How are we to understand the paradoxical conjointing of the local, parochial and popular with a cosmopolitan worldview? Do boundary-crossing working class mass migrants and refugees evolve the open toleration, cultural competence and utopian worldview claimed by globe-trotting elite travelers? Conversely, can there be an enlightened cosmopolitanism that is not rooted in the final analysis in enlightened cosmopolitanism that eludes? Conversely, can there be an enlightened cosmopolitanism that is not rooted in the final analysis in patriotic and culturally committed elites? The worldview of Kalanga “reasonable radicals” in Botswana described by Richard Werbner highlights that ethnic belonging does not negate openness to cultural difference or the fostering of civic and global consciousness and a sense of moral responsibility beyond the local and relative.

Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

Vernacular cosmopolitanism, an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment, seeks to conceptualize apparent opposites—cosmopolitan patriotism, rooted cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan ethnicity, working class cosmopolitanism and discreet cosmopolitanism. Such combinations emerged in the act of questioning postcolonial and precritical forms of cosmopolitan consciousness and travel.

Vernacular cosmopolitanism is perhaps the most ambiguous of these terms: Are we talking about non-elite forms of travel and trade in a postcolonial world, like those of the Senegalese Mourides described by Diouf, or of non-European but nevertheless high cultures produced and consumed by non-Western elites, such as those of the Urdu, Persian or Ottoman worlds? The Sanskritic cosmopolis described by Pollock spanned an area extending from Afghanistan to Java and from Sri Lanka to Nepal, a non-Western but nevertheless cosmopolitan literary world contrasted with the local traditions that succeeded it.

Who Might Be Cosmopolitan?

Are we to define, by analogy, contemporary Hindi, Urdu or Cantonese cultural worlds as cosmopolitan, or as local? And how are we to place minority elites in new postcolonial nations who struggle to defend their local cultures and seek justice through multicultural citizenship, while being at the same time liberal, tolerant and highly educated world travelers?

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Kwame Anthony Appiah also argues that cosmopolitanism may equally be an argument within postcolonial states on citizenship, equal dignity, cultural rights and the rule of law. Echoing Martha Nussbaum’s notion of cosmopolitan patriotism, he proposes that “rooted” cosmopolitans do not abandon their ties to morally and emotionally significant communities—families and ethnic groups—in being open to the world. They may and often do feel sentimentally attached to several homes in different countries.

Postcolonial elites nevertheless differ in significant senses from international labor migrants and refugees. The question raised by Ulf Hannerz is whether these groups may legitimately be labeled cosmopolitan at all. Hannerz proposes a set of useful distinctions between cosmopolitans, who are willing to engage with unfamiliar cultures and places; locals, who perpetuate local cultures and live out their lives in local places; and transnationals, occupational elite travelers who create new professional cultures.

By contrast to such foreign correspondents or oil engineers, Hannerz lumps the transnational cultures evolved by migrants and refugees with those of tourists in being “locals-plus.” If tourists are “locals plus sunshine,” migrants are “locals plus income.” They regard their involvement with other cultures as a “necessary cost.” Recently, however, Hannerz has conceded the possibility that there could be a “bottom-up cosmopolitanism.”

This revision responds to accusations of elitism and Eurocentrism. Arguably, transnational migrant diaspora cultures share the same kind of open closure that typifies elite occupational cultures. But beyond that, huge numbers of working class migrant travelers rely on the hospitality of strangers and, over time, broaden their cultural horizons. An example from my own work is that of the expanding cosmopolitan subjectivity of a Pakistani migrant, a simple man who gained knowledge of different cultures while working with members of diverse ethnic groups on a building site in the Gulf. Nevertheless, he remained rooted in his transnational Sufi order centered in Pakistan.

The view that cosmopolitans are necessarily members of the elite has been challenged by James Clifford, who reflects on the status of companion servants, guides and migrant laborers, and on whether they too

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through the Internet, books, magazines, artist exchanges and international air travel via artists’ and their supporters’ photographic records and other representations and copies. Street art and the community it creates are everywhere and nowhere. Street art and its producers can be found in almost any city in the world, yet it holds no singular place as its primary location or “home.”

