers. In fact, when I first was invited to the book project entitled *The Critical Shusterman*, I recoiled at the title, thinking that I didn't want "critical" to be the adjective that described me, because it was much more descriptive of my father than myself.

My mother, in contrast, was tender, loving, and understandingly tolerant, with a petite figure and a sweet demeanor. I never stopped loving her. She died at 90 in May 2005. When I finished writing *Body Consciousness* in May 2007, I was still absorbed in mourning her loss. So I took for the book's epigraph a few lines from a John Donne poem commemorating the second anniversary of the death of Elizabeth Drury, entitled "Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary." The lines went "…her pure and eloquent blood,/Spoke in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought,/That one might almost say, her body thought./She, she, thus richly, and largely housed, is gone." And I prefaced those lines with an invocation to my mother, Judith: "In memory of J.W.S, whose body gave me life, love, and consciousness." Our mothers typically give us all these wonderful things, though we typically take them for granted, and we learn to focus our pursuits of life and love elsewhere. So a female friend who worked on translating the book into Korean asked me one day, with an unmistakable hint of jealousy, who was this lover who had bodily given me so much but then left me mourning that she was "gone?" She was surprised to learn that the lady so lamented was my mom.

CS: I have been struck by your emphases on love, the body, and the erotic. I speculated a little, gently, on this in my Introduction (mentioning "a dancer"), but do you think specific erotic or romantic affiliations have shaped your philosophy or shaped your life in ways that have in turn shaped your philosophy? Or taken you to places or ideas or experiences that became central or essential?

RS: Love is a central theme in my philosophical thought, though it is less explicit in my academic writing (apart from my texts on *ars erotica*) than it is in my graphic novella, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, which is based on my work in performance art. But your question is more pointed and goes deeper into the sensitive and awkwardly private domain. I can give you a very clear and general answer of yes. Specific romantic relationships have significantly shaped my life and philosophical thought, since powerful, full-bodied life experiences more than the reading of texts have been the key factors motivating my philosophical insights and evolving interests and perspectives. This claim of course calls for corroborating details. But here the philosophical ideal of honest, probing self-examination through self-exposure with a well-meaning interlocutor encounters the worry of narcissistic self-indulgence and the violation of the privacy of others who belong to those romantic affairs and may not want them to be mentioned. One way to negotiate this tension is to refrain from naming the individuals. I learned this slowly. You were right to note in your Introduction that *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, the book that really launched my international career and marked my transition from a competent but narrow analytic philosopher to having a much broader pragmatist and critical theory perspective, was dedicated to "Three Dancing Graces." The book's first edition imprudently gave their first names, which I learned to delete in later editions of the book. But the last two persons mentioned were largely protective camouflage for the deepest inspiration, the real career dancer of the three.

A working class, playfully postmodern, and creatively new-age spirit, she was the muse for that book with its defense of the democratic aesthetics of popular culture and the postmodern ethics of aesthetic embodiment. She saw that my body (trained as an IDF officer's) and my mind (trained at Jerusalem and Oxford in analytic philosophy) both suffered from an imbalance of too much hard and quick masculine *yang* energy, so she insisted I slow down and tenderize by learning yoga and taijiquan. I remember how she laughed at me while I was at my desk *writing* my defense of somatic nondiscursive understanding instead of actually being down on the floor with her stretching and breathing into my spine. She made me ashamed of being the sort of body philosopher who had no real expertise in practical somatic disciplines or therapies, especially one who claimed to be a pragmatist in approach. That respect for practice, taught not by preaching but by the atmospheric glow of beauty in motion

and rest, stayed with me long after we parted in 1990, when Pierre Bourdieu invited me to his center in Paris.

Respect for her practice and shame at my lack of somatic expertise eventually led me to take the four-year professional training in the Feldenkrais Method, which I continue to practice today, though only through workshops. I gave up taking on private patients because of the financial complexities involved and worries that it would be too time consuming and distracting from my academic work. I did my professional Feldenkrais training in New York City between 1998–2002, while I was chairing Temple University's Philosophy Department in Philadelphia. I didn't dare tell my colleagues about it, or my dean, until after the training was over. The experience of being an absent but effective chair reinforced for me the Daoist idea that things go best when the governor is absent and doesn't try to control the governed. I relished the experience of living a secret life, which I remembered from my time as an intelligence officer in the IDF (long ago, 1973–1976), when I wasn't allowed to tell anyone, even my wife, what I was doing or where I was sent. I wrote about that chairing/training experience in an essay for The Chronicle of Higher Education.[3] What I learned from that intense somatic training and practice in the Feldenkrais Method has been essential to my writings on somaesthetics ever since. It's not a coincidence that somaesthetics, though briefly indicated earlier, only achieved real form and articulation during the years of that training. That respect for the practical in somaesthetics, the need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk, I learned from the dancer.

