Welcome to the special ‘Literary Transculturations’ feature of Transnational Literature!

Fernando Ortiz’s coinage of the term transculturation in the 1940s marked an important shift in how the mixing of cultures might be viewed and discussed. Reacting against the theories of hegemony and acculturation, both of which predicate a dominant culture that subsumes other, less powerful cultures, Ortiz’s concept of transculturation emphasises less tidy, more unsettled cross-cultural encounters. According to Mark Millington, ‘The sense is that what is produced by transculturation or hybridization does not fit within neat binaries, that it straddles, mixes and disrupts.’¹

While not bound to any particular historical period, transculturation is of particular relevance to the types and themes of literature that have emerged in the past twenty years: literature that can no longer be conceived of as simply postcolonial. In a strong move away from the binary, literary transculturations point to enactments of multiple sites of culture, to heterogeneity and heterochronicity.

The articles collected in this issue originated in the inaugural conference of the Nordic Network for Literary Transculturaiton Studies (NNLTS),² ‘Post/Colonial and Transcultural: Contending Modernities, Presaging Globalisation’, held in Riga, Latvia in September of 2010. A collaboration between researchers in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the NNLTS explores the theoretical and methodological challenges and possibilities that transculturation brings to the study of English literature. At the conference in Riga presenters sought to both interrogate and lay a foundation for an examination of the transcultural as it relates to other terms of force in literary and cultural studies, namely ‘colonial’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘globalisation’ and ‘modernity’.

The first two articles, by Anne Holden Rønning and John McLeod, tackle the productiveness of the term ‘transculturation’ head-on and are useful in providing a set of critical tools and vocabularies for a discussion of the transcultural. In pointing specifically to Australian settler literature, Holden Rønning posits that the traditional Western conventions for reading a cultural history of the present are too narrow. In a similar interrogation of the viability of our current methodologies for interpreting our contemporary globalised world, McLeod recounts his personal experiences with the incommensurability of cultures on a recent trip to Melanesia and concludes that transculturation offers us the option of being listeners of silence.

The subsequent articles in this special feature may be said to focus more strongly on the application of the critical tools and vocabularies offered by

² The NNLTS is administered from the Institute for Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen, Norway, and funded through 2012 by Nordforsk, an organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers that promotes Nordic research cooperation. For more information on the network members, upcoming events, and projects, please visit the network’s website at: https://www.uib.no/rg/nnlts.
transculturation. Joel Kuortti’s reading of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* argues that the transcultural provides a more nuanced reading of colonial history, but is never solely confined to the colonial/postcolonial dichotomy, as the ‘Islamic’ sections of Rushdie’s book reveal. Ulla Rahbek’s analysis of ‘Feast’ also points to untenable binaries (East/West, global/local, vampire/human, old/new), revealing the more complex layers of what is only superficially a neo-colonial story.

Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou’s application of Peter Brook’s transcultural aesthetics demonstrates how a canonical drama that fails to resonate with contemporary audiences might be removed from its historical and national context and given new life.

The article by Jena Habegger-Conti reveals the underlying Enlightenment ideology behind two projects (one colonial, one postcolonial) aimed at publishing an ‘original’ and authoritative edition of the *Thousand and One Nights*, projects that deny and debase the transcultural history of the story collection.

Erik Falk discusses Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) author Charles Mungoshi’s adoption of the European form of literary modernism to simultaneously react against it in his depiction of local social spaces. Falk employs transculturation to frame his discussion of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, which contradict and overlap in the works of Mungoshi.

Several of the conference participants focus on transcultural identities in their articles. Kamal Sbiri queries Said’s claim that refugees are without a definite identity and ‘tellable history’ and applies Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of deterritorialisation as a more appropriate way to understand the notions of home and belonging in refugee poetry. In an analysis of literature written by Lithuanian emigrants to Canada, Milda Danyte assesses the extent to which the racist rhetoric of the Anglo majority, geared towards constructing a Canadian identity, is reflected in the immigrants’ own view of themselves as more animal than human. Also writing on Canadian literature, Rūta Šlapkauskaitė analyses the complex nature of transcultural identity in the novel *Elle*, in which a colonising exhibition to Canada leaves the narrator marooned on an island with Inuit inhabitants, turning the tables on ideas of alterity.

As guest editor for this issue I would first like to thank our NNLTS co-ordinator, Professor Lene Johannessen (University of Bergen) and Professor Tabish Khair (University of Aarhus) for arranging the conference in Riga. Many thanks are also extended to our contributors for their hard work in revising and in remarkably meeting every deadline, and to our other network members for their insightful comments on papers presented at the conference and during the revision process. My deep gratitude is also given to our peer reviewers from across the globe who so willingly gave their time to provide our authors with immensely helpful advice. In addition, the NNLTS would like to thank the editorial board of *Transnational Literature* for accepting our proposal to produce a special ‘Transculturations’ feature. We are delighted to see these articles published so soon after our conference. Finally, I would like to express a special and heartfelt ‘thank you’ to Gillian Dooley for her support throughout the past year, and for her careful and perceptive work as an editor.

Jena Habegger-Conti
In an increasingly global world literary and cultural critics are constantly searching for ways in which to analyse and debate texts and artefacts. Postcolonial theories and studies have provided useful tools for analyzing, among others, New Literatures in English and other languages, as well as throwing new light on an understanding of older texts. But today, with the increase in diaspora studies in literature and cultural studies, new ways of looking at texts are paramount, given the complexity of contemporary literature. There is, as Bill Ashcroft writes, a ‘strange contrapuntal relationship between identity, history, and nation that needs to be unravelled’.¹ With references to Australian literature, this article will present some reflections on transculturation and modernities, the themes of the Nordic Network of Transcultural Literary Studies, which considers transculturation not as a theory but, ‘a matrix through which a set of critical tools and vocabularies can be refined for the study of texts from a localized world, but institutionalised globally’ and where ‘the engagement of multiple sites and their routes with the progression of “one modernity” in some way or other inform the aesthetics of transcultural literature’.²

Modernities and transculturation

‘Modernities’ and the rewriting of genres, as well as literary transculturation, is a dominant feature of, for example, Australian literature. ‘Modernities’ is a complex term, but we should ask whether modernities are new, or is it a term used to denote a process that has gone on throughout time? After all, the term is used to express a variety of ideas: the avant-garde; the experimental; modern history from 1498; the contemporary or a modern way of thinking; and that the present modernity is not just postcolonial, but also transcultural. Modernity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, although often thought of as decentring and leading to individuation, in fact means that people and cultures are intertwined even more closely than they have been historically, as is also evident in written expression.

Arif Dirlik has argued that ‘[M]odernity may no longer be approached as a dialogue internal to Europe or EuroAmerica, but is a global discourse in which many participate, producing different formulations of the modern as lived and envisaged within their local social environments.’³ This view is shared by, among others, Arjun

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² https://www.uib.no/rg/nnts
Appadurai who uses the term ‘alternative modernities’ to describe the heretogeneity of discourse in non-Western countries. In a plenary lecture, ‘The Multiplicity of Modernity: Globalization and the Post-Colonial’ given at the Barcelona conference ‘Food for Thought’ in February 2010, Bill Ashcroft said such modernities are neither peripheral nor subsidiary but hold memory as an anticipation of future change and empower through the use of language using the cultural values of English literature – a recycling of local modernities thus augments production. But we also need to look at the effects of contemporary communications media, and publishing practices, on the formation of these ‘alternative modernities’. The power is no longer so much the author’s message, but what capitalising forces consider relevant for contemporary expression.

Sara Lennox has raised the question as to whether globalisation in contemporary society is synonymous with ‘modernity’ to characterize the new material and culture practices that have conquered the world, [and...] a revised understanding of the relationship of the European to the non-European world. She rightly posits transcultural influences as at the centre of this discussion, and postulates the need to ‘reconceptualize the nature of the modernity conceived to emanate from Europe’, that is to remove it from being essentially Western. Her argument is based on the fact that, despite the intertextual nature of culture per se,

literature is also the purview of the particular and singular, perhaps even beginning to explore how the aesthetic moment itself can operate as a form of resistance to homogenizing forces, an argument that was broached by the Frankfurt school among other German thinkers.

The debate on globalised modernity is thus linked to the critical interrogation of the paradigm of transculturality, in that the investigation of border-crossings and cultural identities counteracts homogenisation by opening up the Third Space. Lennox’s article, though her starting point is basically globalisation and feminism, demonstrates the need in all literary criticism to move away from the binaries of Eurocentrism and investigate the wider scope of mutual influence(s), the border crossings of ideas, genres, culture and heritage. Our interpretations as readers and critics are always in some way determined by our own cultural and historical specificity, one that changes with time and circumstances.

Today the globalisation of culture and texts, through increased linguistic skills among peoples, and not least the power of the media, whether film, text or electronic means, results in no one being able to avoid the influence of other cultures. In an age of increasing migration in the twentieth and twenty-first century, whether fleeing dictatorial regimes, political or religious oppression, or in search of a better life, an increasing number of people find themselves in a transcultural position. The search for a suitable term to express this age has evoked various responses from transculturation, cultural translation, transliteracy, to transnation. All provide tools for analysis, not just of literature, but also of cultural and social aspects of contemporary

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5 Lennox 4.
6 Lennox 9.
life, and common to all is the feature of border-crossings, back and forth, a constant mediation.

**Different contemporary ways of interpreting transculturation**

As we have seen above, definitions of transculturation are many, from the political and economic, which see this as a struggle between two forces, as a losing and absorbing of culture through force, to scholars who

trace flows of people, objects and ideas within the colonial structures created by European powers to link different colonies ...: explore Latin American and Latino mediated imaginaries; [or] the ways in which art, popular media and digital cultures are used to articulate forms of belonging and resistance and to create new spaces and places, new synergies and new possibilities for cultural, political and social diversity.\(^7\)

Fernando Ortiz coined the term transculturation in the 1940s to avoid the binaries of acculturation and deculturation, that is the loss or uprooting of a previous culture: ‘The word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another,’\(^8\) and as expressed in literature is more than simply acquiring another culture. Acquisition is always a selective process as Ortiz stated in a speech at Club Atenas in Havana in 1942 where he outlined the five phases of transculturation from opposition to compromise, adjustment, self-assertion and finally integration.\(^8\) Ortiz’s view is more problematic today since the process of transition is not seen as a move from one to another, but constant two-way interventions, non-static, as also are the phases he mentions. It is not a process of binary oppositions, and the creation of a hybrid society where the consequent result is something new, but rather a constant back and forth of impulses, according to contemporary social and political needs.

