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A Geopolitics of Academic Writing

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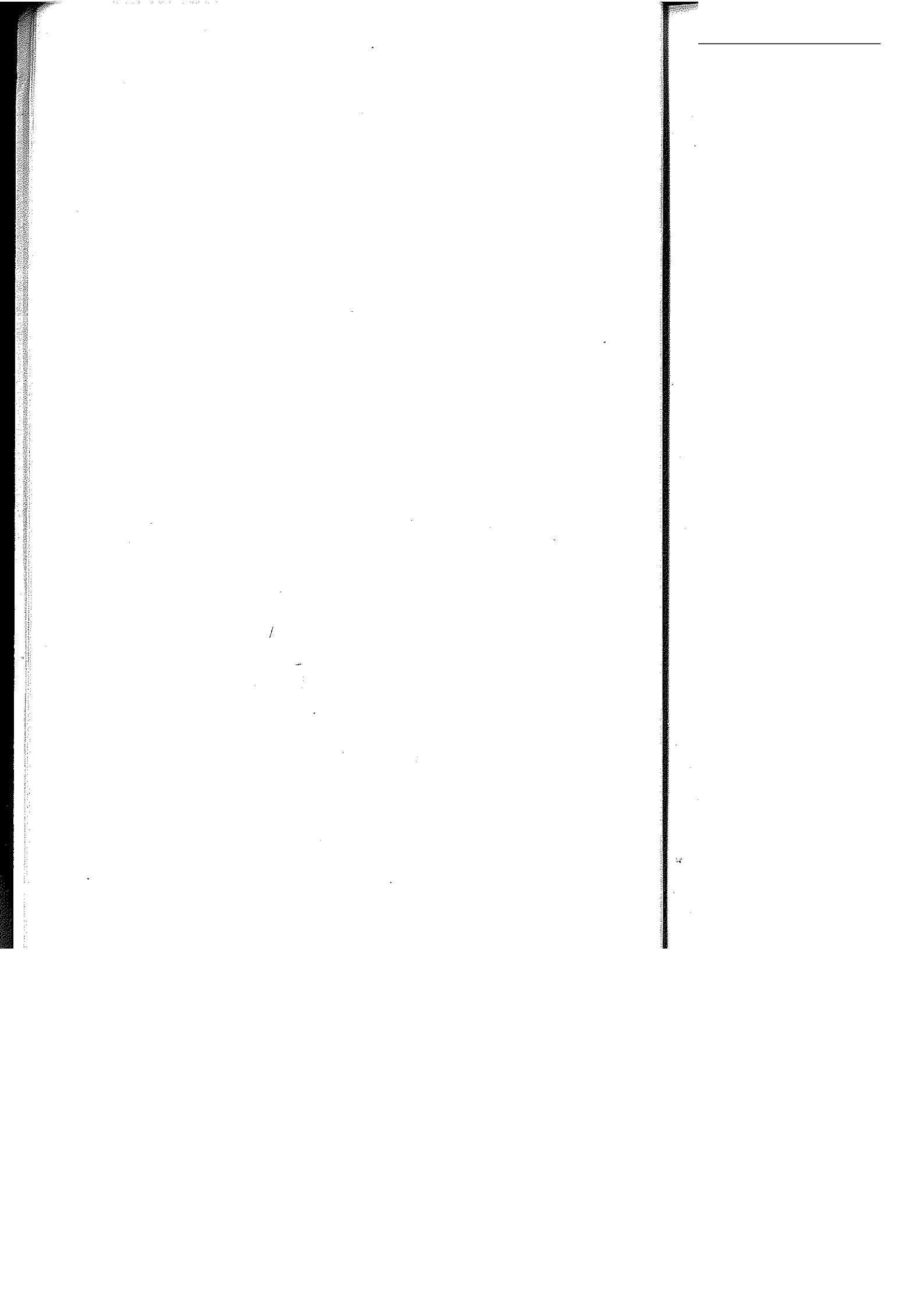
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For A. J.
and colleagues at the University of Jaffna



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Acknowledgments

This book is indeed multivocal. Apart from the different voices from the periphery that I attempt to represent, there are others from diverse communities that emerged through the process of researching and writing this book.