Romance had an equally central role in my exploration of East Asian philosophy. I was a very Eurocentric philosopher who had no interest in Asian culture until 1992, when I fell in love with a Japanese American artist whose welcoming family introduced me to the beauties of Japanese culture that saturated their homes in New York City and nearby Connecticut. That romantic and familial connection resulted in a marriage, a mixed-race daughter, and multiple trips to Japan, including a one-year appointment as a Visiting Professor (with no teaching duties) at Hiroshima University's Graduate School of Education, which was interested in applying somaesthetics to educational

3) Richard Shusterman, "Mind-Body Problems," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 23, 2005, https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/humanitieschair/print-the-chronicle-9-23-2005-mind-body-problems.pdf.

theory and practice. During that year I was fortunate to study Soto Zen practice at the cloister of Roshi Inoe Kido, whose teachings have deeply influenced my somaesthetic thought. He reminded me that somaesthetic awareness and skill are not ultimate ends in themselves but only crucial tools for higher ends of liberation and enlightenment. My study of Japanese thought led to an exploration of its sources in Chinese culture, which in turn led to lectureships and collaborations with universities in Beijing and Shanghai and the Chinese translation of all my major philosophical books up to and including *Thinking through the Body*, but also my novella *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*. Somaesthetics became a significant theme in Chinese aesthetics, and a Center for Somaesthetics was established in Shanghai in 2018. Romance was not absent from my learning of classical Chinese culture. I learned the fascinating complexities of traditional tea culture and ink wash painting from an elegant, long-stemmed Chinese beauty, a true master of aesthetics in theory as well as practice. However, after the outbreak of Covid and the subsequent icy relations between the USA and PRC, I've not been able to return to China. My last visit there was in December 2019, when one of my lectures was cancelled by a local governor.

CS: And how do you think, and how have you thought in your work, about the relations between the erotic, the aesthetic, and the rational or philosophical? How do you think of the focus or the balance or the relation among these elements in your own philosophy or in those of some philosopher(s) you admire, or in some whom you do not admire so much?

RS: Given what I've just confessed, one might conclude that my philosophy is essentially the product of my erotic libido. That would be an oversimplification, because discomfort, disappointment, and confusion were also powerful stimuli for my philosophical explorations, which take lived experience not just linguistic propositions as material for philosophical reflection. I've sometimes likened my philosophical writing to secretions from troubling factors or feelings in my life experience that I struggle to control or palliate by providing them with a soothingly attractive and meaningful textual surface, in the same way that the nacre or mother of pearl enwraps the irritant in the pearl-producing mollusk. That desire to relieve discomfort through the power of attractive thought is one source of the dominant aesthetic motive you find as a leitmotif in my work. And, of course, for me, as for Plato and many other

thinkers, the erotic and aesthetic are very deeply intertwined. Beauty was defined as the object of eros, and the philosophical life, as Plato defines it in the *Symposium*, is a quest for beauty that begins with the desire for a beautiful young body (in which the Form of Beauty is reflected and is sensed by the desiring lover), and then one's erotic drive moves ever higher to ever more refined and ideal forms of beauty. So the erotic desire for beauty was long seen to elevate and ennoble the human spirit by leading to the appreciation of beauty into ever more ideal forms that are rich in rationality and spirituality.

My book *Ars Erotica* tries to recapture, through historical and philosophical analysis, this overlap between the carnal and the spiritual, the earthy and the transcendent, the aesthetic and the rational. We discussed these issues in a symposium about that book in an earlier issue of *Eidos*,[4] where we also explored the ways that our understandings of the arts of love (both in Western and Asian cultures) have been unhappily and oppressively shaped by millennia of patriarchal sexism and misogyny. Still, I argue that this does not preclude the positive power of eros to enrich our experience of beauty through aesthetic creation and appreciation, but also to stimulate rational thought about those powerfully meaningful aesthetic experiences.

For me, personally, eros is the motor of my philosophical thought. I simply cannot write about a topic that doesn't arouse my philosophical libido. But rational scrutiny of the philosophical options available and careful logical critique (a discipline I learned from my training in analytic philosophy) I find equally necessary, though more as the steering wheel to guide the path of my inquiry or as the brakes to control the energetic flow. I wish my writing had more of the ebullient, flowing spontaneity that comes from the surge of libidinal energy. I remember with longing the texts where I felt it was there. I worry that with old age those springs of energy could dry up, where one becomes more guarded and careful – both out of prudence and out of sheer fatigue. Although my philosophical positions are closer to John Dewey than to William James and I admire them both deeply, I prefer reading James because of the vivid energy that exudes from his texts, as if he wrote in spurts of blood.

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4) Marzenna Jakubczak, Max Ryynänen, Ellen Y. Zhang, Matthew Sharpe, Marta Faustino, Crispin Sartwell, and Richard Shusterman, "*Ars Erotica* Symposium," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 5, no. 4 (2021): 123–70.

This relates to the question of the aesthetic dimension of philosophy. I believe that aesthetic dimension is important, both when philosophy is practiced as a textual exercise or conceptual inquiry and when it is more broadly practiced as a deeply embodied way of life. Assembling true propositions is not enough; we already have enough banal truths at our disposal. Philosophy should be interesting and enlightening. It should be convincing and appealing. The aesthetic quality in both text and personal conduct heightens appeal, which can heighten conviction. Even if it cannot compel agreement, aesthetic appeal can command greater attention by rewarding greater pleasure, which contributes to a philosophy's value and power to persuade. This aesthetic criterion puts special demands on the person who practices philosophy as a way of life, as the philosopher's person (his conduct and appearance) become relevant for evaluating their philosophy.