One of the critics most frequently cited when we speak of transculturation in literature is Mary Louise Pratt. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) she sees transculturation as ‘a phenomenon of the “contact zones”’ which are social spaces where ‘disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination.’\(^9\) I agree with Pratt that in these ‘contact zones’ cultures meet, but not necessarily in relationships which are binary based, since the very core of transculturation is the ability to move freely from one cultural stance to another and back again. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin rely heavily on Mary Louise Pratt for their definition: ‘The term refers to the reciprocal influences of modes of representation and cultural practices of various kinds in

\(^{7}\) Technologies of Transculturation is one of the key areas focused on by the Transforming Cultures Centre, University of Technology, Sydney. 20 Nov. 2010

http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/race/Ortiz-2.htm

colonies and metropoles, and is thus a phenomenon on the “contact zone” as Mary Louise Pratt puts it.\textsuperscript{10} It is a view typical of postcolonial criticism at the time, but it forgets the process of constant change that is an integral part of transculturation. It must be stated that recent lectures and publications by Ashcroft have moved away from this binary approach.\textsuperscript{11} However, the binary view is still present in some scholarly circles.

Several postcolonial critics have discussed the need to find other terminology to debate contemporary literature. In an illuminating article, ‘Direction in Postcolonial Studies’, Benita Parry has critiqued the move in postcolonial studies from the late-nineteenth century concern with the imperial project in all its aspects, and the primary critical forms in the late twentieth century on issues of ‘authenticity’, the ‘colonial’ and the ‘postcolonial’ novel. She rightly queries the value of reading nineteenth century texts such as \textit{Jane Eyre} for their colonial context, rather than focussing on how ‘an imperial imaginary does emerge where the transcoding between historical moment and literary practice is located in form and stylistics’.

What a postcolonial criticism has shown is that far from being imitations of Western modes, fictions written within other cultural contexts or from the margins of the metropolitan centers are complex transformations and transgressions of existing conventions, whether realist or avant-garde.\textsuperscript{12}

She emphasises the need to widen the field of postcolonial studies to other than Anglophone literature, and a concentration on issues of exile and migration, and look at what she calls the ‘unsettled diasporas’.\textsuperscript{13} She critiques Stuart Hall’s view that we need ‘to reread the binaries [i.e. anticolonial struggles] as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries forever’.\textsuperscript{14} The term transculturation is, in her opinion, inappropriate in a colonial context because the colonisers did not acknowledge the ‘other’\textsuperscript{15} and posits that reciprocity is ‘a necessary condition of transculturation, [...] a situation where each party recognizes the other as an architect of cognitive and intellectual traditions’. Although in political and social contexts Parry’s view may be relevant, can we apply the word reciprocity to a literary text, and, if so, between whom? Looking at history and recordings of life in the colonies it would seem that Parry’s view is not always applicable. Although the colonisers may not have acknowledged the colonised, readers of literature are often aware of significant influences and crossings, borrowings, albeit at times...

\textsuperscript{11} See Ashcroft, ‘Beyond the Nation’.
\textsuperscript{13} Parry 72. Parry says it is time to consider studies of the ‘experiences spoken by scattered, impoverished, and despised populations stranded in temporary and exploited employment’ since the use of the term ““diaspora” as a synonym for a new kind of cosmopolitanism that is certainly relevant to writers, artists, academics, intellectuals, and professionals can entail forgetfulness about that other, economically enforced dispersal of the poor” from other countries.
\textsuperscript{15} Parry 77.
unintentional, between the different cultures. However, if we are to look at the ‘unsettled diasporas’ we will inevitably be faced with the complexity of the forms of cultural translation to which Hall refers. I would suggest that no one can live in another country or culture, or read extensively about other cultures, without being influenced and affected by it.

Elliott Young, in a review of a book by Silvia Spitta, Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America, voices views similar to those of Benita Parry. He states the need to narrow the definition of transculturation, and warns against the tendency for it to become a bag into which anything can be put, in much the same manner as postcolonialism was used.\(^1^6\) He sees it as a process of adjustment and re-creation, also at the personal level, hence he talks of the transcultural person, and the need for specificity in the literature of a country. Abril Trigo, too, comments on the devaluation of the term due to the loss of the utopian paradigm on which it was built, so it becomes ‘an ideological manifestation of peripheric modernity.’\(^1^7\)

However, transcultural literature is a key element in cultural interaction, and other critics have devised alternative terms to explain the transcultural process. In their introduction to Translation of Cultures (2009) Rüdiger and Gross use the term ‘translation’ to cover what I would suggest we mean by transculturation, that is, ‘the interaction of cultures, the transfer of cultural experience, the concern with cultural borders, the articulation of liminal experience, and intercultural understanding’.\(^1^8\) In this volume various scholars discuss the potentialities of cultural translation, but also its limitations, such as writing against the ‘adopted’ culture in settler literature. The bicultural or multicultural writer becomes both insider and outsider, what they describe as ‘an intimate insider and a determined outsider’.\(^1^9\) This is expressive of border-crossings but is not unproblematic – who then becomes the ‘other’? Is it oneself in one’s country of origin – or does it indicate a certain inability to step across cultures looking at the inside from outside, or vice versa, leading to cultural separatism? The process of translation is an apt description, since a translation is often a new work, adapted to the culture of the target reader. As Oloruntoba-Oju says in his essay ‘Translation, Adaptation, and Intertextuality in African Drama’ translation is ‘not just a translingular vector of meaning, but also uniquely a vector of cultural specificity.’\(^2^0\)

Another alternative to ‘transculturation’ is the term ‘transliteracy’ since meaning may be encoded in various forms. Simon Biggs has described ‘culture as a

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\(^1^8\) Petra Rüdiger and Konrad Gross, eds., Translation of Cultures, ASNEL papers 13 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) ix.

\(^1^9\) Rüdiger and Gross xi.

Dealing with language and its historical components, including modern day computers, Biggs asks whether the use of the term ‘transliteracy’ as defined by Sue Thomas as ‘the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from singing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks’ offers the ‘possibility of reconciling cultural and linguistic differences’. Biggs debates this with examples from history, orality, philosophy, literature, and ethnography. In literary studies this could be a useful term and more precise than transculturation. The link between cultural production and transculturation is a continuation of the debate in postcolonialism on the power of the media and the reception of literatures in languages other than English – for example, the whole African debate led by Ngugi and Achebe about writing in African languages. Transcultural literature embraces a wider range of texts than the term postcolonial (with or without the hyphen). One might be tempted to say that the globalised world is itself transcultural with the globalisation of culture through the media and migration. The reception of literary works of a transcultural nature will be dependent in many cases on the reader’s own background which also changes with time and circumstances. Thus a writer such as Yvonne du Fresne, a New Zealander of Danish-Huguenot descent, who includes many Danish words and phrases in her texts, may have other significance to a Scandinavian reader or one acquainted with Scandinavian customs and culture, as well as other immigrants from Europe, than for the reader who knows nothing of the historical or cultural background to her texts.

Transcultural and discourse
Although much criticism of transcultural texts is focused on the cultural history of the present, that present is dependent on a prolongation of the past. We tend to think of transculturation as a contemporary phenomenon, but in fact it has a political history prior to the nineteenth century going back to the Ancient Egyptian civilisation which combined Arab and African influences, the time of the Roman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and of course French dominance at the time of the Norman conquest in the Middle Ages. All these shared cultures with the countries they ruled over. Transcultural literature today has taken this tradition and rewritten it to suit a different era. Literature is often thought of as an embodied experience, but is also a socialising force – a process of cultural fusion and appropriation, and then selective use. Politically, transculturation can thus be used to describe processes of negotiation in contemporary society that lead to social awareness and solidarity, as well as ensuring the continuity of societies, as they have done throughout time. Polyglotism was the rule, whereas monolinguism is a more recent phenomenon, not least a result of increasing nationalism in the nineteenth century and the growth of the British Empire.

23 See Anne Holden Rønning, ‘For Was I Not Born Here?’ Identity and Culture in the Work of Yvonne du Fresne (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2010).

Many questions arise in the debate as to determining what we might call the ‘boundaries’ of what constitutes transcultural literary forms and texts – is it language, content or a combination of the two? Or is the bicultural or multicultural background of the author, and the same elements as a dominant feature in the text, that which makes it transcultural? Does transculturation deal with issues of belonging and identity, or an analysis of contemporary society from a multifocal point of view? Transculturation in literature does not necessarily evolve from colonial dominance of another language, but rather from literary processes and genres adapted to a new landscape and way of life. After all we define ourselves through language and the creation of sub-cultural fields. And, when we do so, does the interference of the very form of the text affect our view? Given the interconnectedness of cultures, and the normal processes of borrowing, the conventional expression of the Western modern imaginary as the cultural history of the present is too narrow. As Les Murray points out:

It will be a tragedy if the normal processes of artistic borrowing and influence, by which any culture makes part of its contribution to the conversation of mankind, are frozen in the Aboriginal case by what are really the manoeuvrings of a battle for political power within the white society of our country, or by tactical use of Third World rhetoric by jealous artists trying to damage each other professionally. 24

Murray is in some ways reiterating ideas voiced by T.S. Eliot. In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ Eliot writes of the influence of the past on the present which includes ‘the historical sense … [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’. 25 No writer of any genre is a land unto him/herself, but is influenced by the literature they have inherited, adjusting it to express their own meanings. As Eliot writes, ‘the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.’

Borrowing and border-crossing has from time immemorial been a central feature of the arts. One contemporary example which springs to mind is the manner in which Aboriginal artists have palimpsested national romantic paintings by Australian artists by painting barbed wire, Aboriginal figures, symbols, etc. on copies of the original Victorian period pictures. 26 In music, variations on a theme are often transcultural, taking well-known music and giving it a twist to create something new. Interaction between literary texts, or intertextuality, is frequently transcultural, drawing on aspects of literary genres, themes that are recognisable for some readers, but not necessarily essential to an understanding of the text. However, they expose the reader to other ways of expression, in a web woven of diverse cultural strands. Literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century has laid great emphasis on this literary borrowing, but there has been relatively little debate as to the transcultural nature of it.

26 Bill Ashcroft gave an interesting paper on this at the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA) conference ‘Reconciliation: 100 Years of Australian Federation’ in Lecce in 2001. 

Another central theme in postcolonialism and transculturation is the quest for belonging and identity, what Huggan has aptly called “the pull between land and language”. This is especially evident in settler literatures where difficulties often arise as to how to express a landscape for which the original mother tongue has no adequate expression, but also the social need to retain one’s mother tongue as being one of many identities. This implies that one chooses which aspects of culture one will retain or lose, though that choice may not be conscious – linking it to belonging, adopting certain characteristic features of a culture to feel at home in it, whereas other aspects of the original culture are felt to be too valuable and personal to reject.

