COSMOPOLITANISM

EDITED BY CAROL A. BRECKENRIDGE,

SHELDON POLLOCK, HOMI K. BHABHA,

AND DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

A MILLENNIAL
QUARTET
BOOK

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In honor of D. R. Nagaraj

20 February 1954–12 August 1998

Scholar, Visionary, Friend

and Inspiration for this book.

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There must be some way out of here.

Cosmopolitanism comprises some of today's most challenging problems of academic analysis and political practice, especially when analysis and practice are seen—as they are seen in the essays that make up this collection—as a conjoint activity. For one thing, cosmopolitanism is not some known entity existing in the world, with a clear genealogy from the Stoics to Immanuel Kant, that simply awaits more detailed description at the hands of scholarship. We are not exactly certain what it is, and figuring out why this is so and what cosmopolitanism may be raises difficult conceptual issues. As a practice, too, cosmopolitanism is yet to come, something awaiting realization. Again, this is not because we already understand and can practice it but have not—a mode of action whose rules we are familiar with and need merely to apply. Cosmopolitanism may instead be a project whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and definite specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do.

The indeterminacy of how to achieve a cosmopolitan political practice feeds back into the problem of academic analysis. As a historical category, the cosmopolitan should be considered entirely open, and not pregiven or foreclosed by the definition of any particular society or discourse. Its various embodiments, including past embodiments, await discovery and explication. In this way, the components of the linked academic-political activity of cosmopolitanism become mutually reinforcing: new descriptions of cosmopolitanism as a historical phenomenon and theoretical object may suggest new practices, even

as better practices may offer a better understanding of the theory and history of cosmopolitanism.

The foregoing assessment is not always acknowledged, let alone explicitly argued, in various recent contributions to the discussion of cosmopolitanism.[1] These texts do serve, however, to suggest that the sense of timeliness or even urgency about the question of cosmopolitanism is widely shared. And it is worth pausing a moment, before exploring further the approaches adopted in the essays that follow, to consider what accounts for this renewed concern. Three closely related forces that are powerfully at work in the contemporary world seem especially pertinent: nationalism, globalization, and multiculturalism.

The twentieth century ended much as it began, convincingly demonstrating that nationalism, whether of an ethnic or religious or other stripe, has lost little of its power for producing evil in the world. In recognizing the harm that nationalism does in promoting territorially based identities, we do not suggest that it has been always and only a negative force. It is famously Janus-faced, and nowhere more so than in the non-West. The emphasis of anticolonial nationalisms on boundaries and territories has something to do with how European colonialism was experienced by the colonized. For many, colonialism was an acute experience of displacement. Some people were literally displaced (indigenous peoples, but also the so-called nomadic in many countries). Others, in particular those excited by and open to the newly introduced European knowledges, underwent a powerful cultural experience of being dislodged from "tradition." Think only of the various culture wars, typical of many non-Western nationalisms, over the merits and demerits of Westernization.

These experiences gave meaning to nationalist emphases on a family of ideas all of which, in the end, connected identities to imaginations of place: home, boundary, territory, and roots. These imaginations were not always tied to fixed geographical places. Pakistan, for instance, while definitely imagined from as early as the 1920s as a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, had only the vaguest geographical referent for a long time in its career as a concept. Yet it was powerful in its capacity to address the experience of cultural and political displacement that colonialism had meant for many Muslims in South Asia. Thus, the nationalist search for home and authenticity may have been modern—

and vulnerable, therefore, to postmodern critiques of all static, reified, and bounded imaginations of place and home—but it was not, for that reason, inauthentic or illegitimate in itself.

Granting a legitimacy to nationalism does not, however, take away from the point that the modernist (and nationalist) insistence on territorialized imaginations of identity has produced horrendous conflicts in recent history. Besides, in a world increasingly deterritorialized by migration, mediatization, and capital flows, modernist nationalisms with their tendency to connect cultures and identities to specific places have become an ever more retrograde ideology, even as they retain ever greater power to produce history.

This is not, to be sure, precisely the same history over and over. The events at the end of the twentieth century that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia are not easily brought under the same explanatory umbrella as those at its beginning that accompanied the breakup of the Habsburg Empire. Nationalism is not just Janus-like but is also protean. Degrees of popular support, emotional cathexis, and official manipulation differ from case to case. In addition to this multiform phenomenology of nationalism, there are countless other factors that serve to differentiate the Sarajevo of 1994 from the Sarajevo of 1914. Not the least is that, the second time around, the cosmopolitan character of the city and all that it stood for were finally destroyed.