CS: In the intro, I framed your work as a response to or even a rejection of its era, or the era we shared: the "postmodern" era. One reason for that framing is that I thought of my task partly as situating you in intellectual history. Another reason might be because I first heard your name from Richard Rorty, saying that if someone were going to disagree with him, they should do it the way you were doing it. But what do you think about this frame? Of course it is only one of many possible ways in, and I wonder whether it feels too limiting or too reactive. If you were placing yourself and your work in intellectual history, how would you go about it? How do you think your work captures or responds to its era?

RS: You know, of course, that I really admired your Introduction. I regard it as one of the most important elements in the book, as it adds novelty and overarching perspective. I think it brings out a sense of the systematic nature of my thought, even if systematicity is not my main goal or interest in philosophy. My chapters in the book are basically somewhat revised versions of already published texts on specific topics, central though those topics are. But your text is original and breaks new ground.

I believe you were right to situate the book's particular texts in its historical context. My preface explains that the book's texts belong to a particular stage of my thought. Rather than treating my work as a whole, the book presents only texts from my distinctively pragmatist period (spanning the twenty-five years from 1990 to 2014). It does not include my earlier texts in analytic philosophy and literary theory nor my

more recent texts on somaesthetics, eroticism, and philosophy as a way of life. Though Hegel is not one of my philosophical favorites, I embrace his historicist insight that philosophy (despite its pretentious claims to be dealing with immutable essences, timeless truths, and eternal values) is essentially the expression of the problems of its times rather than an unchanging *philosophia perennis*. So your decision to introduce my work by situating it within the problematics of the postmodern period, a period steeped in philosophical excitement and controversy, a period in which we both came of age philosophically, was most appropriate. Of course, this perspective is limiting, as any perspective is, but such limitation is crucial for meaningful focus by helping readers see how the book's different texts hang together by providing an overarching interpretive angle.

However, what readers might find misleading is your emphasis on my "critiques of postmodernism" without a similar highlighting of what I embraced in postmodernism. My early (1991) philosophical defense of hip hop was essentially based on presenting rap as a postmodern art whose value depended on its appealing challenge to modernist notions of unity, originality, purity, timelessness, and autonomy that had grown lifeless and sclerotic. That emphasis on postmodernism continued in my more detailed chapters on rap and other popular art in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, but also in that book's long chapter on "Postmodern Ethics and the Art of Living," which is reprinted here. You're right that Rorty was one of the key champions of postmodernity, and his enthusiasm for its French philosophical expression was largely what brought me to read the likes of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard. Rorty was perceived as postmodern also in France and in Germany, so much so that in 1993 there was a ten-day conference in Normandy confronting Habermas and Rorty, respectively representing modernity and postmodernity. I was invited as a representative of the postmodern, because of the book chapters I mentioned above. I also co-edited a French book based on that conference, *La modernité en questions: de Richard Rorty à Jürgen Habermas* (Paris: Cerf, 1998). But we should remember that Rorty eventually soured on the notion of postmodernism as a general cultural concept (valid for the arts as well as philosophy), saying that the term "has been so-overused that it is causing more trouble than it is worth" and that he preferred to speak of "post-Nietzschean philosophers" rather than postmodern philosophers.[5] I agree with you (and others)

5) Richard Rorty, "Introduction," *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–2.

that postmodern philosophy and postmodern culture remain meaningful, although very ambiguous, concepts. Vague terms still signify! And the "post" suffix is one of those prefixes that have and give real meaning. Just think of the meaning in Danto's notion of "post-historical art."

I'm very happy to learn (just now from your question) that Rorty liked the way I was critical of his views, because I admired him deeply. He was the major influence for my turning from analytic philosophy to pragmatism, and for pursuing my career in America, after I was already tenured in Israel. Since we both have been close to Rorty: you as his final philosophy PhD student, and I as an admiring but critical disciple of sorts, let's take a moment to explore the issue of Rortian critique, which has a significant role in some of the book's chapters but which plays a far greater role in many of my texts outside our book, where I focus on particular thinkers. I believe Rorty appreciated my critique because it was based on reading him as sympathetically as I could and advocating and using his arguments as much and as best as I could until I came upon something that I felt was missing and that would make his philosophy stronger. Rorty was accustomed to everyone taking cheap shots at him; and even if he developed a thick skin or a pose of indifference, such critique must have annoyed him. He once analyzed philosophical criticism in an enlightening way that I'd like to quote here:

> A third-rate critic of an original philosopher usually attacks him (or her) for frivolous irresponsibility, or corrupting the youth, or for having (by underhand "rhetorical" means) briefly made the worse appear the better cause. By contrast, a second-rate critic will spot lacunae in the philosopher's arguments, ambiguities in her use of terms, and vagueness in her conclusions. Such a critic defends the conventional wisdom which the radical philosopher criticized, and does so by detailed examination of the *ipsissima verba* of those criticisms, pointing out how often they either missed the point or begged the question. A first-rate critic will think his way so thoroughly into the hopes and fears of the philosopher he is criticizing that he is able to shrug off, on that philosopher's behalf, the strictures of such lesser critics. First-rate critics delight in the originality of those they criticize, and they criticize them only when they are at their

