If the late twentieth century was a period characterised by the preponderance of the prefix ‘post’, then arguably the last ten years have been marked by the ascendancy of discourses of the ‘trans’. In 1994 Homi K. Bhabha famously wrote that ‘Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the “present”, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix “post”: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism’. Today, seventeen years later, this standpoint now appears more dated than definitive. Contemporary critical discourse is increasingly full of ‘trans’ words: translational, transnational, transcultural. The seeming paradigm shift that this change of nomenclature implies might appear to be a part of a wider transformation of global governance and power, described by Arjun Appadurai as a movement away from a vertebrate system of nation-states towards the cellular, web-like functioning of globalised capital and transnational corporations. Postcolonial studies famously prioritised matters of nation and narration; but according to some critics, in a brave new world of liquid modernities, nations apparently no longer form the backbone of international relations. We are urged to think instead across and beyond the tidy, holistic entities of nations and cultures – transnationally, transculturally – if we hope to capture and critique the conditions of our contemporaneity.

Critical fashions are not always wise, however. To my mind, and as I shall argue in this essay, the tendency to announce and pursue such new perspectives and paradigms risks sending the wisdom of the old prematurely into cold storage. In my critical exploration of the notion of ‘transculturation’, I wish to suggest that an uncritical advocacy of new vocabularies fails to break significant new ground if one forgets the wisdom of fields such as the postcolonial. In so doing, I shall first critique a particular critical concept to which critics are turning in engaging with the apparent cellular condition of our globalised world; namely, the recently remoulded idea of cosmopolitanism. Second, I shall counterpoint cosmopolitanism with postcolonial thought, as a way of arguing for the maintenance of postcolonial discourses as making meaningful critical attempts to think transculturally. Ultimately, I shall argue for a particular understanding of transculturation which reaches beyond the sometimes glib conclusions found in the critical vogue for cosmopolitan critique.

The aforementioned shift from ‘post’ to ‘trans’ can be readily discerned in current critical thought. In their recent edited collection, Rerouting the Postcolonial (2010), Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh argue that residual

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1 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1.
2 As is well known, theories of the transcultural first came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century in the work of Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz. At one level, then, the current conceptualisation of transculturation is actually both a return to the past as well as an attempt to move beyond it. See Fernando Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
models of the postcolonial which emphasise the ‘narrative of decolonisation’ seem much less appropriate in a world defined by the neo-colonial imbalances of global networks which exceed the old map of Empire. These critics urge instead a refreshed inflection of the postcolonial which ‘offers new configurations of the field in relation to cosmopolitanism, eco-environmentalism, post-communist concerns, revisionary pedagogies and critical practices’. The transnational terrain of the global contemporary offers the new postcolonialism ‘uncharted territory’, and today’s scholars need to be up to the task of breaking new ground. In fashioning a remapped tour du monde for postcolonial thought, Wilson, Şandru and Lawson Welsh optimistically conclude that ‘[t]he postcolonial, removed of its primary historical and geographical attachments, can thus come to signify a much larger variety of oppositional practices and gestures of resistance, where the “Other” may no longer be western imperialism and its exploitative capitalist enterprises (as in dominant postcolonial narratives) but, rather, as in the Chinese or East-European context, repressive nationalist communism’. In their rerouted vision of the postcolonial, the term no longer primarily attends to a cluster of diachronic histories, in which the telos of settlement – resistance – independence predominates, but instead facilitates a critical consciousness of the disjunctive, synchronic fortunes of inter-cultural contact in which issues of exploitation and subalternity are depressingly ever-present.