But we would have to be fussy pedants to allow finer points of historical differences to obscure the overpowering and deeply disquieting recognition of repetition and even intensification. Moreover, the morphing of empire into nation-state and nation-state into national-statelets is no longer just a Balkan game but a universal one. Some of its most deadly serious participants are the new players of the postcolonial world, those, for instance, who seek an independent Kashmir—a failed state in the making if there ever was one—in the perilous space between two brand-new nuclear powers. It is not simply that we are going forward into the past; we are going into a past that is at the same time somehow new, a grotesque caricature of the past where the propositions of Western modernity, now catastrophically universalized, are being re-enacted. We are headed toward a League of Nations with ten thousand fractious and anxious expansion teams.

This is not a good way to organize human life.

There's too much confusion,
I can't get no relief

Emergent discourses of cosmopolitanism are riven with deep historical ironies about what it means to live in our times. What defines our *times*? What times are *ours*? It is too easy to name our moment as post–Cold War or transnational. It is fundamentally facile to claim (as many do) that new media and market technologies have ushered in undreamed of possibilities of access and connectivity on a global scale, rendering the postcolonial paradigms of justice and redistribution obsolete in the face of choice, opportunity, and enterprise. Yet despite our discontents and discomfitures, we are properly resistant to a radical revanchism that seeks a return to the certainties of a world of the either/or: either First or Third World; either communism or capitalism; either planned economies or free markets; either the secular or the sacred; either class politics above all other differences or a betrayal of the spirit of History itself.

Cosmopolitanism, in its wide and wavering nets, catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition. The twilight of Transition, rather than the dawn of millennial transformation, marks the questions of our times: Do we live in a post–Cold War world *tout court,* or in the long shadow of that disastrous postwar experience of superpower collusion and competition that deformed the development of the rest of the world? Is South Africa free or is its anxious emancipation still caught in the unresolved pursuit for truth and reconciliation? Is one measure of the (lack of) success of New Labor in Great Britain its inability to deal with the old colonial problem of Northern Ireland? Is the nuclear contest between India and Pakistan part of the newly found confidence of postcolonial nations or the endgame of the trials of Partition?

As we negotiate this transitional territory, we often find ourselves in the interstices of the old and the new, confronting the past as the present. Perhaps the most significant such revisionary experience for cosmopolitical thinking is the neoliberal consensus that has become so apparent in the post–Cold War period. Where once we conceived of the world order in terms of vying and competing political systems and ideological structures, today the neoliberal emphasis falls more on indi-

vidualist aspirations and universalist norms. But this revenant late liberalism reveals, in a more exaggerated form, a struggle at the heart of liberal theory, where a genuine desire for equality as a universal norm is tethered to a tenacious ethnocentric provincialism in matters of cultural judgment and recognition. The discriminatory perspectives of an older form of globalization—colonization—seem to have revived themselves at the point at which we readily consider ourselves to be worldwide citizens forever "hooked up" (connected) on-line. All the derring-do between the local and the global in the dialectic of worldly thinking should not conceal the fact that neoliberal cosmopolitan thought is founded on a conformist sense of what it means to be a "person" as an abstract unit of cultural exchange.

Where once political discussion focused on the systemic nature of public cultures and the distribution of political goods, today there is a revival of the humanist discourse of rights founded on the unique and inviolable presence of "human" personhood. A rights culture is in many respects essential; it is historically appropriate in the light of decades of abuse of human and civil rights obscured by the totalitarian drawing of the iron curtain, or the neo-imperialist flourishing of the stars and stripes. None of this should hide the fact that the fetishization of liberal individualism has, in the past few years, created a cosmopolitan imaginary signified by the icons of singular personhood. What represents the spirit of world citizenship today? In recent years the answer to this question has not elicited ideas and ideals, but philanthropic individuals—Mother Theresa (for her love of the world's poor), George Soros (for his economic investment in Central Europe), Ted Turner (for his billion dollar contribution to the United Nations), the late Princess Diana (for her identification with the global issues of AIDS and land mines), and perhaps Bill Gates (for his lordly hold on the universe).