> best. They attack an optimal version of the philosopher's position – one in which the holes in the arguments are plugged or politely ignored, and the unfortunate side-effects of his work, or the side-issues she discussed, are trimmed away.[6]

I'd like to imagine that Rorty regarded me as a first-rate critic in those terms – at least at the beginning of my pragmatist career, when I was working largely on issues of interpretation and philosophy of language, on reinterpreting aesthetics to make room for dialogue between analytic and continental aesthetics, and for initiating philosophical discussion on boldly naughty topics like rap music. I delighted in his original views, and Rorty seemed to have a soft spot for innovative naughtiness, including my own, at least initially. But he did not like my turn to experience and the body, even if I was trying to make his aesthetic pragmatism richer by introducing nonlinguistic pleasures and somatic delights. When I suggested that his neglect of these elements in favor of producing ever new and disposal vocabularies seemed to reflect American puritanism's neglect of pleasure combined with neoliberal capitalist consumerism, Rorty reacted with a vengeance, describing somaesthetics as "kicking up dust and then complaining that we cannot see."[7] I was grateful for that textual outburst, as my earlier criticisms never received a reaction from him in print (just a friendly acknowledgment in correspondence), and we always remained on very good terms. I detail my accords and differences with him in a chapter in *Thinking through the Body* and offer an assessment of his continuing influence in "Pragmatist Philosophy for Our Times: Reviewing Rorty's Legacy."[8] But as my philosophical explorations increasingly turned toward experience, embodiment, and the nonlinguistic powers of the qualitative and atmospheric (in politics as well as aesthetics), I lost interest in Rorty, while my interest in Foucault and other somatic thinkers (including pragmatists like James and Dewey) never waned.

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6) Richard Rorty, "Posties," *London Review of Books*, September 3, 1987, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v09/n15/richard-rorty/posties.

7) Richard Rorty, "Response to Richard Shusterman," in Richard *Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, eds. Mathew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Polity Press, 2001), 157.

8) Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatist Philosophy for Our Times: Reviewing Rorty's Legacy," *Society* 59, (2022): 583–90.

I've so far avoided the hard part of your question: how I see my work in intellectual history. I think you've done an excellent job on that question, and I think that subsequent scholars (if as informed and sympathetic as you) could assess my contemporary or historical role far better than I can. Philosophers can be as autistic as artists in focusing on their own work and not being overly concerned with how they stand with respect to others (living and dead). I recognize, of course, that some philosophers define their work by comparing themselves to contemporaries whom they criticize or by focusing on responses to philosophers who criticize them. I'm just not that sort of thinker. I'm more curious about learning new things (conceptually and experientially) than contemplating my position in history, even in the history of the present. But it might seem ignoble and cowardly to dodge your question altogether, and those are two adjectives I would not like to have associated with my philosophical work or with my character. So I'll offer a few remarks of response that seem reasonable enough, though perhaps obvious and banal.

First, I see my historical role as renewing the tradition of pragmatist aesthetics, a tradition that had little traction in American or European philosophy when my book with that title appeared in 1992. The lack of a pragmatist tradition in aesthetics is the reason why both the French and German translations of the book (respectively in 1992 and 1994) did not have pragmatism in their titles. Dewey's masterpiece *Art as Experience* did not get a French translation until 2005, and I was given the job of writing the introduction to the translation of that important Deweyan book. This was because the enthusiastic reception of my pragmatist aesthetics made Deweyan aesthetics finally look cool to French intellectuals, even if his aesthetic taste was seen by them as painfully *démodé*. Dewey himself explicitly rejected the notion of pragmatist aesthetics, as I explain in an article that traces the genealogy of that field, including the role that I (and my editor with Blackwell) played in establishing its name.[9] Because my work in pragmatist aesthetics involves the ethical, the political, the cognitive, the perceptual, and their related issues in philosophy of mind and ontology, I may be seen as renewing pragmatist philosophy more generally beyond the aesthetic field.

9) Richard Shusterman, "The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogical Reflections on a Notion and a Name," in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, ed. W. Małecki (Rodopi, 2014), 13–32.