I have much sympathy with this point of view. There seems to me little value in declaring the termination of postcolonial paradigms in the new millennium, as if the challenges they have historically addressed have now magically ceased to matter in a Microsoft world. But others do not agree, and seem keen to end the currency of the postcolonial and instead shape new perspectives from other resources which are better suited to the challenge of the new. Most famously this is declared in Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000), where it is argued that postcolonialism is an effective critique of the colonial and decolonising past but not the global present: ‘postcolonial theory [may be] a very productive tool for rereading history, but it is entirely insufficient for theorizing contemporary global power’. In a similar vein, and at the more modest level of literary critique, Berthold Schoene repeatedly uses ‘postcolonial’ pejoratively in his recent and stimulating book The Cosmopolitan Novel (2009). He proffers that ‘conventional postcolonialist enquiry’ seems too fixated upon the master/slave dialectic of dominance/subalternity and these days lacks the necessary suppleness to think about today’s cross-cultural exchanges that happen beyond the conceptual poles of margins and centres. In Schoene’s reading of David Mitchell’s novel Ghostwritten (1999) he takes an opportunity to chastise the postcolonial for its lack of interest in the non-Anglophone world (Schoene seems entirely unaware of recent work in Francophone postcolonial studies, alas); while

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5 Wilson, Şandru and Welsh 2-3.
6 Wilson, Şandru and Welsh 3.
7 Wilson, Şandru and Welsh 7.
10 See, for example, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds), Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).
his utterly convincing critique of Kiran Desai’s novel The Inheritance of Loss (2006) tellingly condemns it as joining ‘the library of postcolonialist myth’.  

Evidently, the coining of the cosmopolitan is part of a valuable new critical currency freshly minted at the postcolonial’s expense. Schoene’s aforementioned book heralds the arrival of the cosmopolitan novel and makes a thought-provoking case for models of cosmopolitanism as best phrasing an ethical and aesthetic response to globalisation’s disenfranchising designs. In a different vein, Wilson, Şandru and Welsh also regard cosmopolitanism as actually central to the rerouted postcolonialism of the twenty-first century, and find in cosmopolitanism an opportunity to refashion the postcolonial as a concept both conscious and critical of the new global movements and migrations. With its emphasis on the comprehension of living amidst plurality as the degree zero of contemporary life, cosmopolitanism might seem to recognise in very important new ways that we have, in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s words, ‘obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of shared citizenship. [...] People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences’. Yet, the embracing of cosmopolitanism, and its furthering of things like conviviality, conversation and the consciousness of living comfortably with difference, to my mind worryingly forget some of the most important lessons of postcolonial critique. In contrast to the amnesiacal dismissal of the postcolonial, I want to shape my sense of transculturation as a concept which works fruitfully with the rhizomic mingling and consciousness of ‘strangers’ at the heart of cosmopolitanism, but which absolutely does not forget some of the object lessons of postcolonial critique, especially the perpetuation of imperial power after colonialism and the incommensurability of singularity in the ‘contact zone’ of cultures. In order to do so, let me share anecdotally a personal encounter in one such ‘contact zone’ for illustrative purposes which will soon become clear.

In July 2009 my partner, Dr Julie Adams, and I spent three weeks in the Melanesian island of Lifou, the largest of the Loyalty Islands which form part of the French Overseas Territory of New Caledonia, a couple of hours flying time north-east out of Sydney, Australia. We were there as a consequence of Julie’s work: she was pursuing some research concerning the Melanesian objects held by London’s British Museum. On Lifou we lived in the compound of Mme and M. Waisally, high-ranking figures in one of the Kanak tribes. We were provided with a traditional Kanak hut or case in which to live that featured a round building with a high thatched roof, a single power socket and an oblong pit near the entrance used for cooking and preparing meals. Each morning we would break fast with Mme and M. Waisally. Neither myself nor Julie spoke the local Kanak language (Drehu), but Julie’s French was much better than mine, so together we managed some conversation; although much of the time I sat silently listening and not always comprehending what was being said. On our last day, Mme and M. Waisally paid us the honour of inviting us to a coutume for a family event.

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11 Schoene 152.
13 This phrase has been conceptualised and popularised by Mary Louise Pratt in her influential book Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
wedding. A member of the tribe was getting married soon, we learned, and the day would be spent pursuing a series of customary tasks which necessarily preoccupied the days before the wedding.