Without my colleagues at the University of Jaffna who shared their views, texts, and research, this book would not be possible. Many other of their writings were hunted down from long-forgotten local publications to build up my argument. R. Shriganeshan and A. J. Canagaratne went further to read different versions of this manuscript and comment on them.

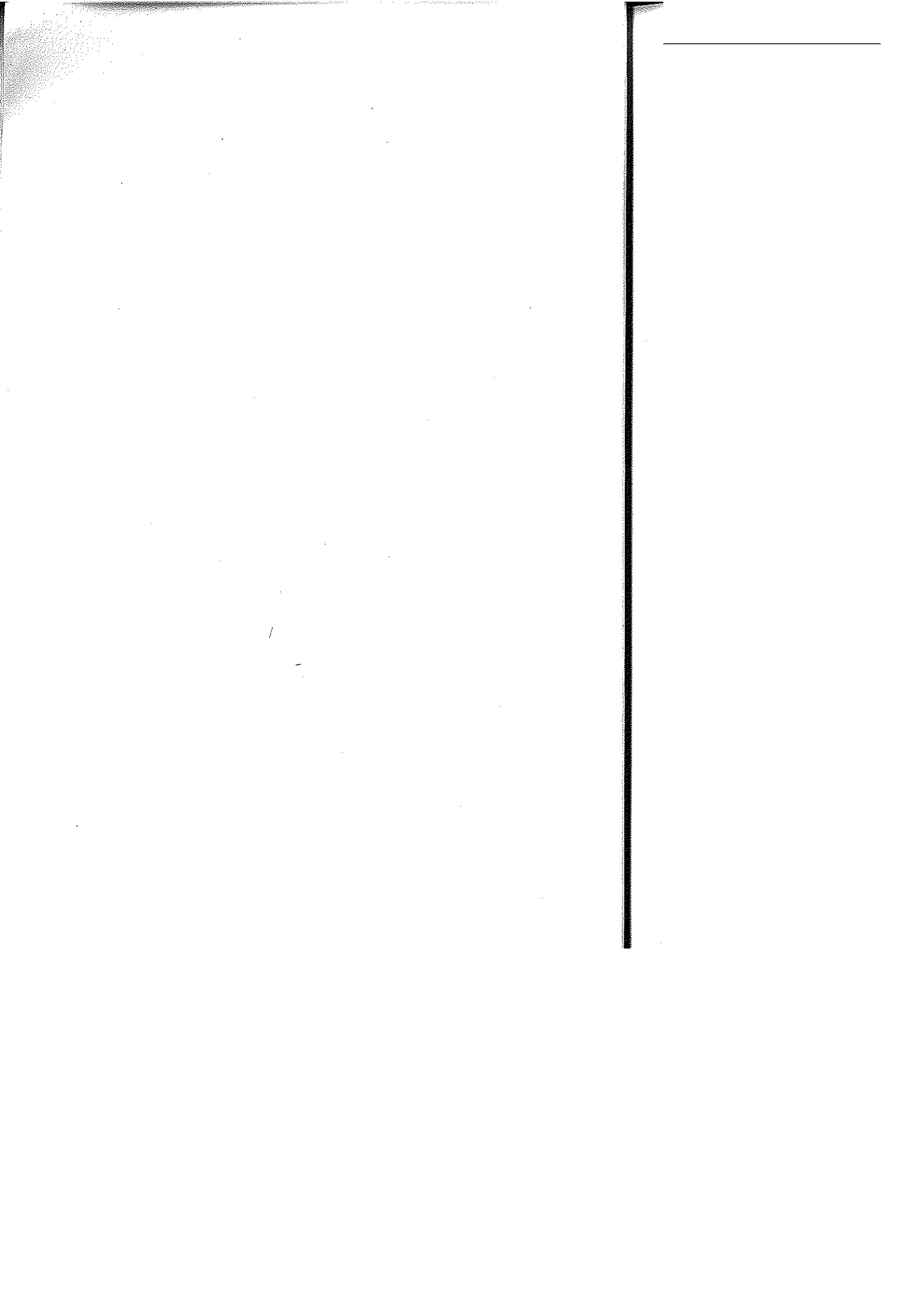
Here in the United States, Deborah Brandt (University of Wisconsin–Madison) first understood the need to give space for this argument and did so in *Written Communication*, which she continues to edit. Later, as I developed this work into a book, she provided useful suggestions on sections of the manuscript as a reviewer for the University of Pittsburgh Press, together with Alpana Sharma (University of Nebraska–Lincoln) and another reviewer who wishes to remain anonymous. I also thank Niels Aaboe, Editorial Director of the University of Pittsburgh Press, and David Bartholomae and Jean Ferguson Carr, editors of the Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture, for their support.