Second, people regard me as initiating the field of somaesthetics, which, as I always insist, is not a departure from my work in pragmatism but an extension of it, even if it is also an interdisciplinary project that has important developments in fields other than philosophy. My understanding of pragmatism recognizes that its philosophy is nourished, tested, and expanded through engagement with other disciplines, including ones that highlight practice. Through somaesthetics I've been deeply engaged with researchers in human-computer interaction design and with projects of performance art that are beyond the margins of academic philosophy but that enrich my academic writing and my philosophical art of living. I've been pleased to find myself described in print as a "philosopher-artist." But I was transdisciplinary long before my turn to pragmatism and somaesthetics. My first two books were on literary criticism and T.S. Eliot, though that work is not represented here in our collection; nor is my recent book on *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*.[10] If such interdisciplinarity suggests a nomadic impulse of wandering between disciplines, it is echoed in wandering through different philosophical traditions and cultures: analytic philosophy, pragmatism, phenomenology, critical theory, hermeneutics, and Asian philosophy. That is why the French have described me as a "*philosophe nomade*."[11] And that is why Roger Ames (from whom I learned so much about Chinese philosophy) described me as a "world philosopher," meaning that my thought is not limited to only one cultural tradition, that it tries to be global in outlook, even if it fails to have significant global impact. Does having a global outlook mean that I'm no longer an American pragmatist philosopher? I believe that the pluralist principle in pragmatism would counter that conclusion, and I hope that my work, though not defined as comparative philosophy, will be remembered as belonging to a movement of twenty-first century transcultural cosmopolitan philosophy. In that global spirit, and as an effort to resist the disturbing wave of hostile, rival nationalisms, I've established an NPO for cosmopolitan culture.

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10) Richard Shusterman, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* (Routledge 2022).

11) Le Point, "Richard Shustermann, philosophe nomade," *Le Point.fr*, December 13, 2007, accessible via *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20110721005507/http:/www.lepoint.fr/archives/article.php/214541.

CS: Cosmopolitanism is an interesting theme that's been addressed by philosophers at various times in various ways, going back to ancient Greece and into our new millennium. What is your particular take on the cosmopolitan theme, and does it relate to the nomadism you mention?

RS: You're right that cosmopolitanism is an old philosophical theme going back to Diogenes the Cynic's claim to be a citizen of the world rather than of a particular city state, to be, in the Greek terminology, a *kosmopolitês* (κοσμοπολίτης). Its Greek etymology is significant for my vision of cosmopolitanism. The term comes from the Greek "kosmos" denoting the world but implying a world of attractive order or unity. Remember that "kosmos" is the source of our term "cosmetics." Consistent with the central aesthetic dimension that you see in my philosophy, there is a strong aesthetic aspect to my understanding of cosmopolitanism. Most philosophical treatments of cosmopolitan focus on the ethical and political, on trying to reconcile the global claims of universal rationality, morality, and human rights with significant local practices and values that seem to conflict with those putative universalities. I believe that cosmopolitanism needs to go beyond that ethical and political focus to examine more deeply the aesthetic dimensions of the different cultures we share in this world by engaging in transcultural dialogue with aesthetic engagement.

My premise is that ethical and political issues are always framed in a broader cultural atmosphere, a lifeworld, that is shaped by aesthetic practices in the arts, ritual, and everyday life and language. Cosmopolitanism, in my view, should be transcultural, pluralist, and dialogical rather than universalist in outlook. With such transcultural dialogue in mind, our Center for Cosmopolitan Culture rejects the idea of cosmopolitanism as inherently a project of Western culture, one that advances by colonizing, subjugating, or exploiting other cultures for the benefit of the more privileged nations of the West. We can find better ways for achieving cultural understanding and harmony than hegemonic cultural universalism. We can negotiate cultural conflicts (and the political conflicts they engender) by learning more deeply about the cultures that contrast with ours and by appreciating those differences rather than focusing only on what we share. Of course, such appreciative negotiation does not guarantee that all conflicts are satisfactorily resolved. But to focus only on what we share is essentially refusing to acknowledge and to learn from our cultural differences; and

those differences can enrich our own culture, especially the individual's self-culture. I describe various forms of transcultural exploration (some of which you could call cultural nomadism) in our book's chapter on "Dialectics of Multiculturalism: Ethics and Politics," which explores how philosophy can be "practiced as a critical, meliorative art of living within determinate sociopolitical cultural contexts." So even here, when "ethics and politics" are the titular topics, the aesthetic asserts itself as a dimension that should not be overlooked.

CS: I wonder how multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism might be related or might contrast. I think that, as we both lived through the postmodern era, we both also lived through the era of multiculturalism in Western universities. How are those connected? I have started to think that my own early work, which not only used Chinese and South Asian traditions to try to critique or supplement Western aesthetics, but also things like hip hop and country music, might have been a bit too casually appropriative, that my treatment of these traditions was somewhat superficial and self-focused, though I regarded myself at the time as devoted to intercultural understanding, especially of the beautiful. I think you have been a bit more reflective and careful, perhaps, but I wonder how you see this period now. Were you, or could you have been, an authority on hip hop music, for example? And how do we deal with the simultaneous necessity of considering a variety of cultures and their arts and their philosophies and the dangers of appropriation and cultural narcissism? I'm genuinely worried and confused about this right now, Richard.

RS: Let's take your own worry first (since affect is an important issue that colors everything) before we tackle the conceptual question. I don't think philosophers should be afraid of exploring cultural forms beyond those in which they were raised. Of course, we should avoid rapacious, plundering appropriation but that does not mean we should fear to tread in cultures that are not our own. Cultures are out there for use, and particular groups do not own them; cultures can grow and prosper through proper, respectful ways of appropriation. Without cultural sharing our world is locked into narrow, self-protecting cultural compartments. Do Americans (or Jews) need to ask Germans their permission to write about Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Frege? Do German Jews get a pass for that, while Turkish or French Jews do not? Should we

instead ask the Austrians' permission, for quoting Wittgenstein and Neurath, and for utilizing their texts in translations they never authorized?