For example in Australian literature, does the adaptation and inclusion of Aboriginal ideas, myths and sociolect make a text transcultural? Is David Ireland’s *Burn*, because of its content, transcultural, despite its extensive use of stream of consciousness technique to portray the mental state of the protagonist Gunner, of Aboriginal descent, in contrast to the style used for the narrative portraying the life of Gunner’s family, which is of mixed origin, since both forms are still Western discourse? Other examples of writers who have tried to cross the transcultural divide at various levels in Australia are Xavier Herbert in *Capricornia*, and David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, as well as Les Murray’s poetry. They have all written about aspects of Aboriginal life and culture in fictional or verse form, raising valid cultural issues, but the one culture still dominates, and the style and genre is still Western.

Language is one of the determinants of discourse and of the most obvious elements of transculturation. In many European countries there is considerable concern as to the number of English words in daily use in what is otherwise a native language, and of the problems ensuing from attempts to impose native language equivalents. One example of this transcultural phenomenon of our globalised world is the teenage linguistic mix, common among second and third generation young of immigrant parents or grandparents. They are born into a transcultural space and the formation of their own language, a mix of two or more languages, as several studies have shown, is one way of showing how the borders within which they live can be crossed and re-crossed, and incomprehensible to those outside the group. Likewise the very term New Literatures in English indicates a form of transculturation, the English language as used by those not really English by birth. As Eliot pointed out,

> It is easier to think in a foreign language than it is to feel in it. ... A thought expressed in a different language may be practically the same thought, but a feeling or emotion expressed in a different language is not the same feeling or emotion.  

Literature is often the emotional expression not only of identities, but also of how those identities came to be formed, and as such it has an emancipatory function. Some literature of transculturation illustrates this as the personal struggle, usually fictional, of an individual torn between cultures, trying to find the self, and is especially

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apparent in settler literature. One example is Les Murray’s search for what it means to be an Australian and what *is* Australian literature, and Australian language.

**Settler literature**

Settler literature raises a wealth of issues closely related to transculturation, especially memory, place and space. It is a useful example of transculturation, since the migration of many peoples to a country results in a mixing of heritages and cultures. As Ashcroft writes, ‘The concept of the border is disrupted in many ways in postcolonial literatures, but most powerfully in the relationship between memory and place: memory rather than nostalgia and place rather than nation.’ Memory and mythmaking are central issues of contemporary debate. The boundaries between history and memory are often blurred and fluid in fiction. Much critical work has been done on the fallibility of memory. Hayden White has suggested there is a tension between what he defines as the two aspects of memory, the ‘traditionalised memory’ which is ‘information about, and accounts of the past that are latently stored in its corpus of traditional lore’ and ‘rationalised memory’ which is about ‘the community’s past’ – written and accessible. Both of these we find in Australian literature, which often uses memory of the past in a rewriting of history or to fill in the gaps in previous historical fiction. Two obvious examples are Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Jack Maggs* as well as some of Mudrooroo’s texts, for example, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*.

In settler countries the border crossing has a finality, especially in earlier times, of moving from one to the other with the chance of return slight, whereas literature opens up the possibility of crossing and re-crossing those boundaries – it gives fluidity to the topic/theme. How are these views on transculturation applicable to Australian and New Zealand literatures, countries with indigenous populations, invaded by immigrants, some forced, and originally mainly from one culture? In Australia immigrants were often far from a homogenous group socially and culturally. Many were of the lower classes bringing with them their own regional and local subcultures and languages. Late twentieth century immigrants arriving from Europe and Asia are all reflected in the wealth of multicultural writing and the attempt to express what it means to be an Australian. This diversity (some would say multiculturalty) gives to Australian literature an element of the transcultural, writers expressing their heritage, their relation to Australia, not always with authenticity. From the 1970s the search for the Australian voice has continued. Was it the ballad form of the bush poets such as Lawson, or the storytelling of the Aborigine as Les Murray suggested, or a refined European form? Les Murray’s project, for example, was to show and illustrate in his poetry how the narrative of the Western modern imaginary cannot express the ‘true’ Australian voice as it ignores the ancestral poetry of the country. Transcultural literature in settler countries is often marked by texts

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29 Ashcroft, ‘Beyond the Nation’.
taking the past and applying it to the present, or through an investigating of the past coming to an understanding of present issues and situations by examining the ‘routes’ that have led from ‘roots’.

Many of the writers who spring to mind are bicultural or have multicultural backgrounds. In Brian Castro’s *Birds of Passage* (1983), the protagonist finds an old journal written by a Chinese ancestor (the Chinese were employed as miners in the late nineteenth century in both Australia and New Zealand) and sees it a kind of reflection and parallel to the story of his own life in Australia as a blue-eyed Chinaman, as he describes himself. In a short article, ‘Writing Asia’, Castro tells of his ancestry:

My father had come from a long line of Portuguese, Spanish and English merchants who settled in Shanghai at the turn of the century … my grandmother was from Liverpool … married a Chinese farmer from a little village. My Liverpudlian grandmother spoke fluent Cantonese, and I was brought up in a household which used a mixture of English, Cantonese and Portuguese.

Is Castro’s writing transcultural or multicultural? Central to such settler texts is the question of belonging and identity – the search for the personal with emotional overtones. Texts such as Beverly Farmer’s *The Seal Woman* (1992), about a Danish woman, Dagmar, who goes to Australia to seek relief from grief after her Norwegian husband, an Antarctic scientist, is lost at sea. She experiences a clash of cultures illustrated by the link to the mythic stories of the Selchie, and the symbolic reality of seal invasions on the Norwegian coast at the time.

This same emotional issue is the focus of Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*, as Fredy in his travels around the world throughout the twentieth century is in a constant search for where home really is. Fredy is an observer of cultures, comparing them with his own, which is transcultural, German, rural and Australian. However, we can ask today how far Australian literature has come in rejecting colonial generic forms and creating its own transcultural Australianess, and does this reflect in the use of genre. Many works still share much with colonial generic forms, as seen in the work of David Ireland, Peter Carey and David Malouf, to mention some.

In this article I have presented some of the ways in which we can look at the term ‘transculturation’ and its link to modernity or modernities. Like identities it is a pluralistic phenomenon. Both open up for a variety of approaches, some complementary, others narrower. A further examination of this concept will perhaps provide us as readers and citizens of the world some pegs on which to hang our interpretations, and our lives.

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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 ascendency 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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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

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’.\(^{11}\)

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’.\(^{12}\) 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.\(^{13}\) 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

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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.
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.\(^{18}\)

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.’\(^{19}\) 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?’\(^{20}\) It may well be that the greatest achievement of the women’s movement was ‘to change our habits’\(^{21}\) 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

\(^{18}\) 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

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’.  

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’, 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’, 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 globetrotting, 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’. Ultimately, so the argument goes, Mitchell’s work ‘promotes the rise of a new political aesthetics and aesthetic politics, which is looking conspiruously Nancean’. Schoene’s indebtedness to the philosophical disposition of Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as his understandable

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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’. 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’. 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’, 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?’ 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

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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.

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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 authorizes. 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.


Introduction: Implications of Transnational Texts
Post-colonial literary theory very often presupposes a historical continuum between the sets of regional texts it analyses. Thus, post-colonial literatures of, for example, India or Kenya are studied in view of the British colonial history, and those of Angola or Brazil with regard to the Portuguese colonial history. While there is on the one hand a rationale for this – the colonial history certainly does feature in, and has had effects on, post-colonial literatures – sometimes a simplification process takes place because the colonial history is often more complicated than one is led to understand.

Furthermore, in the case of transnational literatures, the trajectories of cultural influences are even more complicated and histories more varied, as the authors, texts, and literatures in question escape simplistic national, ethnic, linguistic and other identifying definitions. My focus in this article will be on Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) especially as a transnational text. Rushdie himself embodies this problematisation of definition as he ‘is’ a diasporic writer categorised by critics and scholars variously, among other things, as an Indian, Anglo-Indian, Anglo- or Indo-Pakistani, British-Indian, British, English, postcolonial, Commonwealth, or a world writer. His controversial novel, then, carries these implications.

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1 I would like to thank the participants of The Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies symposium ‘Post/Colonial and Transcultural: Contending Modernities, Presaging Globalisation’, Riga, Latvia, 10–12 September 2010 for their comments, and especially Lene Johannessen, Tabish Khair and Jopi Nyman for their input.
10 Madeiena Gonzalez, *Fiction after the Fatwa: Salman Rushdie and the Charm of Catastrophe* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 2005) 197-8; Gonzales also discusses the overall problems of categorising Rushdie.

various aspects with it, but especially in its narrative engagement with Islamic history it evades any such direct colonial/post-colonial routings and (dis)continuities.

In my article, I analyse especially the chapters set in the early Arabic history of Islam, and how these complicate, challenge and subvert the reading of them as a post-colonial narrative, and suggest as well that we cannot write the novel off as simply an example of parodic postmodern popular culture. The directions of influence, creation of interpretive communities, and justification of aesthetic, social, and moral issues cannot be determined through colonial history without problems. The Orientalist paradigm and practices have been strong in Western culture, and the subsequent Saidian critique of Orientalism has been strong in cultural and literary analyses during the past three decades. What implications do transnational texts and analyses have on the interpretations of cultural representations?

A significant term in this analysis is *hybridity*. What I imply with hybridity is related to power relations between cultures contributing to the hybrid construction so that it ‘does not mean any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but implies a markedly unbalanced relationship.’ Hybridity could mean different things, and the representations of relations need to be considered differently if they are in a post-colonial or in a transnational context. The reception of Rushdie’s book indicates that the binary trajectories such as colonial–post-colonial, East–West, traditional–modern, or local–global are not the only possible or available options for people to react to or engage with cultural artefacts and phenomena such as books. As Rushdie’s book deals with a historical period and place not directly within the parameters of British colonial history, it also sets out to study issues that are tangentially yet irrevocably connected with this particular history, thus ambiguating the influence of cultural contacts, interests, and readings.

Due to its main Indian-British diasporic context, Rushdie’s novel has often been studied as a postmodern post-colonial text, with particular attention to cosmopolitan subjectivity and diasporic identity. My treatment of it here as (at least partially) a transnational text – that is, a text representing connections and influences beyond, or parallel to, the immediate colonial history and its post-colonial corollaries – aims to illustrate the ambiguous complexity of representation. The setting of the ‘Islamic’ parts of the novel predate the Western colonial era, and yet they are connected to the current trends of globalisation and transnationalisation through narrative linkages. By understanding these linkages, their cultural contexts, and the contexts of reception, it might be possible to propose more nuanced and perceptive interpretations of transnational cultural texts such as *The Satanic Verses*.