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for revision. I must of course take responsibility for my own obstinacy and weaknesses that account for the limitations in this book.

My wife, Nanthini, daughters, Lavannya and Nivedhana, and son, Wiroschan (whose birth six months before the completion of this manuscript fortunately slowed down my writing and provided some invigorating time for reflection), continue to accommodate my life in scholarship and activism.

A Geopolitics of Academic Writing



The Problem

"In China, a Spectacular Trove of Dinosaur Fossils Is Found" triumphantly proclaims the front-page headline of the *New York Times* of 25 April 1997. Datelined from Philadelphia the previous day, the first paragraph states: "An international team of paleontologists announced today that a fabulous trove of dinosaur fossils had been discovered in a remote region of northeast China." This international team is later introduced as comprising four members from American universities and another from a German university. Going by the journalistic penchant for immediacy and timeliness, readers might interpret the finding to have been made very recently, by this team. But it is after reading several more paragraphs that we find that the discovery had actually been made by the Chinese much earlier. The cause of the present announcement, it transpires, is simply the fact that the team of Western scientists had just returned from a visit to the site. The report was inspired by the meeting of the Academy of Natural Sciences the previous day in Philadelphia, where the paleontologists had reported the outcome of their visit. When we read even more closely, we find that Western scholars had got wind of the discovery about seven months before the Philadelphia conference, during a scholarly meeting in New York City. The discovery had been made by a Chinese farmer. The date he discovered the site is not given anywhere in the report. His name is also not given. The names of the members of the international team and their university affiliations are, on the other hand, cited very prominently.

The point to note about this report is not that the role of the West since the dinosaur fossils' belated discovery gets a lot of prominence. This is after all to be expected. A newspaper published in the United States for a readership primarily based here will narrate events from that standpoint. Therefore, the persons and events in the remote Third World location are

eclipsed by the Western academics and their activities. More troubling is the impression created by the report that the Western intellectuals should get sole or primary credit for the fossil discovery. When the newspaper claims that "the spectacular trove was not announced until today" there are many questions that arise in our minds. Announced *by* whom? *To* whom? Certainly, the Chinese must have been aware for a long time of the discovery they had made in their own backyard. The unqualified manner in which that statement is made reveals that its intent is to claim nothing less than global relevance. The whole world is claimed to know about the fossils after the announcement at the Philadelphia conference. It is as if the finding is real only when the West gets to know about it. It is at that point that the discovery is recognized as a "fact" and constitutes legitimate knowledge. Whatever preceded that point is pushed into oblivion.

The Chinese characters in this drama are no strangers to struggles over the ownership of knowledge. A still closer reading of the report suggests that the farmer himself understood the significance of what he had discovered. He had divided the fossils into two portions and sold them to two rival Chinese universities. He had evidently had an insight into such matters as the marketability of intellectual products, the competition for ownership, and power struggles over knowledge. The Chinese faculty members of the rival universities had also been theorizing about the find, producing their own explanatory paradigms in competition with each other. But little did they realize that beyond their local politics of knowledge, there was a greater power with far superior resources waiting to pounce on their discovery. They would soon realize the reality of imperialism in knowledge construction, with the contest for the fossils and their interpretation played out at the international level.