On the morning of the coutume I sat with the women under an awning, watching them expertly weave a series of head garments. Soon they began to sing a song, the words of which had been taped up on an adjoining wall. When the song finished, the women immediately began to sing it again. Unable to understand the words, but gradually learning the melody and rhythm, I joined in, having no idea what I was singing about – or indeed if it was appropriate for a man to be singing in the first place. I had also been given a special blue shirt made from island cloth to wear, identical to that which the men had on that day. During the singing, the men were loading a van with a great deal of food for the ceremony, but it was made clear to me that it was not necessary for me to help them. Should I have insisted, I wondered? Was my proper place with them? Or would it be inappropriate for a foreigner to deal with this task? How should I be acting here? At lunchtime we ate with the tribe and I tried to ignore the snorting of a pig under a nearby tree and tied to a long pole in preparation for slaughter later that day.

Soon it was time for us to walk a mile or so to the venue for the coutume party, but nobody seemed in a rush to go. I began to fidget. Eventually one of our friends, a local woman called Jan, summoned us to walk. We arrived at the site where the coutume presentations were to take place, but did not enter; rather, we had to wait with the other villagers outside the enclosure for reasons which I could not fathom (plenty of villagers were already inside). After a long while, I began to wonder if we were becoming a burden to our hosts on this important day, to whom our presence was perhaps a little distracting. Would it be more convenient if we were not there? But it was not possible to ask this. And we had just shared their lunch: so how could we go now? We waited and waited in silence. It began to rain. A very drunk villager turned up and persisted in a long, taxing conversation with Julie. We did not know what was going on – why the interminable delay? why arrive so soon when there was nothing happening? – and we had no understanding of what was the appropriate thing to do. I became anxious and exasperated; I was not used to having little or no sense of propriety in such situations. Eventually Julie said that we had to meet some friends who were staying nearby (which was true), and if it was okay to depart. We were immediately told that of course it was. We walked to the supermarket to buy some beer for our friends with mixed feelings of relief and upset. We absolutely did not want to offend our hosts or do anything that appeared rude or disrespectful, but we did not know the language or the rules of custom. I felt lost and vulnerable. I prayed that Mme and M. Waisally were not offended. I opened a lukewarm can of beer.

What kind of experience was this? A cosmopolitan ‘conversation’? A moment of multicultural conviviality? A postcolonial tale of First World privilege amidst the neocolonised? Following Mary Louise Pratt’s well-known formulation, we were clearly in the ‘contact zone’ of cultures, seeking to negotiate communitas and conviviality at a threshold where cultural specificities did not easily convene. It was a place where both the transit between cultural distinctiveness and autochthonous local singularities were insisted upon. The coutume ceremony struck me later as a threshold of speech and silence: the limits to the ability of all of us to communicate were well evident, while our shared lingua franca of French took us all only so far. An
unawareness of custom as well as language made it difficult to know what to say or ask, of what was tolerable and what was taboo. And it was a threshold, too, of the local and the global. The long-standing traditions of a wedding coutume now incorporated recorded music, French cars and Danish beer as well as the hats woven from local pandanus.

That disconcerting combination of conviviality and incommunicability, of understanding and ignorance, left me struggling to make sense of it with recourse to my postcolonial training. On returning to the UK, I attempted instead to regard this experience as a distinctly cosmopolitan one. But the more I read of critical accounts of cosmopolitanism, the more this new perspective seemed ill-equipped to deal with my Lifou experience, and primarily for one reason: its inability to sound that disconcerting silence that both marks and mars transcultural engagement in the ‘contact zone’.

As Salman Rushdie commented not too long ago, ‘the things that we have in common are perhaps greater than the things that divide us’. Arguably, postcolonial studies has on the whole neglected to attend to commonality in preference for the political legitimation of cultural difference for the wretched of the earth. It is on this point where cosmopolitanism seems to promise a new way of thinking about our essentially polycultural, hybridised world beyond the languages of cultural nationalism or minority discourse. Consider, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book *Cosmopolitanism* (2006). Appiah’s is an especially lively, approachable and stimulating attempt to generate ethical action in a world where, in his own words, ‘the odds are, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more’. Living with plurality is the challenge of our globalised contemporary (although as Appiah shows this is actually nothing new). Early in his book he makes the important point that the comprehension of cultural plurality does not automatically lead to liberal or enlightened sentiments about the dignity and legitimacy of different peoples, and questions the assumption that ‘intimacy must breed amity’. A cosmopolitan sensibility is one which must be actively and ardently pursued, and an ethical investment consciously made in engaging fruitfully with exogamous peoples. Appiah’s favourite word for this engagement is ‘conversation’. Choosing neither the arrogance of universalism nor the separatist consequences of relativism, the cosmopolitan seeks to open a conversation with his fellow humans whose cultural mores remain distinct rather than automatically shared, although these mores cannot help but overlap. In so doing, he or she knows that they ‘enter every conversation – whether with neighbours or with strangers – without a promise of final agreement’.