A cosmopolitanism grounded in the tenebrous moment of transition is distinct from other more triumphalist notions of cosmopolitical coexistence. Modernity has never fallen short of making universalist claims to world citizenship, based on the spectacular success of the Enlightenment as a pedagogical and political project. Capitalism envisages itself as a worldwide network of markets and profits; communism appeals to workers of the world to unite; late liberalism argues passionately against instrumentalism or determinism, and for the recognition of the human as the bearer of universal rights. But each of these worldly visions

is framed by the ideal of national sovereignty; and nationhood is the social form that renders modernity self-conscious—conscious of being contemporary—so that the cosmopolitan spirit may inhabit a world that is ethically synchronous and politically symmetrical. But, sadly, we know better than to claim (in the spirit of Gertrude Stein) that a nation is a nation is a nation. Nationhood—or nation-*ness*—may be the common currency of world culture and international politics, but its varied geopolitical histories have demonstrated, more often than not, the terrible asymmetries of the idea of modernity itself.

The cosmopolitanism of our times does not spring from the capitalized "virtues" of Rationality, Universality, and Progress; nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world. Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community. Too often, in the West, these peoples are grouped together in a vocabulary of victimage and come to be recognized as constituting the "problem" of multiculturalism to which late liberalism extends its generous promise of a pluralist existence. Cultural pluralism recognizes difference so long as the general category of the people is still fundamentally understood within a national frame. Such benevolence is often well intentioned, but it fails to acknowledge the critique of modernity that minoritarian cosmopolitans embody in their historic witness to the twentieth century.

What we are calling a minoritarian modernity (as a source for contemporary cosmopolitical thinking) is visible in the new forms of transdisciplinary knowledges that we initiate in the "multicultural" academy. Where once we attempted to teach difference by emphasizing areal locality and specificity, today we try to struggle free from the self-fulfilling dialectic of the general and the particular. Instead we attempt to provincialize Europe and we seek cosmopolitical genealogies from the non-Christian Sanskrit world. In each of these cases we are involved, at the same time, in a vernacularization of a great tradition and the amplification of a *petit récit.* Transdisciplinary knowledge, in the cosmopolitan cause, is more readily a translational process of culture's in-betweenness than a transcendent knowledge of what lies beyond dif-

ference, in some common pursuit of the universality of the human experience.

None of them along the line
know what any of it is worth

We have suggested that the nature of late-twentieth-century nationalism, multiculturalism, and the globalization of late liberalism has created a historical context for reconsidering concepts of cosmopolitanism. These categories are by now commonplaces for debate. Many of the key terms central to these debates—"universal," "theoretical," "abstract," "conceptual"—have been characterized as implicitly masculine because of their properties of mastery, distance from experience, indifference to specifics, and concern for absolutes in human life. These are the terms of a disembodied, free-floating, or generalizing scientific or humanistic thought. To focus, therefore, on these three historical practices is to ignore another pressure and inspiration to think about the cosmopolitan, namely, feminism. Feminism has learned to wrestle with problems and attendant possibilities while struggling to keep the situated rather than the universal subject in the foreground.

Thus, for cosmopolitanism, feminism may serve a role similar to but different from the other contested "isms" of the late twentieth century—nationalism, multiculturalism, and globalism—whose critiques are grounded in other economies and ideologies of difference and similarity. U.S. mainstream feminisms have noted that the "our" of our times is a noninclusive our that consists of able-bodied, white, heterosexual men. Asian American and African American feminists have pointed out the racialized nature of U.S. mainstream feminism itself, and together they have made an argument for the constitutive nature of gender and race in relation to each other. South Asian feminism has had to probe its class and cultural moorings in the world of the Hindu upper class with its attendant erasure of the lower class woman as well as the woman marked as Muslim, Christian, or tribal. Thus, all feminisms have had to struggle with their own universalisms.

No true universalism can be constructed without recognizing that there is a diversity of universals on which analyses are based, and that these are often in fact quite particular—not universals at all, but rather

interpretations devised for particular historical and conceptual situations. These are less universals, and more in the nature of arguments for the universal. Twentieth-century feminism developed concurrently in many parts of the world with an apparent promise of universality. It held out the hope that feminism would be good for all womankind and would dispel all national, racial, and cultural barriers.[2] Feminism was to be a global touchstone for all humankind. But feminism has had to critically engage historical change, as well as the tendency towards exclusion in centers of dominance, based on gender, race, class, and regional biases. Thus, recognition of the plurality of feminisms (and their own need for internal debate and differentiation) has now become a commonplace alternative to the idea that there exists a singular, universal feminism.