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‘Without Any Fixed Place’

Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) begins with an epigraph that is taken from Daniel Defoe’s *The History of the Devil* (1726). The quoted text runs as follows:

Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is … without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.\(^{15}\)

In many previous studies and commentaries this has been interpreted – and not incorrectly or irrelevantly – as an image or a metaphor for the migrant condition, a ‘motif of migrancy and vagabondage’;\(^{16}\) being uprooted, unixed, and volatile. Taking my cue from this passage, I propose to look at Rushdie’s novel as laying out a more general condition for a transcultural, transnational\(^{17}\) literary (and other cultural) work that shares this allegedly ‘satanic’ quality of ‘a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition’ – being ‘without any fixed place, or space’;\(^{18}\)

In *The Satanic Verses*, the four chapters that form the so-called Islamic part of the novel cover only a quarter of the whole of the 547 pages. The first and third of these chapters, namely ‘Mahound’ and ‘Return to Jahilia’, are set in the context of the early Arabic history of Islam – named Submission in the novel – while the other two, namely ‘Ayesha’ and ‘The Parting of the Arabian Sea’, are set in contemporary albeit fictional India. The ‘Mahound’ chapter tells of the prophet Mahound and the emergence of a new religion, Submission, while ‘Return to Jahilia’ tells about its consolidation. ‘Ayesha’ is about an orphan Muslim girl Ayesha who persuades the village of Titlipur to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, while ‘The Parting of the Arabian Sea’ tells about this journey that seems to end in a catastrophe. All these chapters are of interest, especially as the first and third chapters have been at the centre of the *Satanic Verses* controversy,\(^ {19}\) but here I will only concentrate on the early history.

All the four chapters are narrated as dreams, if not delusions, of Gibreel, one of the two main protagonists of the novel. Thematically these chapters do, however, come close to the main parts of the book. In her astute analysis, Feroza Jussawalla comments on the recurrent interpretations of the protagonists:

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\(^{17}\) For the present purposes, my definition of the *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* ‘transcultural’ refers to forms of cultural amalgamation, and ‘transnational’ to global connections between people, cultures, and nations. These can incorporate, but do not necessarily coincide with, the ‘post-colonial’ which is characterized by a shared colonial history.

\(^{18}\) For the explication of the ‘satanic verses’ in Islamic history, see Joel Kuortti, *Place of the Sacred: The Rhetoric of the Satanic Verses Affair* (Frankfurt/M etc.: Peter Lang, 1997) 105-111.

\(^{19}\) See Kuortti, *Place*. 

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In contemporary academic criticism, the two main characters of *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta and Salahuddin Chamcha, are seen as the essence of post-European coloniality … as hybrid migrants. But migration and hybridization are not just conditions of recent postcoloniality.20

Jussawalla discusses the way in which Rushdie has tried to bring forth the fact that it has not been only ‘Europe’ that has colonized India but there is also a history of Muslim colonisation. The features of hybridity in Indian culture are, therefore, at least as much the result of earlier layers of the history of colonisation.

What is of specific interest in the quotation from Jussawalla here, however, is not the history of colonisation in India but the claim that ‘migration and hybridization are not just conditions of recent postcoloniality’. Indeed, such historical multidirectional continuity is also what Rushdie’s text emphasises: cultures and people have mingled with each other throughout time, ‘not just’ in the post-colonial world. While I do not claim that the novel is not relevant from a post-colonial perspective, it is my contention that a transnational reading makes it more poignant.

What we can deduce from Jussawalla’s observation is that, in their inherent historical and cultural multiplicity, hybridity and migration are, indeed, central concerns for the novel. This is further attested by Rushdie himself in his essay ‘In Good Faith’ (1990), where he tries to explain his reasons for writing the novel during the controversy that followed its publication:

> If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity.21

From this quotation it is clear how Defoe’s vagrant Satan befits Rushdie’s use of the concept in the context of the migrant. Furthermore, this migrant figure and migrant condition – whether real or fictional, referential or metaphorical – cannot be reduced to a post-colonial figure or condition, for it surpasses such a definition. An example of this can be found in the city of Jahilia which will be considered next.

**Pre-modern Globalization**

In the ‘Mahound’ chapter, the events take place at the beginning of the sixth century CE in a city called Jahilia (and later also in the city of Yathrib). Daniel Easterman notes that Jahilia is an Arabic term (*jahiliyyah*) meaning *ignorance* and is used by Muslims to denote the pre-Islamic period.22 While Rushdie’s text is in many ways (as dreams, fiction) removed from the actual Islamic history, it clearly connects with the history through such naming practices as well as intertextual means; thus Jahilia reads as Mecca (and Yathrib as Medina) in the eye of Islam. It is not my intention here to

analyse how closely or otherwise the novel follows the actual history but rather to comment on its transnational aspects.

Early in the chapter, after shortly introducing Mahound, Jahilia is described as a place where even settling down is based on inconsistency:

The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand … – the very stuff of inconstancy, – the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form … These people are a mere three or four generations removed from their nomadic past, when they were as rootless as the dunes, or rather rooted in the knowledge that the journeying itself was home.
– Whereas the migrant can do without the journey altogether; it’s no more than a necessary evil; the point is to arrive. – (SV 93–94)

This inconstancy, together with the dream framework, paves way for an interpretation that fixed, pure forms (of cultures, religions, languages, people) are impossible or unattainable.

Jahilia serves as an archetype of cultural unfixity – *unfixability* – as it is built at an intersection of caravan routes (SV 94). It is a buzzing commercial centre with international, intercontinental contacts through which

the caravanserais prospered. The produce of the world came up from Zafar to Sheba, and thence to Jahilia and the oasis of Yathrib and on to Midian where Moses lived; thence to Aqabah and Egypt. From Jahilia other trails began: to the east and north-east, towards Mesopotamia and the great Persian empire. To Petra and to Palmyra, where once Solomon loved the Queen of Sheba. (SV103)

What is depicted here is not some forsaken backyard in the desert but a thriving (even if threatened) cultural centre – albeit quite recently established. The previous quotation shows that international connections, global aspirations, were already in place in the Arabia of pre-modern times, long before the European nations that would become colonial powers were even formed. The people, products and places that are connected in Jahilia are truly a mixed lot:

O the splendour of the fairgrounds of Jahilia! … Merchants, Jewish, Monophysite, Nabataean, buy and sell pieces of silver and gold…. There is linen from Egypt and silk from China; from Basra, arms and grain. There is gambling, and drinking, and dance. There are slaves for sale, Nubian, Anatolian, Aethiop. (SV 96)

The novel is set in the economic sphere of pre-Islamic Arabia. In this historical context, the caravan routes brought people together in places that at the time would otherwise have been unreachable. The slave trade flourished, goods changed hands, and arms were in great demand. One could claim that all these transnational movements and transactions presaged globalisation. The way in which *The Satanic Verses* manages to capture the richness of this historical aspect textually is remarkable, and it emphasises the inescapability of hybridity. Then again, the novel is
not only concerned with the mixing of people through trade contacts, however important these may be. The crucial issue relates to religion – as it deals emphatically with Islamic history – which will be the final focus of this article.

**Transnational Hybridity**

One vital dimension for the use of the concept of hybridity in *The Satanic Verses* is religion. For this, the Islamic chapters are elemental, as they explore the questions of religious adherence and the birth of a religion from an a-religious perspective.

The novel depicts a context in which religion is used to attract visitors. In Jahilia, the city ruler Abu Simbel is concerned about the city finances and wants to get new religious tourists by including more deities in the local temple. All this is further done in competition with the city of Sheba:

Sometimes Abu Simbel suspects that only the pilgrimage stands between the city and its ruin. The council searches the world for statues of alien gods, to attract new pilgrims to the city of sand; but in this, too, they have competitors. Down in Sheba a great temple has been built, a shrine to rival the House of the Black Stone. (SV 103)

A new religion is emerging in the story, one with a decisive monotheistic motivation. Against this background, the idea of religious multiplicity is a critical one, and something that the novel explicitly examines. There is a demand for a global view of religion – statues of gods are drawn from all over the world – the world as it was known then and there. Here, the connections range from the Mediterranean to the Far Eastern, from the Central Asian to the Northern African. The interpretation of these hybrid, transnational constellations that are formed require sensitivity to non-hegemonic, non-Eurocentric histories.

This religious multiplicity is further explored in more specific terms in the novel in a description of the House in Jahilia, the destination of the pilgrimage tourists:

Hubal and Kain look down on Grandee and poet as they stroll. And the Nabataean proto-Dionysus, He-Of-Shara; the morning star, Astarte, and saturnine Nakruh. Here is the sun god, Manaf! Look, there flaps the giant Nasr, the god in eagleform! See Quzah, who holds the rainbow ... is this not a glut of gods, a stone flood, to feed the gluton hunger of the pilgrims, to quench their unholy thirst. The deities, to entice the travellers, come – like the pilgrims – from far and wide. The idols, too, are delegates to a kind of international fair.

There is a god here called Allah (means simply, the god). Ask the Jahilians and they’ll acknowledge that this fellow has some sort of overall...

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23 For more on the issue, see Kuortti *Place* 18-24 & 89-117 and Joel Kuortti, *Fictions to Live In: Narration as an Argument for Fiction in Salman Rushdie’s Novels* (Frankfurt/M etc.: Peter Lang, 1998) 125-81.

24 I understand the novel as a non-theological, fictitious historical account. There have also been comments that Rushdie’s novel is anti-religious or more specifically anti-Islamic. On the other hand, for example, Jussawalla discusses the novel as Rushdie’s earnest engagement with Islam (Jussawalla “Rushdie” 50-73).

While the text takes an explicit irreverent attitude towards religion and especially its monotheistic forms, it simultaneously records its deeply effective nature in its multiple cultural guises by presenting the variety of deities as parallels. There is what John Erickson calls a ‘process of leveling’ in this whereby differences are equalised rather than destroyed. All this suggests an ethical call for transnational literature and culture in general.

In face of such a representation of the amalgamation of cultures already in the sixth century, we can conclude that it is impossible to maintain the idea of hybrid migrancy as (predominantly or originally) a post-colonial phenomenon. The analysis of *The Satanic Verses* indicates that the interpretation of the representation of the early Islamic history would be different from a transnational rather than from a post-colonial perspective. The interpretation would not depend on, for example, the Indo-British colonial history that is essential for the interpretation of most of the other parts of the novel, but would demand a contextual reading that would be more attentive, for example, to the specificities of pre-Islamic and Arabic histories.

In the current discourse of post-coloniality, however, certain formations of migration tend to be represented more often and with more emphasis while other forms are marginally present, or are silenced. Apart from its literary and immediate socio-political aspects, the acknowledgement of the transnational historical and cultural multiplicity of hybridity is more than ever an ethical issue that needs to be addressed in order to maintain the relevance of discussions of post-colonial, transcultural and transnational issues.