Ethical cosmopolitanism emerges as a polyvocal, continual conversation and negotiation between people who recognise the equality of all others and amongst whom there can always be found something that is shared, even if momentarily:

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15 Appiah 113.
16 Appiah 8.
17 Appiah 44.
Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another.\(^\text{18}\)

It is indeed highly tempting to invest in such ‘proper conduct’ which might guarantee the survival of a polycultural planetary humanism that helps us live together without major conflict. Yet, three problems present themselves in Appiah’s admirable thinking which mute my enthusiasm for it.

First, Appiah’s sense of the cosmopolitan agency of cross-cultural conversation seems to me remarkably passive. Such conversations are part of a wider process by which people apparently get used to one another; by living with difference for long enough, he suggests, change inevitably arises. ‘When it comes to change,’ he remarks, ‘what moves people is often not argument from a principle, not a long discussion about values, but just a gradually acquired new way of seeing things.’\(^\text{19}\) Cosmopolitan conversation, it appears, is actually not the same as that ‘long discussion about values’; cosmopolitan change emerges as an idealised mystification of how the world turns once we all become used to being with each other. This is a point of view which seems directly contradicted by Appiah’s previous remark that amity is not guaranteed by intimacy. It also leads him to posit some rather contestable examples of how getting used to new ideas brings progressive change. When discussing the victories of the women’s movement in the First World, Appiah asks ‘how much of the shift away from these assumptions is the result of arguments? Isn’t a significant part of it just the consequence of our getting used to new ways of doing things?’\(^\text{20}\) It may well be that the greatest achievement of the women’s movement was “to change our habits”\(^\text{21}\) and some people’s common-sense understanding of gender roles, but Appiah seems to de- emphasise in profoundly worrying ways the hard-fought struggle by many women and their male supporters against the social status quo – which has involved protest, criminalisation, incarceration and, of course, fatality for those involved. The same might be said of anti-colonial insurgency: I am not sure that South Africa ended Apartheid because everyone gradually got used to living with each other. Power is never so passively or quietly given up; certainly one of the lessons from postcolonial studies is that power and equality have to be actively pursued, sometimes at great cost to those demanding their basic human rights.

Second, Appiah’s realm of cosmopolitan conversation seems improbably fenced off from the machinations of ongoing intercultural instabilities of power; those matters of who speaks, and from which vantage, which nonetheless complexify any

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18 Appiah 84.
19 Appiah 73.
20 Appiah 76.
21 Appiah 77.
admirable shared ethical horizon. His give-away phrase ‘properly conducted’ masks these challenges: how do we protect such proper conduct, and what happens to those who do not conduct themselves acceptably? In what languages, and hence on whose terms, do we speak to each other? When I waiting was at the wedding coutume in Lifou, what would have constituted ‘proper conduct’, and who would have decided? Considering Appiah’s remarks on conversation we might remember Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and the fantastical Midnight Children’s Conference, which begins life as a convivial conduit of equality and secular collectivity but soon breaks down as the machinations of power, prejudice and impropriety stifle this chance for newness to enter the world. Thirdly and finally, Appiah appears to play down what I consider to be the major stumbling block for cosmopolitan theory: the incomparable shape of cultural singularity which cannot be readily captured or communicated ‘conversationally’, regardless of one’s cognisance of it. Comprehension is not the same as consciousness: regard and recognition do not neatly align. This was clear to me on Lifou, at the wedding coutume.