When Western scholars first heard about the find at the meeting of the Society for Vertebrate Paleontology in New York, they responded in a predictable way. They concluded that their presence was immediately needed in China. They quickly arranged for what they called a "reconnaissance trip"—which ominously suggests an impending attack and continuous engagement in the site. No sooner had they returned from their trip than the team members announced their own hypothesis about the find. While the Chinese believed that the chicken-sized dinosaur was a primitive non-feathered relative of the earliest known true bird, the Western team disagreed with this interpretation. It debunked the paradigm produced by the

Chinese scholars by positing a different chronology of dinosaur evolution. Needless to say, the news report devotes much space to explaining with considerable sympathy the hypothesis of the Western team.

Though I don't have the expertise to arbitrate that interpretive conflict here, the attitudes displayed by the Western scholars and media need to be criticized. The ease with which they overrode the local knowledge of the Chinese scientists on their find on their own soil is striking. The knowledge gained through the process of gathering data in the local context pales in significance next to the interpretation produced at a second remove (typically miles away in alien institutional or laboratory settings) by the foreign team. This displays a common Western assumption that though the Third World may have the data, it takes Western academics to theorize about it (Franco 1988; Loomba 1994). Third World communities are treated as if they don't have the know-how and theoretical sophistication to transform their raw material into valid knowledge. It also follows that, for the West (and the *New York Times*), it is not the context relating to the discovery and maintenance of the raw material that is important but the theoretical constructs generated from it. Predictably, the background behind the discovery of the fossils is given short shrift in the report, while the theoretical activity is given maximum attention.

To the credit of the Academy of Natural Sciences, it must be noted that it invited a Chinese national to be present (perhaps as a token) in Philadelphia when a contract was signed to jointly study the site. The news report in fact concludes with this statement by Dr. Ji Quiang: "This locality we have just begun to look at is not only a Chinese treasure, it is a global treasure." These are liberal sentiments that should be music to the ears of Western academics. It is not surprising that the report concludes with this statement. But the irony in an earlier statement by Dr. Quiang appears to be lost on the reporter and the international team. "I look forward to a wonderful cooperative project with American and *other* international paleontologists," says Dr. Quiang (emphasis added). He thus differentiates American researchers—who dominated both the so-called international team that visited the site and the contract-signing ceremony—from "other international paleontologists." Dr. Quiang seems to be calling for greater involvement from these "other" paleontologists in order to make the enterprise truly global. The composition of the "international team" that visited China was heavily (80 percent) American.

4 The Problem

(Even the single member from the German university served to make the team only Western and not necessarily international in the widest possible sense.) This hasty dubbing of any of their intellectual involvement as “international” reveals certain other problematic attitudes of Western/American scholarly communities. Perhaps this indicates a myopic attitude that whatever activity they are involved in is of international/global significance. Perhaps the scholars are arrogating to themselves the right to speak for the whole world because of their presumed intellectual superiority.

Many of these impressions from the news report were confirmed that morning in my English as a Second Language (ESL) class (dominated, ironically, by Chinese students) during our daily discussion of the *New York Times* for reading-comprehension purposes. The students assumed that it was the American team that had made the discovery; that the hypothesis of the American team was superior to the one put forward by the local scholars; and that there was sincere international cooperation in the study of the site. The students also lauded the true intellectual commitment of the Western academics, who acted decisively and efficiently to make known to the rest of the world a find whose significance and import lay unrecognized in the rural hinterlands of China. We cannot blame such uncritical interpretations on superficial reading strategies or linguistic incompetence. There are many factors in the construction of this report that may encourage such impressions even among competent readers.

Consider first the textual strategies displayed in the report. Note such crucial features as the headline and introduction for what is said—and what is omitted. Recollect the conclusion that foregrounds the Chinese scholar’s statement that the fossils would be everyone’s property. Observe the texture of the report, which is replete with details of the Western scholars and institutions but contains almost nothing of the dates, names, or activities of the Chinese. We could also do a fine-grained analysis of the syntactic structures employed in the report—such as the passive construction in the headline and introduction, which allows for the omission of the agent (thus leaving vague who really made the discovery of the fossils). Furthermore, we must remember the power of the print media to establish “truth.” When something appears in print it is widely construed as constituting publicly acknowledged facts in a manner that oral communication cannot. Even if the Chinese farmers and scholars had been talking about these fossils for years, the information would exist in the realm of hearsay, folk knowledge, and myth until it entered print. What is in print is

accorded the status of verified knowledge. Through the media report, the Western scholars are able to achieve recognition for the discovery, while the oral knowledge of the Chinese farmers remains suppressed.