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26 Rushdie’s source for this is very likely F. Hommel’s entry ‘Arabia before Islam’ in *E. J. Brill’s First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913–1936*, vol 1 that was republished in 1987, ed. Martijn Theodoor Houtsma et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

27 Erickson 153.
Uniquely local? Reading Manjula Padmanabhan’s short story ‘Feast’
Ulla Rahbek

Manjula Padmanabhan’s short story ‘Feast’ (2009) was published in the journal *Tehelka* in 2009, in a volume devoted to original fiction on the theme of excess. In the words of the editor, Tarjun J. Tejpal, this theme is pertinent and ‘proved easy […] Look around you. Look at the year gone by. Look at where we are headed.’ The editor quotes Louis MacNeice’s comment that “the world is crazier and more of it than we think, incorrigibly plural” and concludes that ‘literature is the surest way of understanding an incorrigibly plural world’.¹ In other words, through a fictional exploration of all kinds of surplus, perhaps we will have a better understanding of our constantly changing global world. Excess and an increased understanding of our often strange contemporary world are also central to ‘Feast’, set in India, Salman Rushdie’s ‘elephantine place’, which provides what Amartya Sen calls a ‘veritable feast of viewpoints’.² The story reads as a piece of travel writing and begins with an arrival scene: a suave, well-dressed, Western vampire arrives New Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International Airport, visiting India for the first time, and greatly looking forward to ‘his personal, private bloodfest’ (16).³ He is picked up at the airport by the driver Satish, whom he later consumes with greed and excessive enjoyment. But before this bloodsucking orgy, the vampire has noticed something peculiar. In the encounter with ‘the mass of hot, sweating [Indian] bodies’ (15) he senses an ambiguous scent he cannot identify and classify. It is unpleasant yet intoxicating; it is ‘rich with chemicals, human air-born ejecta, germs, dust particles, scent molecules, pheromones’. The vampire wonders if this desirable yet disgusting scent is ‘uniquely local’ (15).

The question about what is uniquely local is one that haunts the vampire and drives the story forward, and it allows us, as we follow the vampire’s fest and the accompanying quest to answer that question, to contemplate certain ancillary queries about topics such as the local versus global, East versus West, old versus new, excess versus austerity.⁴ The question also reveals how the story allegorises well certain globalising transformations characteristic of life right now. The on-the-surface simple story can be read as an allegory about attempted yet unsuccessful neo-colonialism figured as tourism, where tourism is – literally in this case – a parasitic activity, and about the decline of the West as power structures are shifting in favour of the East.

¹ Tarun J.Tejpal, ‘Free, Fair, Fiction’, *Tehelka Magazine* 6.1 (10 Jan. 2009) 3. (An introduction to the year-end special issue.) The terms excess and plural are used here, I gather, not in a theoretical, philosophical or psychological sense, but rather in a commonsensical way that sees excess and plurality, although of course not conceptually the same, as sharing an emphasis on that which is abundant, extravagant and perhaps too much.
⁴ The idea of the local remains problematic throughout the story and is usually paired with a question mark, as if to underscore its unresolved status.

We are also reminded of the West’s first vampire story, John William Polidori’s *The Vampyre: a Tale* (1819), whose introduction describes the vampire as a figure of superstition, a travelling tale coming from the East and developing in the West after Christianity:

The superstition upon which this tale is founded is very general in the East. Among the Arabians it appears to be common: it did not, however, extend itself to the Greeks until after the establishment of Christianity; and it has only assumed its present form since the division of the Latin and Greek churches; at which time, the idea becoming prevalent, that a Latin body could not corrupt if buried in their territory, it gradually increased, and formed the subject of many wonderful stories, still extant, of the dead rising from their graves, and feeding upon the blood of the young and beautiful. In the West it spread, with some slight variation, all over Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Lorraine, where the belief existed, that vampyres nightly imbibed a certain portion of the blood of their victims.5

This quote is very specific when it comes to location – we can follow the figure through specific geographical areas, as he moves from the East to the West. The tradition of the vampire as a figure that is linked to religion, travel, and excessive and blood-sucking parasitical activities is also central to Padmanabhan’s story, but through her postcolonial and transcultural optics, the familiar tale is given a dizzyingly new spin. It becomes muddled: in India, we read, ‘they have monsters, even one they call “vampire”, [but] there is nothing fixed and definite about them’ (19). So let us first follow in the trail of our vampire-cum-tourist as he makes his way through the masses of Indian people and how he tries to make sense of the for him unusual, and unusually provocative, excess.

The vampire’s second and equally ambivalent encounter with the strange and unfamiliar happens not long after he senses that disgusting yet strangely stirring scent. As he finds himself outside the airport, he notices something that startles him: masses of mosquitoes, those quaint, rival bloodsuckers, who, our vampire muses, ‘in the third world [are] still a force to be reckoned with: carriers of disease, miniscule assassins’ (15). It is still too early for the vampire to see how the power structures are already changing – as the lone vampire he cannot compare with the power of the multitude of mosquitoes. What he has yet to learn is that here in the so-called third world, in the twenty-first century, he is not a force to be reckoned with. His perhaps uniquely local cultural characteristics – his vampirism – are presented as powerless and oddly old-fashioned.6 The mosquitoes, which to him are tiny and quaint, share with the Indian population – in the story figured as the ‘mass of hot, sweating bodies’ and the ‘countless warm bodies lying unguarded in their sleep’ (15) – something the West cannot emulate; sheer numbers, or excess, if you will.


http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6087/6087-h/6087-h.htm

6 I modify the phrase ‘uniquely local’ with a ‘perhaps’ because the story never really resolves the issue of what and where is the local.


As he drifts through the streets of New Delhi, disguised in various ways, he tries to understand and make sense of his encounters in this contact zone of the new and strange world. I see New Delhi as a contact zone in the manner described by Mary Louise Pratt, in her exploration of travel literature, as a social space where ‘disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination’. It is precisely this asymmetry that is so noticeable, both as the ‘social asymmetry, of which the caste system is only one reflection,’ to quote Amartya Sen, but also in rather more unexpected ways, as we shall see. And in this vast metropolis, the unclassified scent continues to haunt the vampire. He tentatively classifies it as innocence. It is the only way of making sense of his experiences as a vampire-tourist exploring the ‘places where the teeming hordes [are] especially dense’ (16). In such places, the contrast to European reserve and sparseness is striking:

Squishy soft bodies pressed against him on all sides with a surprising lack of reserve. He had never before encountered such uninhibited yet anonymous physical contact. In Europe, it was unheard of for strangers, even in the grip of football hysteria or Oktoberfest revelry, to tolerate intimacies on this level. (16)

He discovers that in what he thinks of as their innocence, the masses do not protest against him or try to fight him off when he attacks them. Again, he does not understand why, but he feels that this innocence paves the way for ‘his reign of passion in this new country. His personal, private bloodfest’ (16). The reaction that the vampire sees as innocence could also be figured as what Wikas Swarup in Q & A (2005) thinks of as apathy. He has the landlord of the chawl where the protagonist lives explain to him why the masses tolerate cruelty and suffering: ‘We Indians have this sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it. So, like a proper Mumbaikar, close your eyes, close your ears, close your mouth and you will be happy like me.’ Whether innocence or apathy (these words seem to mean more or less the same to the increasingly confused and disturbed protagonist), or something else all together, it makes life easier for the vampire. As a would-be neo-colonial conqueror, he sets out to suck the lifeblood out of what to him is a new nation, to take advantage of the naiveté and artlessness of the local population, who seemingly cannot understand the force of the vampire’s power. However, he soon begins to realise the failure of his new-fangled and parasitic colonising mission, even though he still cannot understand why it leaves him oddly dissatisfied.

So he again ponders that initial question about the allegedly uniquely local or innocent quality of the still unclassified scent. Is it perhaps connected to the climate or the culture: ‘What is the meaning of this unique local taste? Why have I not encountered it before? Is it possible for culture to impart an actual physical fragrance? And if so, why have I never heard of such a thing before?’ (17, italics in

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8 Sen 34.
9 Vikas Swarup, Q & A (London: Black Swan, 2006) 84.
original). All of the victims surrender to him with extreme submission and he begins to be slightly unnerved by his easy success. Surely neo-colonialism is not supposed to be that easy? The vampire begins to be homesick for Europe and ‘the familiar, uncomplicated scent he associated with European victims’ (17). He begins to find the strangeness, the extravagance, and the unknown frustrating, and gradually the bloodsucking success coupled with all the unanswered questions begin to corrode his self-confidence and knowing feeling of superiority.

After six months in India, his tourist visa is running out and he still does not understand the abundance of the nation he has been devouring. In this state of anxiety and vulnerability, he meets Cindy, a vampire-gone-native, who acts as a go-between. She is almost the same, but not quite Indian, to twist Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas a little – as a mimic woman, she has reached some kind of understanding of India, yet retained some of her vampire characteristics. In her hybrid position she is not unlike Thomas Babington Macaulay’s ‘class of interpreters’ between the West and the million governed (only in reverse), who, to paraphrase slightly, are a class of people, Western in blood and colour, but Indian in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect. This middle-(wo)man can finally answer the question that haunts the story and the vampire.

In her elaborate explanation, Cindy sets up a binary system – between the West and the East, between Europe and India, between monotheism and polytheism, between austerity and excess – in order to enlighten and educate the vampire. She needs to construct this binary in order to try to help the vampire make sense of the mental muddle in which he finds himself. This is Cindy on the western ‘race’ of vampires:

We’re products of a very specific belief system. I won’t name it, since you’re still too sensitive and all your dark powers, even though they’re forged in opposition to that system, require your absolute belief in it … The belief system we belong to is an austere one. Think about it: one immortal soul, one life on earth, one chance of heaven or hell. Right? … But in order to maintain our powers we must uphold our own belief system … In order to be culture specific monsters we ourselves have got to be true believers. (19)

The penny is beginning to drop for our vampire, who listens to Cindy with bated breath. The revelation of vampirism’s complicity with the very forces it is defined in contrast to leaves him speechless. Apparently this is the price for the vampire’s immortality – that (perhaps) uniquely local characteristic of the culture specific monster the vampire learns that he is, in Cindy’s binary. But Cindy, in her in-between situation (perhaps the binary only holds as a ‘pedagogical tool’?) is also qualified to explain the other side of the binary she herself straddles:

10 The original reads: ‘We must at present do our best to form a class that may be interpreters between us and the million whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect.’ Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Minute on Indian education’, The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Ashcroft et al. (London: Routledge, 1995) 430.
In this culture [i.e. Indian], the rules of faith are completely different. There’s no precise heaven or hell. There’s no immortal soul … no single … uh … divine authority. Instead there are infinite births, infinite deaths, infinite divinities … Just by being here they get recycled … Instead of a single life and a single fate, there’s a ranging torrent of lives and fates, truths and deaths! … And there’s always a chance of better luck next time around! In the next life. The next incarnation. (19)

As a last point in her educational monologue delivered to our by-now dejected and frustrated vampire, Cindy drives the point home, teaching the vampire a lesson about, from a Western perspective perhaps, third-world excess, fertility, surfeit and power, and that what she construes as the uniquely local is intimately linked with surplus. In this polytheistic system, ‘there’s always more where it came from’ since it is a ‘multi-life-multi-chance system’ (19).