Lest it be thought that the assumptions behind Appiah’s envisioning of the cosmopolitan are particular to him, let us return to Berthold Schoene’s delineation of cosmopolitanism. Schoene’s sense of the term is in many ways more satisfying and nuanced than Appiah’s, and his work is always exciting and highly stimulating; but some recurring problems can be discovered in his rendering of cosmopolitanism. On the positive side, Schoene is suspicious of celebratory renderings of cosmopolitanism if they amount to little more than cheerful descriptions of multiculturalism. Rightly, he wonders about ‘the relative inconsequentiality of everyday intercourse’ between cultural groups and he dismisses multiculturalism and ethnic diversity ‘as mere exotic wallpaper to the self-fashioning of middle-class identities, whose quality of life and sense of self are appealing enhanced by being able to “feel cosmopolitan” due to the apparent, yet far from actively neighbourly, proximity of “others”’. In his view, the new cosmopolitan novel heralds a different, better way of envisaging cosmopolitanism, one in which the individual recognises both their singularity and their inseparable commonality with all others, and where the specificities of the local are always subject to the transnational whims and cultural weather brought by global forces. The cosmopolitan novel engenders a consciousness of being which frees the subject from solipsistic individualism as well as notions of holistic subjectivity promoted by nationalism or race, and makes him or her confront their porous singularity amidst those whom are neither the same nor other. Hence, the cosmopolitan novel is a composite text, characterised by montage, rapid shifts of focus, multiple narrative threads, lack of closure and telos. The cosmopolitan author possesses the capability to ‘open up and yield to the structuring of the world as she or he finds it, however bewildering, turbulent or self-contradictory’. With an ethical commitment to representing ‘worldwide human living and global community’, Schoene’s cosmopolitanism promotes what he calls ‘mondialisation’, the imagining of a world beyond the old vertebrate world order of national divisions and the global

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22 Schoene 4-5.
23 Schoene 16
24 Schoene 17.
25 Schoene 24.
propensity to homogenise the planet into a market-place for consumers. The cosmopolitan is aware of the indigeneity of all positions including their own, and in cosmopolitan writing ‘the realities of the political and the economic are subject to imaginative scrutiny and recasting instead of undergoing a process of simple rendition’. \(^{26}\) Here, it seems, is an aesthetic and an ethical standpoint more dynamic and politically aggressive than Appiah’s quaintly passive sense of trustworthy change.

Schoene’s book is a highly stimulating contribution to current debates, but it contains two major problems which impact negatively upon the strength of its argument. The first point concerns the ‘imaginative scrutiny’ to which cosmopolitan texts subject ‘the realities of the political and the economic’. The examples of cosmopolitan writing which Schoene explores seem to struggle to do exactly this. Ian McEwan’s political novels, especially *Saturday* (2007), depict middle-class characters who comprehend that they live in a globalised milieu and possess a cognisance of strangers but have no idea how to act or indeed interact in a cosmopolitan fashion. For Schoene, this severely limits the extent to which a novel like *Saturday* can be called cosmopolitanism (he prefers the term ‘glocal’). But what Schoene does not realise is that McEwan’s exposure of a challenging threshold between global cognisance and cosmopolitan consciousness is exactly the point of the novel. McEwan invites us to consider just how difficult it is for some to happen upon a cosmopolitan consciousness while remaining perfectly aware that they live amidst, or as, strangers in their neighbourhood. In so doing, his work questions the admirable idealism which underwrites Schoene’s faith in the cosmopolitan novel as brokering and engendering new habits of thought. In declaring that *Saturday* ‘is an accomplished novel not so much of failure as of foreclosure’, \(^{27}\) Schoene fails to see that McEwan quite deliberately decants that tension between cognisance and consciousness into his main characters, as a way of exploring just how difficult it is to be cosmopolitan.

My second critical response to Schoene returns us to the apprehension of change as a profoundly passive matter which we considered previously with Appiah. Surprisingly perhaps, for all of his attention to the transformative ability of cosmopolitanism to ‘recast the world’, \(^{28}\) Schoene’s enthusiastic rendering of successful cosmopolitan writing offers no convincing evidence of its determined transformative agency. It is significant that his most enthusiastically endorsed example of the cosmopolitan novelist is David Mitchell, the well-known author of *Ghostwritten*, *number9dream* (2001) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Mitchell’s globe-trotting, fractal and compound fictions fit well into the mould of the composite cosmopolitan text, and lead Schoene to declare that they build ‘an inoperative compositeness designed to rehearse the world-creative repercussions of attempting to reconcile individual singularity with communal incorporation’. \(^{29}\) Ultimately, so the argument goes, Mitchell’s work ‘promotes the rise of a new political aesthetics and aesthetic politics, which is looking conspicuously Nancean’. \(^{30}\) Schoene’s indebtedness to the philosophical disposition of Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as his understandable

