

# Cosmopolitanism

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THIS article argues that the field of Victorian cosmopolitanisms has largely neglected accounts of migrants, exiles, and nomads in explorations of the nineteenth-century cosmopolitan world of empires. A focus on these hypermobile figures draws attention to the ways in which mobility, in all forms, disrupts our understandings of place, home, and world as they are conceived in cosmopolitan thought. These examples of displaced subjectivities reveal how cosmopolitanism travels along space, disregarding borders of region, nation, or empire and conjuring new ideas about how we belong to the world. By thinking about how different cosmopolitanisms contend or coexist with one another, the article reconsiders a question that persistently reappears in debates about cosmopolitanism across time and space: Is it an ideal of sameness and commonality or an orientation toward difference and plurality?

In the preface to a collection of her fragments charting her peripatetic wanderings across North Africa, Isabelle Eberhardt ruminates on her desire to “be unknown, everywhere a foreigner and at home, and to walk grandly and solitarily in conquest of the world.”<sup>1</sup> In one utterance, recorded at a transitional moment between a settled life and an uprooted one, Eberhardt captures the phenomenological tension that underpins cosmopolitanism—that is, being at home in the world. A few fundamental aspects of the cosmopolitan imaginary are worthy of note here: how the boundaries between “home” and “the world” are obfuscated; the uneasy dialectic of strangeness and familiarity; and the significance of mobilities “in conquest of the world” or, alternatively, in the social, spatial, and aesthetic construction of the *cosmopolis*.

Eberhardt’s sentiments echo conceptions of cosmopolitanism that can be traced as far back as Diogenes’ declaration of his identity as a *kosmopolitês*—a citizen of the world. Denis Diderot’s 1754 *Encyclopédie* defines the cosmopolite as one who “has no fixed abode” and is “not a stranger anywhere.” The notion of world citizenship informs a

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multiplicity of cosmopolitan thought, from Immanuel Kant's theory of an international world order to Karl Marx's analysis of cosmopolitan capitalism. The nineteenth-century literary world continued to reflect a range of cosmopolitan ideals, especially an increased interest in refiguring national identities. Across these dynamic and varying conceptions of cosmopolitan thought and practice lie different notions of what represents "home"—the locale, the nation, the empire—and what represents "the world"—often a nebulous sense of what lies beyond these boundaries, that which disrupts the fixed contours of our social, cultural, and political identities.

For a concept that is continually in flux and highlights encounters between differences, cosmopolitanism is still too often thought of as essentially universalist and humanist—liberal Enlightenment thought renewed for the nineteenth century, or a reaction against those very ideals. The field of nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism has yet to explore the ways in which cosmopolitan thought shifts across space and place and how writers articulate these changes. Although there have been attempts to uncover "other" cosmopolitanisms from beyond the West, much of our understanding of the concept—and therefore our methodologies—overstates the importance of place in cosmopolitan thought. Research has considered how cosmopolitanism has traveled "outward" from Victorian England to Europe and America, from its colonies back to the metropole; it attempts to "situate cosmopolitanism."<sup>2</sup> However, cosmopolitanism, at its most fundamental level, is about disrupting our notions of place and its bearing on our selfhood. How, then, do we explore the concept as it travels along space, disregarding borders of region, nation, or empire, conjuring new (and continually renewing) ideas about how we belong to the world?

This brief essay contends that cosmopolitanism in an age of empire is best understood when we turn our attention to how mobility, in all forms, impacts conceptual understandings of "home" as fixed and remote and "the world" as mobile and distant. Displaced writers—those hardly associated with the figure of the well-traveled cosmopolite—and their accounts of hypermobility ruptured the boundary between home and the world. As figures often living in and moving through the margins of society, their cosmopolitan worldviews were mired by the experiences of *being* as well as *encountering* the stranger, the foreigner, and the other. While these words carry different valences, they become increasingly muddled in firsthand accounts of migration, exile, and nomadism.

The writings of Emily Ruete (born Sayyida Salme of Oman and Zanzibar) have only recently been revived by scholars as examples of late nineteenth-century Arab cosmopolitanism.<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* (1886) offered European readers an insight into Arab life and customs, and Ruete positioned herself as an interlocutor between these two worlds. Her observations about Germany's social and cultural life are framed by her own notions of a global community: "Even in this century of railroads and rapid communication, so much ignorance still exists among European nations of the customs and institutions of their own immediate neighbours."<sup>4</sup> Late nineteenth-century Hamburg, a model for Western liberal cosmopolitanism, was not as connected to the rest of the world as Ruete had imagined it to be. She found little room for the pluralistic cultural attitudes she had been raised with in Zanzibar. Her father's palace housed "various [East African, South Asian, and Arab] races" that lived and ate together, where "the most fascinating beauties as well as their opposites were abundantly represented."<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, Ruete is most troubled when she is confronted by the "European" attitude to social, cultural, and ethnic difference, which attempts to flatten difference in the name of a universalist humanism. Thinking of her own position between these two models of cosmopolitanism, she ponders a question that seeps through debates of the nineteenth century and resurfaces even today: Is cosmopolitanism an ideal of sameness and commonality or an orientation toward difference and plurality? This conceptual conundrum arises out of Ruete's migration, and her lived experience of cosmopolitanism is defined by a conflict of values, a difference in worldviews, a disparity in how she and others conceptualize home and the world.

Ultimately, cosmopolitanism is a way of writing the world. And, as the recent "global turn" in Victorian studies and calls to "decolonize" the field have demonstrated, the Victorian world of empires was lived, experienced, and written in multiple ways. Eberhardt and Ruete are examples of cosmopolitan writing insofar as they depict how different visions of the *cosmopolis* collide, converge, and coexist with one another. Eberhardt's cosmopolitanism travels from fin-de-siècle Europe to French-occupied Algeria, while Ruete's *cosmopolis* is caught between the conflicting cultural politics of East Africa, Germany, and the Middle East in the shadow of nineteenth-century globalization. Theirs are only two stories of many in which multiple narratives of a "global community" are continually molded by the influence of other worlds, other empires, and other ways of being. If, then, we are to adequately research the ways

in which writers of the long nineteenth century imagined and narrated their world, we should begin by taking some key conceptual assumptions around cosmopolitanism—a term that has been commonly associated with power, privilege, and place—and disrupting them. Cosmopolitanism has been criticized for its conceptual instability, but it also engenders a plurality of interpretations and methodological approaches. If it allows us to revisit the concept of who or what makes a cosmopolitan, it can also enrich our sense of who or what we consider to be Victorian.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings from the Sand*, vol. 1 of *Collected Works of Isabelle Eberhardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 3.
2. Tanya Agathocleous and Jason R. Rudy, “Victorian Cosmopolitanisms: Introduction,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38, no. 2 (2010): 389–97; Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
3. See, for example, Jeremy Prestholdt, “From Zanzibar to Beirut: Sayyida Salme Bint Said and the Tensions of Cosmopolitanism,” in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, edited by James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 204–26.
4. Emilie Ruete, *An Arabian Princess between Two Worlds: Memoirs, Letters Home, Sequels to the Memoirs: Syrian Customs and Usages*, edited by E. J. van Donzel (New York: Brill, 1993), 405.
5. Ruete, *An Arabian Princess*, 156.
6. See, for example, Valeska Huber and Jan C. Jansen, “Dealing with Difference: Cosmopolitanism in the Nineteenth-Century World of Empires,” *Humanity* 12, no. 1 (2021): 39–46.