Just as feminist thought continues to struggle with the objections to universal discourse, so also cosmopolitanism must give way to the plurality of modes and histories—not necessarily shared in degree or in concept regionally, nationally, or internationally—that comprise cosmopolitan practice and history. We propose therefore that cosmopolitanism be considered in the plural, as cosmopolitanisms. In so doing, we leave open the question of the center and periphery in intellectual debates, and we hope to avoid the imposition of practices and histories that do not necessarily fit interpretations devised for historical situations elsewhere.

Feminisms in relation to cosmopolitanisms: this opens up two problematic issues. First, how can we think feminism to develop a cosmopolitanism that is not based on the concept of a "citizen of the world"? Who is the subject of citizenship? Is citizenship a necessary common frame to be shared universally? Is the cosmopolitan necessarily about the production of the sort of individual interest, will, and belief that most ideologies of citizenship appear to require? What would be the basis for a feminist cosmopolitanism that understands solidarities as something other than the coincidence and coordination of individual wills? The second is an issue of scale: if cosmopolitanism seeks to take the large view, how can we think the intimate under its sign without restricting intimacy to the domestic sphere? Any *cosmofeminism* would have to create a critically engaged space that is not just a screen for globalization or an antidote to nationalism but is rather a focus on projects of the intimate sphere conceived as a part of the cosmopolitan. Such a critical perspective would also open up a new understanding of the domestic,

which would no longer be confined spatially or socially to the private sphere. This perspective would allow us to recognize that domesticity itself is a vital interlocutor and not just an interloper in law, politics, and public ethics. From this reconfigured understanding of the public life of domesticity and intimacy it follows that spheres of intimacy generate legitimate pressure on any understanding of cosmopolitan solidarities and networks. The cosmofeminine could thus be seen as subverting those larger networks that refuse to recognize their own nature as specific systems of relations among others. That is, we would no longer have feminism as the voice of specificity interrogating the claims of other putative universals. Instead we would have the cosmofeminine as the sign of an argument for a situated universalism that invites other universalisms into a broader debate based on a recognition of their own situatedeness. A focus on this extensional understanding of domesticity and intimacy could generate a different picture of more public universalisms, making the domestic sphere subversive of thin claims to universalism.

There are many here among us
who feel that life is but a joke.
But you and I, we've been through that

It is in the context of these powerful trends, which show every sign of intensifying, that the essays on cosmopolitanisms that follow have tried to situate themselves. They are all responding to the phenomena of nationalism, globalization (including its most violent embodiment, European colonialism), and multiculturalism. The exercise of bringing feminisms to bear on cosmopolitanism, however, remains. Cosmofeminism is a space yet to be well inhabited. Although the perspectives and analyses of the essays here are heterogeneous, this heterogeneity is not something we mean to express in a concessive clause, as if we found it a cause of concern about incoherence or of regret at failing to reach consensus. On the contrary, we intentionally sought ways to ensure precisely the kind of mix we offer here. We were interested to see what new archives might be brought to bear on the analysis of cosmopolitanism; to discover whether the historical and, what is equally important, the geocultural perspective on the problem could be extended beyond the singular, privileged location of European thought and his-

tory; and to determine whether disciplinary approaches could be varied so as to move the discussion beyond the stultifying preoccupations of Western philosophy and to allow the possibility of capturing the wider range of cosmopolitan practices that have actually existed in history. For it is only through such procedures—adducing new empirical data on the variety of cosmopolitanisms and the new problematics that accompany them, decentering the conventional locus, and investigating from a wide range of scholarly perspectives—that new and post-universalist cosmopolitanisms, of the sort variously proposed in these essays, have the potential to come into being.

Most discussions of cosmopolitanism as a historical concept and activity largely predetermine the outcome by their very choice of materials. If it is already clear that cosmopolitanism begins with the Stoics, who invented the term, or with Kant, who reinvented it, then philosophical reflection on these moments is going to enable us always to find what we are looking for. Yet what if we were to try to be archivally cosmopolitan and to say, "Let's simply look at the world across time and space and see how people have thought and acted beyond the local." We would then encounter an extravagant array of possibilities.