\(^{26}\) Schoene 30.  
\(^{27}\) Schoene 64.  
\(^{28}\) Schoene 26.  
\(^{29}\) Schoene 122.  
\(^{30}\) Schoene 123.
suspicion for more programmatic or formal political programs, means that his sense of what constitutes political endeavour is always to an extent going to be more noumenal than material – and there is nothing inherently wrong with that, perhaps. But if being political is predicated upon the agency to intervene dynamically with the intent to challenge and transform how power functions, then it is hard to see how Schoene’s reading of Mitchell’s fabulous fictions can discover political agency in either their writing or reception.

During his discussion of *Cloud Atlas*, for example, Schoene rightly notes how the novel’s concatenation of narratives shows ‘human history riven by recurrent mutual exploitation, be it in the form of conquest accompanied by genocide and enslavement, colonisation and the building of Empire, or the threat of ever-increasing glomicity and worldwide corporatisation’.31 But no evidence is discovered either in the novel or in its reading concerning how this recurrent cycle of exploitation can be broken. Instead, the novel is declared as illustrating ‘humanity’s ongoing vulnerability to evil [...] as well as the inveterate resilience of humanity’s goodness’.32 In such trite terms, changing human history appears as something of a chimera: change is always happening, but not transformatively so – just as the ever-shifting shape of the clouds in the sky is driven by essentially the same recurring weather patterns. When this conclusion is coupled with Schoene’s declaration that the cosmopolitan writer should ‘take the plunge and like everybody else start mingling among the world’s vast, inoperative being-in-common, that is, the world as such’,33 a sense of the political as transformative disappears beyond the cosmopolitanism’s *horizon du monde*. Cosmopolitanism thus defined emerges as little more than the cultural logic of global corporatism that mistakes cognisance of incongruous collectivity for consciousness of the incommensurability of difference. This is cosmopolitanism as cumulus rather than communitas, passively revolving in imperious skies rather than dynamically challenging how the globalised world turns. And while it is absolutely right to ask that we start to think about what human beings have in common rather than brood on our differences, putting one’s trust in the hospitable transformation of habit seems a rather inactive response to the ever-increasing circuits of exploitative global power.

The singularities of those not like us are not as freely available to consciousness as Schoene and others might presume. Cosmopolitanism thus defined forgets one of the most important lessons of postcolonial studies: the incommensurability of difference most famously rendered in Spivak’s question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’34 Postcolonial critique insists that we suspect the apparent transparency and communicability of difference via a mode of representation that appropriates more than it articulates. One’s perspective of other peoples is not so easily focused and realised. What we sometimes hear amidst the blether of conversation is silence, one that marks an uncrossable threshold in the global contact

31 Schoene 117.
32 Schoene 117.
33 Schoene 29.
zones of the contemporary. Here we need the increasingly mothballed wisdom of postcolonial studies ever more urgently, perhaps.

It is worth recalling that moment in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999) when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recounts a series of visits to a famous pink stone palace hotel in Jaipur as part of her research into a subaltern figure of the Rani of Simur. On her first visit, while searching for the palace, she came across some ‘shy hardy women’ who ‘gathered leaves and vegetation from the hillside to feed their goats’:

They were the real subaltern, the real constituency of feminism, accepting their lot as their norm, quite different from the urban female sub-proletariat in crisis and resistance. If I wanted to touch their everyday without the epistemic transcoding of anthropological field work, the effort would be a much greater undoing, indeed, of life’s goals, than the effort to catch the Rani in vain, in history.\(^{35}\)