To regard cultural learning and application as cultural looting and trespass helps reinforce cultural sectarianism and conservatism. That said, I agree with you that it's important to be respectful in engaging with foreign cultures, some of which are not as foreign as they initially appear because of their hybrid character and our own personal and cultural hybridity. I discuss that point in detail in the chapter on multiculturalism already mentioned, so I won't plunge into it here. But before returning to the complex issues of respect and authority in transcultural nomadism, let me address your conceptual question about the relationship between multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Both terms are vague and ambiguous. Construed one way, they could be seen as oppositional: multiculturalism entailing cultural pluralism while cosmopolitanism signaling monism, a single universal culture of the world. But construed another way (that I prefer) the terms can be fruitfully collaborative rather than contradictory: multicultural cosmopolitanism implies a pluralistic cultural worldview where difference is appreciated and explored as well as commonality. I've explored this pluralistic model with respect to philosophical internationalism.[12]

You asked a personal question about my relationship to rap that I don't want to dodge. It allows me to respond more fully to the issues of respect, appropriation, and authority through a concrete example. Hip hop culture played a relatively brief but important role in my career (between 1988 and 1997). For several years I was a devoted fan. How did I get into it? I was an Associate Professor at Temple University, which is situated in the North Philadelphia Black ghetto. I commuted to work on the subway; the music, the fashion, the language, the gestures – in short, the culture was all around me. And I could make no sense of it at first, but its energy and mystery attracted me. And as I learned more about rap music (in those early days of the genre when it was regarded as quasi-criminal by establishment culture), its boldly defiant aesthetic, philosophical, and political claims with their critique of social oppression and their commitment to educate and raise political consciousness and cultural self-confidence to advance sociopolitical reform rapidly won me over.

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12) Richard Shusterman, "Internationalism in Philosophy: Models, Motives, and Problems," *Metaphilosophy* 28, no. 4 (1997): 289–301.

Hip hop was a perfect example of what I was looking for in pragmatist aesthetics, a democratic, energetic, dynamically embodied, socially conscious, and radically critical popular art. I also loved the way rap challenged elitist, modernist purism by contrastingly celebrating the aesthetic of the mix, both through its signature technique of appropriative sampling and its blending the different cultures of African diaspora and American pop. So I studied rap both as a fan and as a pragmatist philosopher who appreciated its aesthetic, political, and philosophical message. When I wrote my first text on hip hop ("The Fine Art of Rap"), I was aware that I had no academic background in African American culture and no ethnic authority as a member of that culture. So, out of respect for the culture and recognition of my outsider status I was very hesitant about submitting my text for publication. I felt I needed the critical judgment of an authority on African American culture. So I sent my manuscript to a genuine expert, Houston Baker, who directed the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania. I had never met or corresponded with him before. But he responded with such warmth and encouragement (inviting me to meet him at Penn and commending the text as just what was needed to bring rap's street culture the intellectual respect it deserved) that worries of self-serving and superficial appropriation no longer arose. Later, through the publicity the book received in the media, George Ware, a North Philly ghetto resident, social activist, and former SNCC member who established a quarterly journal for rap, contacted me and asked me to join his project.

So for a couple of years I had a column in the hip hop fanzine he edited and published, *JOR Quarterly: The Journal of Rap Expression and Hip Hop Culture*. I was the only White dude writing for the journal, and I had fun with it; I adopted the moniker "Rich Frosted," which I appropriated from Entenmann's Classic Rich Frosted Donuts, still today advertised as "chocolatey-covered" with "a moist, golden" inner core. That moniker indicated, as did my photo on the column, that I was just a White boy who loved rap. But I also asked George and his crew whether they felt that my actions were inappropriately appropriative. Their answer shocked me. They absolutely had no fears about my appropriating their culture because they knew that I, as a White guy, could not speak for them. They added that they trusted me far more than the likes of Houston Baker and Skip Gates, whose African American identity would lend them authority in speaking for ghetto culture while prosperously living far from ghetto life.

In contrast, I could not front for rap and ghetto culture as the elite Black intellectuals could. So I did not encounter resentment either from ghetto folks or from African American academics, who later invited my paper on "Rap as Art and Philosophy" for the Blackwell *Companion to African-American Philosophy*. Of course, that was back in 2003, when the atmosphere of cultural discourse was fresher and freer, where the policing of thought and speech (and of so much else of what makes life beautiful) was not as oppressive as today. And, of course, hip hop is also very different from back in the days of BDP, Public Enemy, and Stetsasonic, when I was deeply into the genre without ever pretending that I was a B-boy.