We must also take note here of the power of the written medium to transmit information to the global community. Those who enjoy the academic infrastructure that allows them to publish have an advantage in the dissemination and construction of knowledge. This is not a simple matter of having printing presses to publish one's scholarly activities and news. The community also needs ancillary technological facilities for speedy gathering and dissemination of information, marketing networks for global distribution, and relatively low-cost publishing for universal consumption. The advantages enjoyed by Western communities—in terms of technology, marketing infrastructure, and communication networks—enable them to appropriate the knowledge and findings of other communities while glorifying their own achievements. The Chinese scholars—like others in the periphery—obviously lack the means to represent their findings and knowledge effectively to the international community in a timely and effective fashion. Furthermore, the institutional organization and economic strength of the West enable it to act efficiently regarding the fossil discovery. It enjoys the means to get a team of researchers ready, to organize their travel to the site, to fund the team's subsistence, to arrange conferences of international scale to publicize their claims, to support the participation of the Chinese (and other international) scholars, and to initiate research on the site that may demand huge amounts of capital and equipment. If the Chinese scholars had enjoyed similar resources, they would have developed their interpretation and publicized their discovery much earlier to the global community. They would have also possessed the power to orchestrate the whole research enterprise under their own leadership. They would have thus been able to present the discovery in a manner favoring their community's interests, knowledge, and values.

This simple example of the processes involved in knowledge construction introduces some of the issues I wish to discuss in this book. The appropriation of Third World knowledge by Western academic institutions in the name of international scientific enterprise, the ways in which any raw data that might be found in the Third World have to undergo theorization/interpretation by the West to pass into the accepted stock of knowledge, the role of written communication in defining knowledge in public and transnational terms, the place of publishing/academic networks in

serving the Western hegemony of knowledge, and how through all this the local knowledge of the Third World is marginalized—these form the nexus of issues that will be discussed in the chapters to follow.

I wish to explore these themes in the specialized domain of academic writing in research journals. This mode of writing is quite central to the practice of knowledge construction in the academy and plays a significant role in the leadership of Western communities in scholarship. In analyzing the composing and publishing processes of research articles in this book, I will make an argument that is very simple to formulate but difficult to substantiate. The argument features the following claims: academic writing holds a central place in the process of constructing, disseminating, and legitimizing knowledge; however, for discursive and material reasons, Third World scholars experience exclusion from academic publishing and communication; therefore the knowledge of Third World communities is marginalized or appropriated by the West, while the knowledge of Western communities is legitimated and reproduced; and as part of this process, academic writing/publishing plays a role in the material and ideological hegemony of the West. The many complicating details in this argument will be fleshed out as we proceed.

This book is organized around the different types of conventions governing academic writing. I broadly distinguish between *communicative-conventions* and *social conventions*—both of which will be demonstrated to have different levels of influence on academic discourse. Under the former, I differentiate *textual* conventions and *publishing* conventions. Textual conventions are related to matters of language, style, tone, and structure that characterize academic texts. Publishing conventions are the procedural requirements of academic journals, such as the protocol for submitting papers, revisions, and proofs; the nature of interaction between authors and editorial committees; the format of the copy text; bibliographical and documentation conventions; the particular weight and quality of the paper; and the manuscript copies and postage required. Social conventions are the rituals, regulations, and relationships governing the interaction of members of the academic community as they engage in knowledge production and communication. Each of these levels of convention, then, helps us move from the product of writing to the process and to the larger social contexts of text production/reception. In assuming that all of these

types of conventions have implications for academic discourse, I adopt a flexible attitude to the definition of discourse. I treat *discourse* as referring to genres of thinking/communicating/interacting that are influenced by concomitant forms of sociolinguistic conventions, ideological complexes, and knowledge paradigms. Through this inclusive definition I attempt to side step some of the hair-splitting debates today in the human and social sciences on the meaning of this now clichéd construct (Canagarajah 1999; Kress 1985; MacDonell 1986).