Spivak offers us a different envisioning of a transcultural moment, notable not for its conversational encounter but for its silence. At this threshold, where the First World deconstructive intellectual meets Third World subaltern women, Spivak replaces conversation with a consciousness of limits. The ensuing silence is the negative sonic signature of this consciousness: standing at the threshold, Spivak attends to the encasements of epistemological frameworks which are not up to the job of touching ‘their everyday’. To be sure, there is perhaps something more than a little frustrating in Spivak’s silent contemplation of the necessity of ‘undoing’ here. Has Spivak’s sophisticated learning and heady postcolonial critique actually made it harder for her to ‘touch’ the ‘everyday’? Must we always end up standing at the limit with broken tools in our hands? The image of Spivak silently watching these women work in Jaipur as she cogitates about the gulf between herself and these women, unsure of how all their lives might touch without immense effort on her part, might well be taken as figure for the limits of postcolonial theory itself – limits beyond which cosmopolitanism might take us. But that said, Spivak’s subaltern-prompted silence marks a recognition of the incommensurability of these women to First World thinking, and a consciousness of the challenges faced when seeking to open a conversation with them in terms which do not trigger ‘the epistemic transcoding of anthropological field work’. There is something ethical and responsible in Spivak’s silence, perhaps: it signifies a yearning to make meaningful contact with this constituency of women in terms not of her making, while simultaneously it recognises that such potentially transformative conversations are not at all easy to inaugurate beyond the mechanics of First World systems of political representation. This is a particular kind of silent contemplation, one which seeks out transcultural understanding but also sounds an acknowledgement of the disjunctive limits, discursive specificities and political realities that are extremely difficult to cross over or indeed cross out.

My specific articulation of transculturation takes us between and beyond two ethical imperatives: on the one hand, the cosmopolitan commitment to conversation and confected commonality; and, on the other, the postcolonial awareness that ‘speaking with’ can become ‘speaking for’ when dealing transnationally. The transcultural threshold can productively be thought of as one of conversation and silence, engagement and displacement, where cosmopolitan and postcolonial approaches productively inform each other rather than short-circuit an attempt to build ethical, hopeful mondialisation. In the transcultural contact zone of our global contemporaneity, silence does not signify absence or failure. In concert with the conversational imperatives of living in a world of strangers, the anxious silences of the contact zone mark a non-verbal process of understanding in which that yearning to engage hospitably with others is inflected with a consciousness of the limits of one’s standpoint, of the incommensurability of those who exist like us.

To concretise this envisioning of the transcultural, let me conclude by offering a literary example of the vocal silences of transcultural consciousness – one which, although I only have room to deal with it very briefly indeed, may be highly instructive in the present context. In Caryl Phillips’s novel *A Distant Shore* (2003) we find a stirring example of one writer’s attempt to sound the silence of a transcultural world. Set in a fictional Northern English development called Stoneleigh, it deals with the decidedly non-cosmopolitan character of contemporary England. The racist murder of a recent African migrant to the village, known as Solomon, chillingly underlines how threatening the world of strangers seems to be to England’s atavistic youth. At the novel’s heart is the brief friendship forged between Solomon and Dorothy, a lonely and retired music teacher who is Solomon’s neighbour. The lives of each figure are markedly different yet significantly parallel: Solomon has endured the murderous conflicts of Africa and the hazards of entering the UK as an illegal immigrant, while Dorothy’s relatively less dramatic life has also had its fair share of pain, due to her difficult relationships with her sister and her parents and her divorce. For each figure, the past is painful ‘foreign country’ which haunts the scene of their provincial life. Solomon and Dorothy meet infrequently and speak only for a short time, but Phillips proposes that for all their divergent life-experiences and non-communicated cultural particulars their brief encounter engenders the possibility of a significant soundless understanding.

Here is the muted moment which closes the novel’s fourth part, and concerns Dorothy watching from her window Solomon cleaning his car:

> Aside from this man, there is nobody else in sight on this bleak afternoon. Just this lonely man who washes his car with a concentration that suggests that a difficult life is informing the circular motion of his right hand. His every movement would appear to be an attempt to erase a past that he no longer wishes to be reminded of. [Dorothy] looks at him and she understands.