I hope you're not already bored with this sketch of how my engagement with rap complicates simplistic thinking about cultural identity, authority, and appropriation; because I now need to add another dimension of complexity in cultural and personal identity: how it changes in different contexts. Again, I treat this in the multiculturalism chapter, but here I add a wrinkle regarding your question about my relationship to rap. The French version of my book on pragmatist aesthetics (published shortly before its English version and with a different title) received considerable media attention. Invited to present the book on the RapLine, a nationally televised TV show on M6 dedicated to rap and dancehall music, I was shocked to be introduced on air as "un philosophe, universitaire, juif, américain," and wondered whether there was an antisemitic slight in calling me a Jew, when it played no part in my study of rap nor in my book altogether. Other French language media also described me as "a Jewish philosopher from Philadelphia," so I sought comfort and advice from my French friends who reassured me that the Jewish adjective was meant positively to indicate that I had more cultural and intellectual credibility than an ordinary American professor, that I could be identified culturally with Woody Allen, then beloved by the French *culturati*. When similar remarks regarding my Jewish identity greeted the book's very positive German reception, I realized that there was something more involved in highlighting my ethnicity. In Europe, being Jewish gave me more credibility as an advocate of rap, because the Jews have been the Blacks of Europe with a long, bitter history of racial discrimination, oppression, and persecution. The ghettos were the designation of Jewish neighborhoods in Europe before they became associated with African American urban enclaves. For some French and German minds (and for some other European cultures steeped in antisemitism), being Jewish gave me more

authority to speak for rap and for the oppressed populations that hip hop culture aimed to liberate or elevate culturally, socially, and politically. I was surprised and very uncomfortable to be seen that way: because beneath the positive, welcoming reception as a discriminated subaltern, one feels it viscerally as a condescending, compensatory gesture that reflects one's perceived status as inferior or victimized. When I once felt that vibe in a promising romantic context, I was sickened and shivered with nausea and rage. Real cultural nomadism involves persistent episodes of double consciousness and more self-deprecation than self-pride, as one struggles to formulate one's ideas in a foreign language in a foreign culture.

CS: That's fascinating. How do you think being Jewish has affected your philosophy, then? Or perhaps I should ask what Jewish identity means in relation to other "racial" or (in your critical term) "subaltern" identities? What does it mean now, in the wake of Gaza? Is there a Jewish aesthetic, as we might toy with the notion of a Black aesthetic or even a women's aesthetic? I myself was raised by a completely secularized, far-left, Jewish mother. The only thing she taught me about Jewish identity is that we are intellectuals, people of the book. Everyone seemed to be a writer and to be worried about ideas. But I don't know how I think that identity, such as it is, plays into my work, except maybe that thinking seems chronic, or in some way philosophy came naturally to me/us.

RS: Your questions are difficult to answer because the issue of Jewish identity is especially complicated and contested. In Israel, the question of "Who is a Jew?" has been and remains a hotly controversial political issue. In terms of Jewish religion, Jewish identity is matrilineal (though it wasn't so in Old Testament times), so you are Jewish because your mother was, even if your father wasn't. But if your father was Jewish and your mother wasn't, then you wouldn't be Jewish according to rabbinical law, unless you converted or your mother converted before your birth. In Israel, they insist that the conversion be an Orthodox one; and official Jewish status there is important because it guarantees the right to automatic full citizenship through immigration (although there are other ways to become an Israeli citizen, such as simply being born there). Jewish identity is further complex because it is not a mere matter of religion. It is seen as an ethnicity, a people rather than a religion or a nation. You yourself described the

Jews as people of the book. Georg Simmel, the German philosopher and social theorist, was considered a Jew, even though both of his parents were baptized Christian long before he was born and though he never engaged in Jewish religious practice nor self-identified as Jewish. But Simmel suffered discrimination as a Jew, which was one reason why he had so much trouble getting a professorship.

My own sense of Jewish identity is complicated by my Israeli background which is entirely secular but inevitably steeped in the Hebrew language and suffused with knowledge of Jewish culture, even if I don't practice its religious rituals. So I do not feel at home with either practicing Jews in the diaspora or in Israel. I explain this in greater detail in the last chapter of my book *Practicing Philosophy*, entitled "Next Year in Jerusalem? Jewish Identity and the Myth of Return," which explores the vexed issue of the Judaism/Zionism relationship and how I see it and live it. I won't try to summarize that discussion here, but I will address how being Jewish but secular influenced my philosophy. First, it gave me a strong feeling of being an outsider in American and European culture but also in conventional Jewish culture. This created an acute, pervasive double consciousness, which in turn provides the sort of critical distance needed for philosophical critique.

Second, although I know (from life in Israel) that there are Jewish cops and Jewish prostitutes as well as Jewish intellectuals, I like to link my Jewishness (as your mom identifies hers and yours and others') with the powerful secular Jewish philosophical tradition that includes the likes of Wittgenstein, Adorno, Benjamin, Marx, Marcuse, Arendt, Plessner, Simmel, Bergson, Derrida, Levinas, Cavell, and Spinoza (among many others) whose Jewish background gave them a measure of outsider status for critical distance, a view from the outside that can see things differently.