In the first chapter, I widen the context of academic literacy by locating the place of research articles in the intellectual and material inequalities between the *center* (referred to above as the West) and *periphery* (typically communities colonized by European intervention, referred to above as the Third World). The following two chapters introduce the theoretical constructs that help conduct this inquiry. I move on in the fourth chapter to describe the textual conventions that distinguish the writing of center and periphery scholars. In the fifth, I explore the publishing conventions established by center editorial circles and the ways in which periphery scholars attempt to meet such requirements in the context of limited resources. In dealing with the social conventions of disciplinary communities in the periphery in the sixth chapter, I present their academic culture from the "inside," while also exploring how it works as both a cause and a consequence of their exclusion from the publishing practices and networks of the center. In the seventh chapter, I consider the implications of this publishing inequality between the center and periphery communities for the politics of knowledge construction at the global level. Finally, in the eighth chapter, I suggest ways in which both center and periphery academic communities can productively refashion the nature of their relationship by accommodating multiple modes of literacy and textual practices. Such a relationship, based on respect for the local knowledge of each community, would serve to democratize academic communication and knowledge production.

But before we proceed further, I must acknowledge the peculiar contexts relating to this inquiry and the ways they shape this book. I explore in the next section, "The Project," the ironies of my positionality as a periphery scholar now working in (and writing from) the center, making a case on behalf of my former colleagues through the very channels of their intellectual domination.

The Project

With the simmering ethnic conflict between Tamil and Sinhalese communities taking a violent turn in 1983, many areas in Sri Lanka experienced the destruction of the meager technological facilities we had previously enjoyed. In Jaffna (where I lived while teaching at the local university), power supply was disrupted, as cables and power stations had sustained heavy damage during the fighting. Fuel, too, was banned by the state, as much of the region was controlled by the rebel militia. At night, students crowded around the streetlamps set up by the Red Cross with the aid of small power generators. We, being the teachers, were too embarrassed to fight for space with our students to read our Derrida or Foucault under streetlights. Instead, we used oil lamps fueled by kerosene purchased in the black market. When kerosene was not readily available, we used all kinds of other oil produced from local vegetation. This could be burned only for a limited number of hours, as it was very expensive. Our reading/writing had to compete with other household needs (such as cooking) to determine how much oil could be sacrificed for academic pursuits. Many of us worked when the sun was up and closed our books or drafts at nightfall.

Furthermore, communication facilities such as telephones, telegrams, fax, and electronic mail were not available because of the power cut. For the same reason, computer facilities were not accessible. Mass media such as radio and television did not function normally in Jaffna. Mail was delivered from outside the region once every three or four months by the Red Cross and other organizations as a humanitarian gesture. The delivery was further delayed because military forces of both sides screened mail for seditious matter. The effects of such scrutiny were evident when letters were delivered damaged and mutilated. Many were the times when the lo-

cal postal agency issued a general invitation to the public to sift through the scraps in their sorting room to identify any letter that might belong to us. Under such conditions, it was only belatedly that we would come to know that Foucault had expired or that there had been an important international conference on postcolonial literature held in our own capital city. By the time we received calls for fellowships or conference participation, the deadlines for application would have long passed. There was also a ban on published literature from outside by both the government and the rebels (in order to restrict propaganda against themselves). So it was unthinkable to get Chomsky's newest book or the latest scholarly journals. While the few journals that the university library subscribed to would appear as late as three or four years after publication, many others had to be read only on a rare annual visit to the capital city, where the libraries of the British Council or American Center were located.

Moreover, there was a shortage of stationery, as it was banned by the government out of fear that rebels might use it for propaganda publications. So we came up with many ingenious methods to keep writing and printing. Since ruled notebooks were permitted for the use of students, most news pamphlets and scholarly proceedings were printed on such paper. Often, used paper was recycled—some of my first drafts and outlines were written on the blank reverse sides of printed paper. The extent of later revisions depended on the amount of paper one could find. Also, travel outside the region was restricted by both the government (in order to prevent infiltration by rebels) and the rebel militia (in order to prevent deserters and turncoats). The first and only scholarly conference I attempted to attend was that of Modern South Asian Studies in Berlin. After getting through all the red tape—the necessary clearance from the local militia, the Ministry of Education of the Sri Lankan government, and the German embassy—and the difficulties of reaching the airport in the capital city, I arrived at the conference on the evening of the last day of the proceedings, just as most scholars were leaving for home. Missing my own presentation was the least of my disappointments.