We would find a new significance in the Asia-wide circulation of Sanskrit poetry in the first millennium whereby participation in a translocal culture, uneven and restricted by life chances though it was, neither required enforcement at the point of a sword nor entailed the obliteration of everything already in place. We would recapture a moment before Kant of a cosmopolitan humanism in the University of Salamanca and Francisco de Vitoria, thinkers for whom European expansion meant not traveling to distant places, meeting interesting peoples, and killing them, but rather confronting head-on the challenge of enlarging the definition of humanity as they understood it. We would see, furthermore, that the category of capital itself—that most aggressively universalizing of categories—has no simple, unidirectional relationship to historical difference, even in the thought of its apparently most aggressively universalizing of theorists, Karl Marx. Altogether beyond the purview of a self-limiting Western philosophical reflection—where cosmopolitanism becomes just another chapter in a history of dead ideas—is the archive of architecture and housing in Asia. Studying the multitudes and fates of pavement dwellers in Bombay/Mumbai, a city crowded with empty buildings, would enable us to grasp a new kind of endangered

cosmopolitanism already coded in the recent rectification of names signaled by that brutal forward slash; just as an analysis of the twinned or inverted histories of Shanghai and Hong Kong might complexify our categories by offering two very different yet equally cosmopolitan formations. If postcolonial Africa is off the cosmopolitan map for Kant or the Stoics, consider what could be learned (both in terms of the possibilities and tensions of cosmopolitanism) from the biography of a rural Senegalese Muslim brotherhood and its transformation into one of the most remarkable global trading networks of the contemporary world; or from the recent history of the photographed and aestheticized body in Senegal, and its negotiation with trans-African, Islamicate, and cosmopolitan norms of eros—especially eros that sells.

Two things should already be clear from the kinds of materials that make their appearance in this collection of essays and the problematics they generate. The first is how radically we can rewrite the history of cosmopolitanism and how dramatically we can redraw its map once we are prepared to think outside the box of European intellectual history. And the second is how manifold is the range of practices that might allow for new and alternative theorization. Consider again, as an instance of export cosmopolitanism, the circulatory networks of Sanskrit literature in precolonial Asia and the vast space they covered, from Central Asia to the South China Sea. Or, as cases of import cosmopolitanism, the architectural styles of pre-war Shanghai, where people tried to rebuild the whole world on their city streets (with Tudor-style villas, Spanish-style town houses, Russian-style churches, German-style mansions, Shanghai-esque lane houses, and Li long housing complexes); or the transformation of the nude in contemporary photography in Senegal into an image at once profoundly domesticated and irreducibly exoticized. All these instances are ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home—ways of inhabiting multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller.

A certain kind of logic teaches us a law of the excluded middle: an object may be here or there, but not in both places at once; something may be x or not-x, but not somewhere in between; a predication can be only true or false. Whether this logic holds in all possible worlds or not is for others to say. But the application of its dualism in the realm of cultural and political action is decidedly modern. Indeed, it constitutes

a core project of modernity. And here we encounter a striking paradox in the epistemological-historical trajectory of cosmopolitan practices. The more recent these practices are, the more intensely and reflexively mediated and networked they are. Yet, at the same time, the more occluded becomes the very fact of their being mediated and networked. Or rather, the mediation is not so much concealed as rendered illegitimate: cosmopolitan practices come to be seen as mixtures of things believed to have been previously unmixed and on that account, in the eyes of many (such as nationalists), all the more authentic. In fact, modernity itself is just this contradictory, even duplicitous, attempt to separate and purify realms—the natural, social, and empyrean realms, with their things and people and gods—that have never been separate and pure, and still are not. This holds true above all for supposedly individuated and unique cultures, each of which is better seen—more historically seen—as a "quasi object" located at the intersection of a range of other cultural quasi objects.[3] What the new archives, geographies, and practices of different historical cosmopolitanisms might reveal is precisely a cultural illogic for modernity that makes perfectly good nonmodern sense. They might help us see that cosmopolitanism is not a circle created by culture diffused from a center, but instead, that centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere.