Third, I think my Jewish identity and its pervasive outsider status helped shape my nomadism. The discomfort of not feeling entirely at home in a given place prompts one to look for another place, whose subsequent discomfort spurs further wandering. The wandering Jew is thus an iconic figure in world history and culture, a figure tied to the antisemitic persecution that resulted in centuries of forced wanderings and mass killings. The German term for the wandering Jew (and the name of an antisemitic Nazi film of 1940) was "der ewige Jude" (the eternal Jew). Persecution, expulsion, and annihilation of Jews were seen as eternally needed to erase the pernicious social and political contaminations that they eternally cause. We can contrast the negative *ewige*

Jude with Goethe's famous "*ewige Weibliche*" (the eternal feminine) that positively elevates, pulling us up and ultimately saving the sinner Faust from eternal damnation. "*Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan*," are Goethe's words in his drama *Faust*, which I cite in an *Eidos* article affirming the positive power of eroticism to inspire virtue and spiritual progress rather than mere carnality.[13] The connection evoked between the Jewish and the feminine as eternal principles is interesting.

Identifying Jews with women suggests a perception of their shared weakness and inferiority; and in a culture affirming robust strength and macho superiority, the perceived femininity of the Jews would identify their culture with aesthetic decadence, just like the Nazis condemned what they labeled as decadent or degenerate art (*Entartete Kunst*). The Jewish intellectual tradition in Germany and Austria with which we both resonate might be seen as physically weak or feminine, as a culture of persecuted victims who had to flee or be killed: Freud, Adorno, Benjamin, Arendt, Marcuse, Einstein. The robust, strength-conscious militarism we find in Israel is an understandable and self-conscious reaction to the ideology of the Jew as ideally a bookish, weak, epicene intellectual (thus ripe for victimhood) rather than a person of physical strength and hardihood as well as mental power. What I like (and try to promote) in pragmatist aesthetics is the combination of what one typically identifies as masculine and feminine principles, of action and reception, of what Dewey calls doing and undergoing, which he sees as essential to aesthetic experience and indeed all experience. Pragmatism's pluralism and synechism appeals to me because it helps one resist simplistic, exclusive binaries, including gender binaries. My studies of eroticism have convinced me that such rigid gender binaries (with their hierarchies) are inadequate.[14]

CS: Your work on erotic experience is not properly represented in *The Critical Shusterman*, nor is there discussion of your own artistic practice of performance art with "The Man in Gold." So how do you see these later developments in your thought and life as emerging from the previous work that is represented in the volume? I almost

13) Richard Shusterman, "Ennobling Love and Erotic Elevation: A Response to Six Readings of Ars Erotica," *Eidos A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 5, no. 4 (2021): 156–70.

14) Besides my book *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), see "Self-Transformation as Trans-formation: Rilke on Gender in the Art of Living," *The Journal of Somaesthetics* 9, no. 1 (2023): 45–56.

feel that somaesthetics has sent you in some directions or opened some dimensions of experience and writing that might not have been open to you without it. Do you think so? And what might the next developments be?

RS: I should first explain why those elements are absent from our book along with other texts of mine that I consider worthy of renewed attention. My aim in *The Critical Shusterman* was to have a book that would not be unattractively bloated (beyond its 400 pages) and whose texts would present my positions on key general topics of philosophy so as to evoke what could be seen as the systematic character of my thought. So I excluded not only texts that focus on individual thinkers (Wittgenstein, Dewey, James, Peirce, Rorty, Foucault, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Danto, Burke, T. S. Eliot, etc.) but also texts focusing on specific artistic genres (poetry, rap, dance, photography, architecture, film, fashion, cuisine, etc.). I also wanted to give the book greater focus by limiting it to a particular period of time, so I did not include any of my early essays in analytic philosophy but focused instead on texts that span the twenty-five years from 1990 to 2014. That period begins with my initial steps in writing *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) and extends into the development of my pragmatist thinking on topics of ethics, politics, ontology, epistemology, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, and somaesthetics. For these reasons, my work on *ars erotica* and on performance art are not represented in our book, though they are central to my vision of philosophy as a critical and creative art of living, as is my most recent monograph, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*.

You are certainly correct in thinking that somaesthetics was what impelled me to explore eroticism and performance art. When I first introduced somaesthetics in a public lecture in 1996, the interdisciplinary audience responded with welcoming enthusiasm while assuming that somaesthetics would focus on the pleasures of food and sex. I realized immediately that those topics were not the way to gain philosophical respectability for somaesthetics, so I postponed writing on those topics for at least a decade until the credibility of somaesthetics seemed assured. My entry into performance art also emerged directly from somaesthetics, more particularly through my somaesthetics lectures and workshops at various art schools and dance programs in France. The students always asked me how somaesthetics relates to contemporary art and were never satisfied with my theoretical answers. So through the encouraging pres-

sure of the Parisian artist Yann Toma (a professor of art at the Sorbonne), we created (almost by accident) the performance project of the Man in Gold in June 2010, and it still continues today. The most recent appearance of the Man in Gold was with the performance artist ORLAN in Paris in August of 2025. As for my next developments, I hope I'll continue to be surprised by experiences and ideas that excite and enlighten. Beyond that hope, I dare not predict.