We can imagine the barriers such conditions can create to receiving the latest research information, negotiating our manuscripts for publication, and interacting with the international scholarly community. Despite these conditions, teaching and research of a high quality were and even now are conducted by a motivated band of academics—as reported in a

series of articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Dube 1995a, 1995b). Being one of the six major universities on the island, and admitting a limited number of students based on highly competitive examinations, the University of Jaffna (hereafter UJ) could not afford to close down. In fact, UJ grants postgraduate degrees in certain disciplines, and faculty members engage in both research and teaching. The academics at UJ aim to conduct rigorous research of a high order, considering the difficulties as a fact of everyday life. Graduate students typed and retyped their theses on rickety typewriters after many painstaking handwritten drafts to meet the deadline. Faculty members wrote fascinating abstracts and papers for scholarly presentations, even though they could produce only shoddily printed copies.

Context

I would like to explore the practices of academic literacy and publishing in a context-sensitive manner, with all the peculiarity and uniqueness pertaining to what was at that time my setting. I am not too anxious to generalize these features to all periphery communities. Jaffna appears to present a worst-case scenario for academic work. It was perhaps the extremity of the conditions there that made me sensitive to the inequalities in academic work and brought into relief the differences in literacy practices. However, it must be noted that there are many scholars in other Asian, African, and South American communities who are working in conditions that approximate such economic underdevelopment, technological backwardness, and political instability (Gibbs 1995; Muchiri et al. 1995). The differences are mostly of degree and not kind. So, for example, political unrest has recently affected the functioning of universities in Zaire, Tanzania, and Kenya (Muchiri et al. 1995); economic recession has hampered new acquisitions in university libraries in Addis Ababa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (Gibbs 1995); technological limitations and lack of access to the information highway are bemoaned by academics in the West Indies and India (Gibbs 1995). Some of the disadvantages described above apply also to the periphery *within* the center—the marginalized, off-networked, and poorly facilitated institutions in technologically advanced nations (Murray 2000).

This book is largely based on my own and my colleagues' experiences in getting our scholarly work published in mainstream journals from an

underdeveloped region. My academic experience at UJ for more than a decade (until recently, when I moved to New York) provided valuable firsthand insights into the scholarly practices of that community. I have conducted ethnographic/sociolinguistic studies in Jaffna in a variety of social sites (Canagarajah 1993b, 1994a, 1995c, 1995d)—with the literate conventions and discursive practices of the academic community featuring importantly in my research. I hope to generate important questions pertaining to the publishing prospects of periphery scholars through a close analysis of this sharply focused context.

Though I claim to represent scholars from the type of background described above, my critical insights are enabled by my work experience in some American university settings as well. My membership in the academic communities of the center and the periphery has oriented me to the differences in literacy practices of both circles and provided a peculiar “double vision” that informs the discussion in this book. I have had the good fortune to shuttle between both communities and live in each for extended periods of time. After joining the faculty of UJ in 1984, I came to the United States on leave granted by the university for my doctoral research. While doing graduate studies, I taught composition, literature, and ethnic studies at two different universities (in Ohio and Texas). Returning to Sri Lanka in 1990, I continued to teach and research at UJ in the midst of the intensified ethnic fighting described earlier. I relocated to New York in 1994 to join the faculty of the City University of New York. Through all this experience, in a sense, I have moved between sites of immense contrast—primitively rural and sophisticatedly urban; pathetically poor and prodigally opulent; technologically deprived and high tech; in short, the margins and the center of publishing/academic networks. Participating intimately in the activities of both communities has helped me understand the inside workings of knowledge production and publishing in these contexts. This process of shuttling between locations has also served to defamiliarize the academic cultures of *both* the center and the periphery.

