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## Why Cosmopolitanism?

Guest post by Miriam S. Sobré-Denton

Ah, cosmopolitanism. The first time I found you, I was taking a class on global and transnational ethnography with Dr. Takeyuki Tsuda. I read an article by Ulf Hannerz titled “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture.” He has since retracted many of the things he wrote in this article. And yet, for the first time, I felt that I had read an intercultural theory (in an anthropology class, no less) that *actually applied to my life*. So much of the work I’d done up until this point examined intercultural theories that provided dichotomies. You were EITHER individualist OR collectivist. When you travel, you EITHER make friends from your home culture OR your host culture. You are EITHER a patriot OR an interculturalist. Profoundly unsatisfying to me, as my experiences often hinged on dialectical tensions and dialogical experiences—those moments that exist between the both/and, rather than the either/or. Cosmopolitanism was the first theory I’d ever read that said you could be BOTH rooted AND rootless; BOTH local AND global; that maybe you would be the most comfortable with others who experienced similar tensions, who live in spaces of in-between-ness.

And then the backlash set in. Cosmopolitanism, you were not what I thought you were! Cosmopolitanism, I was informed, really isn’t a theory of both/and. This is a theory of exclusivity, of the ‘class consciousness of frequent travelers’; sure there was a sense of both/and-ness, but only for those privileged enough to be able to engage in voluntary sojourns that inevitably involve Western imperialism and cultural commodification. Why would anyone want to study this concept? I was interrogated about the inherent violence that cosmopolitanism—particularly in its Kantian and previously Greco-Roman Stoic iterations. This is a theory of global citizenship only accessible to those who have the privilege of being citizens in that kind of world.

And yet, cosmopolitanism, you continued to proliferate, to grow in breadth and depth. From when I first learned the term in 2006, to the present day (2014), cosmopolitanism theorists flocked to you, across disciplines ranging from sociology and political economy to religious studies and linguistics. Everyone was coming to the party—which also involved directly addressing the critiques of elitism and western imperialism brought with such ferocity by its opponents. Forms of vernacular, non-Western, non-elite and critical cosmopolitanism, which have actually been around since its nascence in places like ancient China in the philosophies of Mo Tzu and Mencius, as well as being promoted by the African philosophy of Maat, are resurfacing in work by such scholars as Pnina Werbner, George Delanty and Walter D. Mignolo.

In intercultural communication, we are, to extend the metaphor, late to your party. Intercultural communication scholars, particularly those who embrace critical and postcolonial approaches, are only now beginning to accept that this cosmopolitanism a term that is growing in strength, rather than waning. As the world shrinks and difference becomes something that can no longer be hidden from (if it ever could), cosmopolitanism in its critical and vernacular forms has reemerged as a theory for our time, which insists not that we should all embrace each other's many and varied values, but rather that we should understand that we all have values, and all hold those values dear to ourselves and the people and things we love. This kind of dialogic empathy requires hope as an approach to non-binary thinking. Cosmopolitanism is not a project that can be forced upon people; instead, it must be voluntarily embraced as an ethic of care for the world, from those next door to those across the ocean. My colleague Dr. Nilanjana Bardhan and I have recently published a book titled *Cultivating Cosmopolitanism for Intercultural Communication: Communicating as Global Citizens*, in which we propose cosmopolitanism's use for our discipline as a space of hopeful dialogue to move from either/or to a space of both/and. Cosmopolitanism, you may not be the answer, but you certainly deserve to be a part of both the discipline the dialogue.

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