But the vampire still does not grasp the complete change in power structures: he cannot understand how, if the Indians succumb to him, he can be their victim. Cindy explains that numbers matter – as indeed the vampire saw at the beginning of the story in his puzzling encounter with the miniature assassins, the rival bloodsucking mosquitoes. Numbers – excess – also help to answer the question about that still-baffling scent. It is not apathy or innocence, not an exotic spice, but lack of fear, because the alleged victims – the Indian population – know that ‘their sheer numbers will prevail’ (19). Cindy explains again: ‘Without active fear to define us, we cease to be monsters. Our powers wane. We begin to die’ (19).

What Cindy here explains is a point Bill Ashcroft elaborates in his discussion of language and power in Caliban’s Voice (2009), where he references Michel Foucault’s claim that power is everywhere and that there is no binary opposition between those who have power, and those who do not. Ashcroft suggests that power can be seen as transcultural and that it circulates both through subjects and on them and thus allows for agency where agency is usually not considered. In ‘Feast’ such transculturation and circulation of power is seen in the deconstruction of the notion of victim. In this reversal of traditional power structures, the West, embodied in our European vampire, is rendered irrelevant and powerless – indeed out-dated. His neo-colonial project fashioned as a touristic ‘reign of passion’ ends in abject failure. He is not a force to be reckoned with. He is nothing, unless he changes, adapts and adopts a new mode of living and a new way of seeing the world.

Our vampire approached India in a typically Western way, as we have seen, equipped with a set of recognisable ideas about the place. India seems to have been part of the vampire’s imagination, constructed as an exotic location, and shaped through the vampire’s fantasy and desire as a mysterious and strange territory. In order to identify the allegorical thrust of the story and the figure of the vampire, we can draw on Amartya Sen’s classification of Western approaches to, or external images of, India. Sen divides these competing versions of India into three overarching categories, which all share the common assumption that there is a vast difference

between the West and the East. Sen labels the categories thus: the Exoticist approach, that sees India as wondrous, different and strange, an attitude that has existed in the imaginations of Europeans for eons; the Magisterial, which refers to India during the Raj and sees India as rather primitive and crude, yet still the staging ground for British action, and, finally, the Curatorial, that collection of different and disparate attitudes to India which all regard the nation as special and difficult to classify and exhibit.12

The vampire can be understood as embodying and combining Sen’s exhotistic and curatorial approaches, as he makes his way around the mega-city of Delhi, trying to make sense of and indeed classify the strange, different and possibly uniquely local of this part of India. But he also sees India as the staging ground for his blood fest, for his neo-colonial project, and as such, he may even be said to reveal a magisterial bent. Yet, as we have seen, what he cannot understand is that the masses of Indians whom he devours do not put up a fight, as any Western victim would do, at least in his experience. Such behaviour — such local passive resistance agency perhaps — does not make sense and refuses to be neatly labelled in any of the categories with which the vampire approaches India. If the vampire had more knowledge of Indian cultural and political history, he would perhaps have seen a certain similarity between that passive resistance and Sen’s celebration of the argumentative Indian, embodied in a tradition of heterodoxy, reason and argument. The term argumentative encompasses for Sen a set of meanings — to argue, quarrel, discuss, prove, reason, persuade — all of which substantiate that particular tradition that is reflected in such illustrious figures as Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and perhaps, on a more grass root level, in the masses whom the vampire encounters, who refuse to act in accordance with an externally imposed script, the script of subaltern victimisation and powerlessness. But the vampire does not posses such sophisticated knowledge it seems, and it is only with the help of a go-between that his rigid attitude is forced to undergo a kind of rewiring and possibly even a complete readjustment of the vampire’s self-understanding.

In order to survive, as it were, in the dazzling new-ness of the third world mega-city, the vampire must become de-territorialised. Or perhaps re-territorialised, considering Pollidori’s point about the vampire tale’s origins in the East, unspecified though that particular location is in his story. The vampire has to abandon the system of European monotheism that produced him; yet he cannot exist outside that system, and remain the same. He must renounce his life script, which has hitherto sustained him well enough, because in the new territory the old life script no longer stands him in good stead. I use life script in the sense that K. Anthony Appiah applies the concept, as descriptive of ‘large collective identities’ that encompass notions of a how ‘a proper person of that kind behaves’; such ‘modes of behaviour’ or ‘loose norms or models’ shape specific kinds of collective identities. Such life scripts, Appiah continues, can be seen as ‘narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.’13 The vampire discovers, as a result of his dialogue with Cindy in the hotel lobby, that the vampire script turns out to be too tight and confining...

12 Sen 139-160.

for life outside the austere monotheism of the West, and for him as an individual vampire who has left and possibly transcended the known world of the large collective identity of ‘European vampire’. Indeed, if he wants to do justice to his own personal narrative and to survive again, as it were, he has to violate the traditional vampire script, and embrace the superabundance of Indian polytheism. He has to be willing to celebrate what Bill Ashcroft calls ‘one of the most exciting features of cultural globalisation’: ‘the strategic capacity to adopt and adapt a world language … for the purposes of self representation.’ I see language here as a broad category, that includes culture and faith. In other words, the vampire must learn to speak a new language, the potentially liberating language of globalisation.

Although the short story began with an arrival scene, it does not end with a departure scene. That would have been a too austere ending, too minimalist and final. And too conclusive for a story that indulges in excessive question marks – some thirty over the course of five pages. Instead the vampire, less suave and blasé than when we first met him, ponders the possibility of going native, and in the process becoming, as Salman Rushdie would perhaps put it, a translated monster, both losing and gaining something in the process. He has realised that the binary between West and East is not insurmountable, that it can be deconstructed and played around with through the work of the imagination. He has discovered that the disturbing scent of lack of fear can be interpreted as uniquely local, wedded to plurality, but not in an exclusive, nationalistic way. By giving up what he has been taught is his cultural specificity of Western vampirism and embracing what Cindy pictures as the uniquely local abundance of possibilities, he can, if he wants to, embrace the hope with which the story ends, the hope of ‘better luck next time’ in the constant recycling of lives and possibilities (19). If the vampire responds to this possibility, as Cindy seems to have done, he would also swap the old for the new, and in that process of cultural translation, Padmanabhan illuminates the changing power structures that Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as the provincialising of Europe. But perhaps it is not that easy. For a story that relies on uncertainty and question marks to drive the plot, it also appropriately ends with one. The vampire’s last question reads: ‘Hope for what?’ (19). Cindy’s answer about better luck next time is her answer, and not the vampire’s, and perhaps not the story’s. His journey (physical and mental) and his future remain unresolved.

Chakrabarty suggests that ‘European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping to think thorough the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought … may be renewed from and for the margins.’ For Chakrabarty, there is no brutal severance with Europe, but rather a link with the West. This is not unlike Arjun Appadurai’s suggestion that ‘for the former colony, decolonisation is a dialogue with the colonial past, and not a simple dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life.’ This kind of dialogue, which may however be seen by some as a kind of complicity, prepares the way for globalisation and a new kind of modernity, shaped by, if we are...

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14 Ashcroft, Caliban’s Voice 15.
to believe Appadurai, the movement of people and the work of the imagination. By the work of the imagination – ‘a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity’ – Appadurai includes the mental work which functions as a link between past, present and future and between here and there and who you were and what you are becoming. The imagination is thus a staging ground for action and escape, linked as it is with motion and migration. Although the story has little to say about the notion of modernity, the scenario it offers and the allegorical way in which one may read it lends itself to such popular ideas. If we put our vampire into this schema of globalised modernity, we can then see how towards the end of the story he seems to become part of what Appadurai calls an *ethnoscape*:

> the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.

Might the ethnoscape also make room for a vampire in transition? Appadurai’s elaboration on ethnoscapes opens up for just such a thought: ‘As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality.’ The vampire travels to India, a journey which seems to become a kind of migration; he regroups with Cindy in what is for him personally a new location and he reconstructs his history and personal project with her help. Via the go-between Cindy, he is given the possibility to engage in that dialogue between old and new, the West and the East, being and becoming (Appadurai’s work of the imagination) and this potentially opens up for a transcultural transformation and liberating de-territorialisation as it reveals how the ethno – which, according to the *Collins English Dictionary* refers to race, people or culture – becomes increasingly slippery, transcultural and translocal. Whereas the story began with the vampire as a European figure it ends on a less certain note. Is he still European? Is he becoming Indian? Is that possible within the narrative confines of this story? What is the uniquely local? The story does not provide answers in the way that Cindy does, and so we are left with both answers and questions that we slip and slide between. Cindy’s answers leave room for excess, and she figures excess as life-giving and full of possibilities for continued growth. The story, however, does not tell us how the vampire fares in such circumstances!

Indeed, this on-the-surface modest and simple short story is in my playful and allegorical reading interpreted as a fictional exploration of Rana Dasgupta’s prediction that ‘the 21st century belongs to the fertile chaos of the third-world metropolis’ with its ‘alternative vision of modernity’. In ‘maximum cities’ such as New Delhi we find a ‘fecund ecology’ and ‘a strange and dazzling hypermodernity

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17 Appadurai 3, 7.
18 Appadurai 33.
19 Appadurai 48.
that bewilders Western understanding’.\textsuperscript{21} It is the same vision Aravind Adiga’s protagonist, the argumentative Indian Balram, in his 2008 novel \textit{The White Tiger}, delineates in his letters to the Premier of China:

\begin{quote}
Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse … Don’t waste your money on those American books. They’re so \textit{yesterday}. I am tomorrow.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Like Dasgupta’s and Adiga’s tongue-in-cheek predictions, Padmanabhan’s story ‘Feast’ also illustrates memorably how such bewildering excess throws notions of what is uniquely local and culturally specific into crisis, but simultaneously how such transcultural confusion paves the way for new and unexpected ways of living and thinking in the twenty-first century, and for new ways of thinking about globalised living.

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\textsuperscript{21} Dasgupta ‘Maximum’. It is interesting to ponder how ideas about excess and fecundity are recycled. Disparaging comments on excess recur time and again in colonial discourses about the (former) colonies, yet at the same time excess is also characteristic of the kind of modernity found in the Caribbean that Paul Gilroy identifies in \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993). Excess is thus a feature of early modernity as well as the specific hypermodernity located in twenty-first century mega-cities in the former colony of India. And in both configurations – early modern excess and hypermodern excess – European descriptions are characterised by a certain scepticism and even distaste, and show a reluctance to embrace the potential creativity inherent in such surplus.