It is easy to assert the advantages of this “double vision” (Bhabha 1994). But let me quickly acknowledge that there are also some tensions that are hard to resolve. It is because I moved to the center that I am able to publish about the scholarly deprivation and exclusion I suffered while teaching at UJ, but in the process of moving my status has changed, calling into question my ability to represent my periphery colleagues. In fact, a

majority of them cannot and will not read this book that attempts to speak for them. There are other ironies that pervade this project. While complaining about the exclusion of periphery scholars from mainstream publishing networks, I am continuing to find avenues in the center to publish their story. Protesting against the ways in which center publishing circles appropriate if not distort periphery knowledge, I am managing to articulate oppositional messages through their very channels. Before I narrate below how I negotiate these tensions, I wish to first establish that my paradoxical stances represent quite well my thesis in this book.

I believe that it is a necessary evil that periphery scholars should use center publications even to resist their dominance. Given the power, spread, and currency of center publications, it is foolhardy not to use them to further periphery knowledge and interests. Since these are the established channels of academic communication, we cannot help but use them even for oppositional purposes. Furthermore, periphery scholars need to negotiate their interests and knowledge with center scholarship. This is important for challenging the limitations of mainstream knowledge, disseminating periphery knowledge effectively, and eventually contributing to the enrichment and democratization of international relations (as I will explain in chapter 8).

However, negotiating with the discourses and conventions of center publishing/research circles to bring out an oppositional perspective from the periphery is not an easy or straightforward process. One has to be sensitive to the conflicting values and interests motivating this negotiation. This is a case of tightrope walking, including the possibility that one may lose one's balance and fall to one side or the other. The process can also have mixed results—sounding unnecessarily hostile to center scholars and condescending to periphery readers. I want to narrate below how I have personally negotiated these challenges as I have continued to study and write on this subject. In a sense, I have to explain how I practice what I preach in this book! Perhaps my experience will serve as an example to my periphery colleagues of the challenges involved in negotiating center publishing/research conventions to represent local interests.

Research in Crisis Situations

I began to experience the inequalities in publishing most intensely when I returned to Sri Lanka from postgraduate work in the United

States. Though I faced a lot of difficulties in conducting research and writing, these matters could not be addressed in the articles I wrote. In a few instances, in order to explain the discursive differences in my work, I mentioned in a paragraph or two the problems of periphery scholars in conducting research and publishing according to center requirements. But, eventually, I had to omit these statements in the final drafts as reviewers felt that they were irrelevant to the focus of my paper. One set of reviewers felt that this kind of background information was too personal to suit the detachment and impersonality of academic articles. On another occasion, when I proposed to include a chapter on the publishing problems of local teachers in my first book dealing with center/periphery differences in English language teaching (ELT) (Canagarajah 1999), the reviewers advised me that this was unrelated to the research/pedagogical issues that the book should be dealing with. It is understandable that a self-reflective exploration of these procedural concerns might be construed as damaging the objectivity of research reporting. However, such publishing assumptions and practices place hurdles in the way of addressing the concerns relating to different contexts of knowledge production. This is perhaps another example of how mainstream academic conventions may serve to keep hidden (and perhaps reproduce) geopolitical inequalities.

Deciding that I have to address publishing problems through a full-fledged study in its own right, rather than appending such concerns to papers on other subjects, I planned out a research project. Although it wasn't clear to me at the time in what disciplinary framework I should conduct this study, I assumed that I would at least make a contribution to political economy, specifically the world systems perspective (Wallerstein 1991). I therefore read the literature on center/periphery relations and planned on showing how academic publishing is implicated in geopolitical inequalities. Having undertaken an ethnography of writing practices of minority students in an academic context in the United States for my doctoral research, I considered myself well prepared to do this study using similar methods. The empirical research was to focus on the UJ academic community, yielding both microsocial (i.e., linguistic, rhetorical) and macrosocial data on literacy practices. My plan was quite elaborate:

- to observe a few chosen scholars through their drafting and revising stages as they prepared a paper for a journal;
- to compare multiple drafts to understand the composing process;

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