36 Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003) 268. I am indebted to my doctoral student Agnes Woolley for inviting me to think of the significance of this textual moment in her own work, and for helping me comprehend its rich range of significance.
What is it that Dorothy ‘understands’ here? It cannot be the violent and cruel past which Solomon is keen to erase, as he never tells Dorothy about his life story. Nor is the meaning of Solomon’s act of washing the car necessarily something that he fully authors. His concentration merely ‘suggests’ something to the viewer, Dorothy; it ‘appear[s] to be’ an act of erasure to her. And it is only her perspective which assumes his solitude equates with loneliness. Solomon to an extent exists framed inside Dorothy’s appropriating gaze that makes him meaningful on her terms; his past leaves no reminder for Dorothy, to whom it remains incommensurable. Yet, in the recognition of Solomon’s ‘concentration’ as the silent presence of a past unexposed, Dorothy sees a parallel of her own loneliness and sense of a difficult life. It is a moment which fuels something else than her solipsistic reflection, and instead enables a concerned and compassionate transcultural engagement between Dorothy with this ‘lonely man’ whom increasingly has come to seem a lot like her to her own eyes.

Dorothy understands as she looks at Solomon that she has something in common with someone whom she can never really know, and with whom conversation has been at best threadbare. Dorothy’s encounter with Solomon enables her to reflect upon the limits of her own life while recognising the parallels and crossovers with others who might be deemed strangers or foreign in the provincial horizon of Stoneleigh. This is an ethical understanding that is different to the chatty cosmopolitanism of Appiah or Schoene and to the deconstructive fatality of some, although by no means all, forms of postcolonial theory. It is a transcultural creation that brokers compassionate connection while recognising the limits of the threshold; that engenders compassion while admitting the blindness and insight of one’s standpoint; one that neither calcifies nor liquidates difference in the contact zone of intercultural encounter. And it breeds an ‘understanding’ that triggers social intervention and ethical action: meaningfully, it is Dorothy who subsequently shames the villagers into recognising the racism in their midst and who influences a local girl, Carla, to tell the police who murdered her friend.

Transcultural understanding is inevitably partial. It is a cognisance of others and a consciousness of limits; a recognition of the existence of other lives and experiences which must not be ignored but cannot easily be phrased from the vantage of one’s standpoint. It is an approach towards singularity, but not an appropriation of singularity: sometimes the local does not compute, no matter how ready we make ourselves to participate on the terms of another’s indigeneity. As I learned on Lifou at the marriage coutume, the silences one encounters at the threshold can lead to anxiety, discomfort, ignorance: a moment of stupidity that possesses its own wisdom. These challenges are educative, worldly, necessary. We must not bypass the illuminating consequences of uncertainty and anxiety which often result from arriving at a threshold where one indigeneity meets another – whether in Lifou, Jaipur or the provincial towns of the English North. The incommensurability and singularity of these non-coincident ‘contact zones’ is of course beyond question; but something useful might be gained if we dared to consider, mobilising Salman Rushdie’s advice, what they might have in common as well as what sets them apart.

Postcolonial studies has long insisted that meaningful, transformative change depends on much more than a glib cognisance or apprehension of the existence of different cultures that make our world complex; we need to inhabit consciousness at its disconcerting limits, at the threshold where representation is anxiously arrested.
Caryl Phillips is right to argue that when, as a writer, ‘you try to imagine yourself into somebody else’s skin, it’s an act of generosity to try to engage and listen.’ In seeking to enter into the cultural milieu of others on their terms, listening to and learning from their ways of life, we acknowledge and contest the potential imperiousness of our standpoint and transgress the threshold of someone else’s world. But as Elleke Boehmer has recently argued with reference to Hanif Kureishi’s memoir *My Ear at His Heart* (2004), narratives may also admit to ‘the mystery that is not so much Other, generically speaking, as the ultimately unknowable other human being’. As Spivak reflected, the task of ‘undoing’, of stepping outside our standpoint and avoiding the temptation to transcode, may be extremely difficult indeed. The readiness, perhaps, is all.

Resourced by the wisdom of postcolonial studies but attentive towards the challenges of the new millennium, transculturation offers a way of thinking about our globalised contemporary which listens to both conversation and silence. At the transcultural threshold we encounter the enabling recognition of an unbreachable incommensurability which resides at its heart, and which must be recognised and considered carefully if ‘transculturation’ is to broker productive conceptual agency.

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