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Can Transcultural Theatre Raise the Dead? Exploring Kaj Munk’s *Ordet* (*The Word*) via Peter Brook’s Essentialist Aesthetic

Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou

*Ordet* (*The Word*) from 1925 by the Danish priest, poet and playwright Kaj Munk is a modern miracle play with a powerful resurrection scene at the core of its dramatic structure. The text itself contains explicit Christian and theological discussions and a strong appeal to the personal faith of its audiences. Such content, combined with a resurrection theme, often presents an awkward challenge to present-day directors wishing to stage the play within a Danish context, when Denmark itself may be said to defend its secular position with almost fundamentalist fervour. The positioning of the play within the Danish canon is therefore a sometimes uncomfortable business, as is the examination of the literary and historical figure of Kaj Munk himself, to which I shall return. My purpose here is to examine whether there may be hope for a dramatic text that has come to be considered at best problematic, at worst anachronistic, within its own national and canonical context, if it were submitted to notions taken from transcultural performance theory and practice. I will examine this question mainly by focusing on the transcultural aesthetic of Peter Brook’s theatre, particularly his mythopoetic, ritualist and essentialist approaches to performance, and then, with Brook’s notions in mind, I will look at a recent production of *Ordet* by Swedish director Lars Norén for The Royal Danish Theatre in 2008. This production did not engage with transcultural performance practice, but may be seen rather as an attempt to accommodate the religious messages of the play within a Danish/Scandinavian context by, as we shall see, undermining the moment of the resurrection. I will argue that such an ‘accommodation’ diminishes a vital part of the play’s dramaturgy, whereas an imagined transcultural *mise-en-scène* inspired by an aesthetic vision such as Brook’s with the potential to remove the play in part or entirely from its national/historical context and to highlight the enactment of ritual in the resurrection scene might result in an alternative, but possibly very powerful revival of this miracle play.

**Intercultural Theatre and Transcultural Theatre in Theory and Practice**

Firstly, we should here distinguish between transcultural theatre and intercultural theatre. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo’s article ‘Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis’ is helpful in defining the term transcultural as a sub-category of the larger intercultural framework, which also comprises intracultural and extracultural theatre practices.\(^1\) Intercultural theatre may be described as a hybrid process, in which dramatic texts, acting styles, settings, designs and performance traditions operate and negotiate between their respective cultural contexts, in order to bring about a *mise-en-scène* that encompasses a range of aesthetic elements from both

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the ‘source culture’ and the ‘target culture’. Intercultural theatre should therefore, when staged properly, result in a form of mediation, or an encounter, between the script, or other form(s) of dramatic source(s), from one cultural framework and the performance traditions from another (or several) cultural framework(s). In transcultural theatre, however, we may add the particular purpose of reaching what we might call a pre-cultural layer via this encounter. The conviction of an existing pre-cultural pattern, a universalising essence of culture, is evident in the work of well-known directors like Eugenio Barba, and certainly Peter Brook, and the endeavour to reach and express this abstract notion in performance by shedding superficial cultural layers is fundamental to the notion of transcendence in a transcultural performance.\(^2\) Intercultural as well as transcultural performances ought to avoid appropriations, meaning that one cultural framework should not merely be adapted and modified in order to meet the expectations of the other. This is certainly not a simple quest, perhaps it is even a doomed one from the onset, if founded on simplistic assumptions.

The implications of transcultural performance are evidently considerably more complex than the mere exchange of one set of codes for another. Particular care should be taken by approaches that depart from as well as terminate within a Western framework exemplified in the familiar image of the Western traveller who embarks on a journey and returns, thinking of himself as enlightened after his encounter with the Other, who nonetheless remains precisely an Other. This approach may be said to build essentially on a wish to traverse rather than to transcend.

Additional problematic aspects of transculturalism as a theatrical practice occur when productions fail to clarify the terms on which they are attempting to create the cultural encounter. The term transcultural performance naturally creates a certain set of expectations in an audience, which may ultimately be incompatible with the director’s intentions. Such expectations might be of a more anthropological nature: the audience approaches the performance expecting to gain an insight into diverse cultural elements, but finds that these elements are primarily utilised in an aesthetic framework, such as in the setting and costume, light and sound designs of the production. These may delight the senses, but do not necessarily offer profound cultural insights. In the worst case scenario, this form of transcultural theatre employs cultural elements in a superficial and preconceived manner and succeeds in presenting no more than an eclectic mixture of cultural clichés, which have a trivialising effect in even the most convincing performance.

**Peter Brook and ‘The Culture of Links’**

In postcolonial contexts the implications of transcultural performance naturally appear even more problematic when we wish to pay particular attention to whether the cultural encounter takes place on equal terms and when we are searching for instances in which original texts are decontextualised with a view to selling them to (Western) audiences. The adaptation of an Oriental text to suit a Western cultural reference

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framework was also claimed by some critics to be the main problem in Peter Brook’s well-known and controversial production of *The Mahabharata* from 1985, which is one of the first and best known examples of a director’s attempt to create a transcultural performance in the West. The critique of Brook’s nine-hour-long staging of *The Mahabharata* was primarily founded on the fact that he appeared to focus on the overall mythical elements in the epic text rather than deal with its particular cultural and historical background. This was registered by some critics as a typically westernised textual approach, which disregarded the kind of authenticity that is predominantly founded on fidelity to the particular historical and cultural contexts of a dramatic text, even if Brook’s final productions (meaning both the stage production and the subsequent film) were acknowledged for their aesthetic vision and effect. Rustom Bharucha wrote scathingly that ‘Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* exemplifies one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent years.’ What, in Bharucha’s view, was most disturbing about the representation of Indian culture in Brook’s work was not so much its being a Western approach, but the fact it ‘exemplifies a particular kind of Western representation which negates the non-Western context of its borrowing’. In order to comprehend (but not necessarily justify) Brook’s work, one must make allowances for his autonomous authenticity concept, which is defined via essentialism rather than particularity. The perspective of Brook’s transcultural theatre is essentialist in the sense that it proposes to transcend cultural differences and explore ‘the great narratives’ that may link people and their differentiating cultural expressions at a profounder level. Although often considered postmodernist in his directorial approach, Brook’s aesthetic springs from a deep-seated humanism and, at the same time, what some might deem, a Utopian view of communalism. Brook himself describes his so-called ‘culture of links’ thus:

> It is the force that can counterbalance the fragmentation of our world. It has to do with the discovery of relationships where such relationships have become submerged and lost – between man and society, between one race and another, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between humanity and machinery, between the visible and the invisible, between categories, languages, genres. What are these relationships? Only cultural acts can explore and reveal these vital truths.

This vision is expressed in his choice of texts, in his theatrical settings and designs, his multi-national casting and in his use of global acting styles exemplified in his actors’ training of speech and movement. He has repeatedly sought out texts that have provided him with material for re-enacting transcultural myths. Myth is, in fact, Brook’s preferred narrative trope with which to indicate the above-mentioned global human truth, because myths represent, in Brook’s view, the great narratives of the

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4 Bharucha 70.
world. However, they are not to be seen as fixed entities as much as open dynamic structures, invisible patterns underlying our everyday phenomenological perception.

The purpose of the theatre then becomes to perceive this mythopoetic vision and to re-enact and impart it via performance practice. In this sense the theatre becomes (again) a place for communalist interpretations of ritual and its art, not an end in itself, but a means to apprehending the what Brook calls ‘the invisible’. It is important here to note that Brook’s universalist aesthetic should be understood primarily in terms of theatrical performance, that the communalist idea of a shared space across cultural differences is confined to the theatrical space. In other contexts it may well be torn to pieces by postmodernist theories in which universalism becomes a highly self-deceptive vision, an overruling of otherness in the name of communalism. I am, of course, aware of the numerous ways in which to point out the instability of Brook’s concepts, even when they remain within a theatrical framework. The ways in which Brook explores his essentialism, however, prove his own awareness of the dangers implied in it, because his textual approaches and setting designs may be said to be continuously striving for semantic confrontation rather than closure. His casting policy too, although multicultural, is meant to avoid racial stereotyping. His actors are not cast in order to represent their respective race and culture, at least in the superficial sense of such conceptions. Instead they are asked to employ their differences dynamically and to create an ever-evolving semantic process, which must proceed beyond stylised cultural mannerisms. As David Williams writes in ‘Transculturalism and Myth in Peter Brook’s Theatre’, Brook’s actors are ‘individual performers, rather than racial metaphors or cultural representations – makers, rather than bearers, of signification’.  

A perhaps slightly predictable example of this was seen in the casting for his 1990 production of *The Tempest* in which the part of Prospero was played by a black African actor and Caliban by a white German actor in order to foreground the usual post-colonialist reading of the text.

In order to allow them to retain their individuality, Brook has taught his actors to inhabit a space between impersonation and story-telling. By allowing them to be individual narrators, while at the same time impersonating their part, they should be able to retain their own personality and particularity even within the act of performance. Brook describes this technique as being ‘detached without detachment’. The actor shows full involvement via physical and psychological empathy, but, simultaneously steps back from his own performance in his function as an individual storyteller. He retains that part of his own personality which enables him to transmit his narrative, without losing himself in the process and appearing to the audience as a mere representative cultural emblem.

**Transcultural Defamiliarisation**

Thus, Brook’s theatrical practice does not try to suppress notions of otherness in an all encompassing universal embrace; that would be a simplistic reading of his aesthetic, as well as one that might soon enable us to dismiss it. Instead he aspires to link cultural differences rather than erase them and thereby heightens our awareness of

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6 David Williams, ‘Transculturalism and Myth in Peter Brook’s Theatre’, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, 73.  
them. Brook asks his audiences to look for the ‘Culture of Links’ beyond the familiar brackets in which they situate themselves as well the Other. Defamiliarisation thus becomes a key mechanism in his performances. Maria Shevtsova has said of Brook’s approach that it ‘obliges performers and spectators alike to review routine assumptions about their own culture through its prism of cultures’.

Transcultural theatre, within Brook’s aesthetic framework, should therefore set up a negotiation with elements that may at first appear alien to us, but which are intricately linked to elements from our own culture, elements that may otherwise be forgotten, repressed or taken for granted, so that in that encounter with the Other, we are ultimately invited to examine our own otherness.

When approaching transcultural performance mainly from an essentialist perspective such as Brook’s, which is what I shall attempt to do shortly by focusing on Kaj Munk’s text, the process of dealing with our own otherness through a transcultural encounter becomes useful in the process of drawing out and highlighting elements within a dramatic text that have become problematic or lost their thematic values, because they have been confined within a national and/or canonical cultural context. Some of the elements best suited for transportation between cultures are then, according to an aesthetic perspective such as Brook’s, rituals, myths and/or religious concepts. Such elements may successfully transcend national, historical, even linguistic boundaries when viewed from an essentialist (or universalist) perspective, and by representing these via performance modes and/or conceptual contexts that aspire to a transcultural encounter, we may be able to re-evaluate their significance and approach the texts in which they are presented afresh. We are therefore not only looking for a performance mode that is capable of transmitting issues of the human condition recognisable to all cultures, especially as some would argue the instability and utopianism of such a venture; rather we are looking for a performance mode that is capable of heightening our own awareness of – and critical engagement with – such issues.