In light of the newly recognized anthropological understanding of translocality and multi-sited ethnography, we must consider how and why we are critiquing and questioning our methodologies and theoretical standpoints. We are often too quick to pigeonhole ideas before they have ever been released by attempting to place our own pre-conceived understandings and theories on them. An example of this might be the over-eager anthropologist who sets out with a specific set of ideas as to what they will find in the “field” before they have even begun to undertake their actual research.

Perhaps we might benefit from a more relaxed approach to the practice of these new ethnographic truths and allow the methodology to emerge from experience rather than pre-mediated analysis; if so, anything can become fodder for ethnographic reflection. Although, it is important too to avoid the automatic response of immediate analysis of ethnographic experience; why not propose reflections rather than revisions? Instead of continually reworking our “data” to fit a preposed project, why not allow the “data” to wash over us as ethnography, and let the understandings emerge from this process of reflection. In this way I believe that we, as ethnographers, will be subject to a much more in-depth insight into the nature of those cultures and spaces we choose to study.

Ethnography is not only about people, but also the boundaries that are erected between us; these emerging, changing spaces become the locations that identify us.

Justin Armstrong is currently finishing a master’s thesis on the global street art scene at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Justin has collected hundreds of photos of street art from around the world and interviewed many of its practitioners for the writing of this thesis. He works in the areas of audio-ethnography and Japanese film studies.

Tsing might call “world-making forces” at the level of the intimate.

As a possible starting point, we have turned to contemporary theoretical physics’ “anthropic principle,” propounded by such researchers as Stephen Hawking. Drawing on the idea that electrons can exist in either of two states at the same time, that they can, in other words, occupy two positions or states simultaneously, the “anthropic principle” posits the existence of parallel universes existing at the same time, and the possibility that people themselves can occupy such multiple worlds simultaneously. We suggest this idea might be fruitfully mined as metaphor for theorizing instances of anthropological subjects and objects existing simultaneously in multiple frames of meaning, in differing magnitudes of practice, and multiple domains of materiality, thus confounding standard anthropological conceptualizations of space and time that keep us tied to the ground. It provides anthropologists with a conceptual framework for rethinking the local and the global as simultaneous, understanding them as indeed inseparable, and therefore not conceptualizable in terms that depend on singular locations.

In addition, the anthropic principle asserts “that the laws, constants and basic structure of the universe are not completely arbitrary. Instead they are constrained by the requirement that they must allow for the existence of intelligent observers.” The central place given to observation in representations of the universe in contemporary “anthropic theory” extends insights of early-20th-century quantum theory, which up-ended the then-current conception of the universe. Bohr, Heisenberg and others revealed instead a probabilistic universe dominated by chance and complexity, one comprehensible only through overlapping, and sometimes even contradictory descriptions, since the very act of observation could be shown to constitute and change the object of analysis, ideas that clearly found their counterpart in the contemporaneous cinematic work of Eisenstein and later worked their way into anthropology.

Thus anthropic theory holds promise for our efforts to think about an ethnographic practice that can attend to the co-presence of the global and the local and enable us to think about doing ethnography (and being ethnographers) within a framework that admits the possibility of multiple temporalities of the present, our own present included. Like the uncertainty principle which depends on an accumulation of experiments/observations to approach what can never be seen from a singular fixed position, these images alert us to the need for an ethnographic practice unencumbered by a single metaphorical geographic position, one which not only recognizes that all truths are situated and partial, but also that the anthropological project itself can only be constituted by overlapping and multiple images, with varying, and perhaps infinite “depths of field,” that are at once materially dependent and interdependent.

Much depends on context, and some environments are more cosmopolitan than others. Constantinople, Alexandria, Cairo and Thessalonika were great cosmopolitan cities. If we take vernacular cosmopolitanism to refer to a multi-centered world, beyond the West, in the sense proposed by Arjun Appadurai, it is perhaps among the elites of such cosmopolitan cities that distinctive vernacular cosmopolitanisms are created.

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