This ultimately suggests that we already are and have always been cosmopolitan, though we may not always have known it. Cosmopolitanism is not just—or perhaps not at all—an idea. Cosmopolitanism is infinite ways of being. To understand that we are already cosmopolitan, however much and often this mode of being has been threatened by the work of purification, means to understand these ways in their full breadth through a disciplinary cosmopolitanism. That is why this particular volume ranges across language and literary history, critical intellectual history, political philosophy, ethnography, urban studies, architectural history, and art history. And, had there been time and space, it could have gone on without disciplinary limit in exploring cosmopolitan practices, which are themselves without limit.

Besides attempting to expand the repertory of archives, geographies, histories, and disciplines that have bearing on the discussion of cosmopolitanisms, the essays here, each in their own way, seek to address the politics of cosmopolitanism. It is in the political sphere that our fail-

ure to realize what we have always been has had the most awful consequences, the sorts that have awakened the sense of urgency behind this collection. All the authors are sensitive to the peculiar demands of this object of analysis: the politics of the question of cosmopolitanism are as irreducible as they are untotalizable. Here again, accordingly, given that the absolute universalisms of Western cosmopolitanism must forever subvert it from within and from the start, real strength may lie in division—at least, in a division that holds division as a value—and true unanimity in a consensual dissensus. In one essay, accordingly, it is shown how, from within Marx's own analysis of the categories of capital and abstract labor that would appear to homogenize all historical difference, we may find across-the-grain thinking, ideas that suggest resistance to the sublation of difference into the logic of capital even as capital expands. In another essay, a new cosmopolitan politics is expressed in the idiom of "arbitrage," that is, doing better in the domain of social power, identities, and communities what multinational corporations already do well in the domain of business. In another, the formulation offered is "critical and dialogical cosmopolitanism," wherein diversity itself might become a universal project. In yet a fourth, a politics "both-cosmopolitan-and-vernacular"—in short, a refusal to choose—is theorized as a possible option out of the lived experience of real people.

These may sound like ever more private academic fantasies, and perhaps they are. But the authors share deeply a sense that such questions are important to the fate of human collectivities—a sense that comes out of their actual engagements, whether with Bombay pavement dwellers, Murid traders, or colonial discourse and other coercive cosmopolitanisms of the past. And they know, if they know nothing else, that we should not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.

NOTES

All epigraphs are taken from Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower.*

1. See, for instance, Martha Nussbaum with respondents, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism,* ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000); Kimberly Hutchings and Roland Dannreuther, eds., *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Roel Meijer, ed., *Cosmopolitanism, Identity, and Authenticity in the Middle East* (Richmond, England: Curzon, 1999); and Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Ap-

parently unknown to the authors in *Cosmopolitics* is the remarkable series of studies by the historian of science Isabelle Stengers, which argues for a form of politics no longer contained within the separation of nature and society that characterizes Enlightenment and modernity. Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques,* 7 vols. (Paris: La Découverte, 1997).

2. Asuncion Lavrin, "International Feminisms: Latin American Alternatives," in *Feminisms and Internationalism,* ed. Mrinalini Sinha, Donna Guy, and Angela Woollacott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 175.

3. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History

Sheldon Pollock

Few things seem to us as natural as the multiplicity of vernacular languages that different peoples use for making sense of life through texts, that is, for making literature. And few things seem as unnatural as their abandonment and gradual disappearance in the present. In fact, literary language loss is often viewed as part of a more general reduction of cultural diversity, one considered as dangerous as the reduction of biological diversity to which it is often compared. The homogenization of culture today, of which language loss is one aspect, seems without precedent in human history, at least for the scope, speed, and manner in which changes are taking place.

This commonsense view of the world needs two important qualifications. First, the vernacular ways of being that we see vanishing everywhere were themselves created over time. These are not primeval ways of autochthons, for autochthons (like the Spartoi of Thebes, "the sown people" born from the dragon teeth planted by Cadmus) do not exist outside their own mythical self-representation. Second, by the very fact of their creation, the new vernaculars replaced a range of much older cultural practices. These earlier practices, which seemed to belong to everywhere in general and nowhere in particular, affiliated their users to a larger world rather than a smaller place. They were, in a sense to be argued out in this essay, cosmopolitan practices. These great transformations in the course of the last two millennia—from the old cosmopolitan to the vernacular, and from the vernacular to the new and disquieting cosmopolitan of today—resulted from choices made by people at different times and places, for very complex reasons. Studying the history of such choices may have something important, perhaps even urgent, to tell us about choices available to us in the future.

In earlier work I have studied the period following the old cosmo-