It is also this last point that may ultimately define the purpose of transcultural theatre, if it is to go beyond a mere representational cultural re-enactment. Transcultural performance may not be able to represent unfamiliar cultural elements to an audience in an authentic manner because, like all other modes of theatrical performance, it establishes its significance in close negotiation with its recipients: its audiences, whose preconceived values are ubiquitously present in the theatre. An audience faced with various cultural elements within a performance has very different prerequisites for understanding – or indeed failing to understand – these elements. Some audiences will immediately detect inauthenticity in the presentation of, for example, mock-oriental elements, because they are able to bring a clear conception of ‘the real thing’ to their understanding of the performance. Other audiences will simply not be able to recognise certain elements unless they are actually represented in a manner already familiar to them, in other words: as cultural clichés. From this perspective, we ought to evaluate transcultural theatre less on its ability to teach us something about the Other and more on its ability to teach us something about ourselves. If we are to validate the advantages of transcultural performance we should therefore attempt to explore it as a process of defamiliarisation that provides an

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8 Quoted in Williams 72.
opportunity to reintroduce and re-evaluate elements that might otherwise have lost some of their cultural value. In addition to this, we would thus also permit transcultural performance to define itself within an aesthetic context (rather than, say, an anthropological or, even worse, a political), which significantly emphasises its artistic autonomy and offers a safeguard against misuse and misinterpretation.

Kaj Munk’s *Ordet*

In order to further explore some of these arguments, I will now turn to *Ordet* and examine whether this particular dramatic text and its highly mythopoetic content might benefit from an encounter with certain aspects of transcultural performance, as exemplified in Brook’s aesthetic.

The play depicts a religious feud within a small community of villagers on the west coast of Denmark. The feud is between two characters: the comfortable and respected farmer Mikkel Borgen, who has made himself an advocate of the great Danish theologian Grundtvig’s rational and rather earth-bound approach to Christianity; and the village tailor, who is a follower of the highly spiritual, some might even say fundamentalist movement, ‘Indre Mission’ (‘Inner Mission’). The feud between these two fathers influences the lives of their children: Mikkel has three sons, all still running the farm together with the father. The youngest son, Anders, is in love with the tailor’s daughter, which forms the basis for the initial conflict of the play, and Mikkel’s other son, appropriately named Johannes, appears to be insane, believing himself to be a prophet, a reincarnation of Christ, in fact. This state has been brought on by a combination of the traumatic memory of his fiancée’s death in a car accident and his profound and exaggerated studies of the Bible and the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. His lines are oblique, but poignant and often quoted directly from Scripture, which creates both tragic and comic effects when confronted in the dialogue by the more ‘rational’ faiths of the other characters, including the village vicar. Johannes thus functions as a constant reminder of Munk’s notorious refusal to ‘play it safe’ in all existential matters by continuously challenging the half-hearted modifications and relativism of the other characters with his own call for an uncompromising – and sometimes uncomfortable – faith. Finally, Mikkel’s third son, also named Mikkel, is happily married to Inger, who is expecting their third child.

The initial conflict thus springs from the love between the two young villagers made impossible by their fathers’ religious differences, but this conflict is quickly replaced by the pregnant Inger’s sudden illness. Her child is still-born and she herself dies soon after, despite the local doctor’s efforts and everyone’s prayers. The play thus undergoes an abrupt change from the popular comedy of the first acts to tragedy and subsequently to a miracle play in the last. The play’s final scene takes place in the living room of the farm where the dead Inger is placed in an open casket, the family in deep mourning beside her. Johannes enters, seeming to have regained his sanity. He no longer speaks through biblical citations, but addresses the mourners directly, blaming them for their lack of faith in the miracle of the Resurrection. Everyone is naturally appalled by this ill-timed and irrational sermon, but then Inger’s youngest daughter takes her uncle by the hand and asks him to bring her dead mother back to life. In an extremely powerful theatrical moment, Munk lets Johannes, aided by the
pure faith of the child, awaken Inger from the dead – she literally rises from her casket and is reunited with her family. Although the doctor, also present in the final scene, is given a line to explain away the miracle as a result of an error on the part of the medical examiner, the miracle carries the scene, both performatively and thematically.

Munk has calculated the effect on the audience extremely well. By staging a miracle in a simplistic and familiar everyday setting, he is able to create a very powerful contrast between physical and metaphysical elements. The effect of the mythopoetic re-enactment of the Resurrection is heightened via the contrast to the very tangible and naturalist context represented by the setting. In this sense, Munk’s text and his use of the theatre as a space in which to re-enact a ritual as powerful as the Resurrection calls for an immediate emotional and intellectual reaction from the audience as spectators to this re-enactment. I shall return to this important point of the theatrical implications in the following, as it exemplifies the difficulty in reviving the play dramatically without affirming its content.

**Ordet in its National Context and Lars Norén’s 2008 Production for The Royal Danish Theatre**

The play’s uncompromising religious message, with the miracle as a central thematic and dramatic device, has, ever since its premiere in Copenhagen in 1932, received sceptical reactions from critics and audiences. Munk’s call for a fervent, unquestioning faith in the possibility of a religious miracle, realised in the play through Inger’s revival, simply proved too much for several of his Danish contemporaries, both within the church as well as in culturally enlightened circles. This sort of theme appeared anachronistic to a society that believed itself to be completely secularised – much in the same way as Munk’s own uncompromising behaviour (which first led him to flirt with fascist ideology in the early thirties and later to fervently support the Danish resistance movement during the Second World War and the German occupation of Denmark) earned him an ambivalent epitaph in a national-historical context. Munk was executed by German soldiers in 1944 after having repeatedly defied a ban on preaching openly against the occupation and collaboration, and he immediately came to be seen as a martyr and as a symbol of the Danish resistance. In the 50s and 60s, however, this status became slightly more ambiguous, partly because of Munk’s aforementioned early fascination with fascist ideology and rejection of democratic ideals, partly because his religious aesthetic had trouble competing in a post-Beckett theatre.

The inclusion of *Ordet* in the *Culture Canon*, which is a widely debated and much criticised project initiated and published by the Danish Ministry of Culture in 2006 as part of an attempt to create an anthology of Danish culture, was therefore a surprise to some, as was indeed the choice of the play for one of the opening performances for the Danish Royal Theatre’s grand new playhouse in Copenhagen in 2008. This production by the Royal Danish Theatre and its subsequent critical reception may be said to epitomise the awkward relationship between the play and its Danish critics and audiences. The play was chosen as one of the opening productions on the premise of its being a Danish classic (exemplified by its inclusion in the *Canon*), but The Royal Theatre then proceeded to hire the Swedish playwright,
director and affirmed atheist Lars Norén, to direct the play, perhaps expecting him to modify the religious message in order to better suit the sensitive secular palate of the Danish audience. However, the critical reception of Norén’s production was mixed. His inevitable modification, or rather undermining, of Munk’s religious content certainly agreed with some reviewers, but offended others, not so much because it was anti-religious (very few Danes would openly admit to having anything as Medieval as uncompromising faith today), but because it was simply an unfulfilling performance, arguably even caricatured and overly intellectualised.

Norén’s production design was minimalist, but unmistakably Nordic, and the acting naturalistic; thus Norén, as was previously mentioned, made no attempt to transfer the production into unfamiliar cultural contexts. If anything a certain mock-national nostalgia could be seen in the production design, presumably inspired by the Danish film director Carl Th. Dreyer’s version of Munk’s play for the screen from 1955, of which Norén is said to be a great admirer. In fact, in an interview given shortly before the opening of the production, Norén expressed regret that he had to stage Munk’s text rather than T.H. Dreyer’s script.

However, what was unusual was Norén’s decision to stage the miracle of the last act in a purely symbolic as well as understated mode, rather than in the intended overwhelming naturalist mode implicit in Munk’s text. This ultimately resulted in an undermining of the play’s entire dramatic structure. After the revival of Inger, Norén simply let her walk dreamily off the stage, leaving the mourning men behind, an unmistakably symbolic gesture demonstrating that the miracle was to be perceived as nothing more than a dream or a metaphysical suggestion. This decision may indeed be seen as a modification and thereby a modern appropriation of Munk’s religious message, but this interpretation presents a problem in that the miracle of Munk’s text is not solely confined to the thematic structure of the play, it is pivotal in establishing a performative enunciation, without which the energy of the entire structure remains unresolved. The ritual of resurrection was re-enacted in the mise-en-scène, but immediately emptied of significance by denying Inger’s corporeal presence.

Norén’s interpretation of the text may have been postmodernist in its deferral of semantic conclusions and its insistence on a pervading relativist point of view. His ending is meant to be semantically open, which might make sense in a post-Beckett theatre, but, as opposed to Beckett, this relativist approach ultimately comes across as cowardly in the clash with Munk’s dialogue, because the dialogue itself carries an implicit response to relativism that forces the audience to face faith and doubt in equal measure. Norén may have attempted to relieve the audience of this task by presenting doubt as the only possibility, but without taking into account the fact that the text refuses to allow its audience a passive response.

Of course a myriad of complex implications exist in author, text and director relations as well as in the unsolved concepts of fidelity and faithful representation that might be taken into account in this page and stage clash. I will not explore those in detail here, but only point to Norén’s production as an illustrative example of a failure to revive or reaffirm the position of Ordet as a dramatic text by leaving out the one element that may have been approached from an essentialist perspective, namely the religious and ritualistic concept of the miracle, whilst still retaining the surrounding elements of the setting that only make sense within a Danish national-historical
context. Such an interpretation only offers a dead end, because it refuses to face the mythopoetic element of the text, preferring to ‘play it safe’ instead.

**Transculturalism, Myth and Ritual**

However, a way in which to bring about a *mise-en-scène* from a text like *Ordet*, which both allows the performative enunciation of the miracle to live and offers a nuanced vision of the religious content, might be sought in Brook’s transcultural aesthetic centred around myth and ritual. Brook’s approach to the myth as an open and dynamic structure may apply to Munk’s re-enactment of the Resurrection, when this re-enactment is recognised as a ritual rather than as a semantically closed statement. It is of fundamental significance to point out the fact that Munk’s text does not necessarily argue the miracle of the Resurrection as a physical possibility. However, it does claim that the yearning for that miracle is a natural part of the human condition and this yearning is then re-enacted as a theatrical ritual demanding that the audience re-examine their own reaction to it. The idea of the resurrection as a theatrically re-enacted ritual may be related to Brook’s idea of the ‘Holy Theatre’ and in particular to his idea of ‘The Happening’. Brook writes about the ‘Happening’:

> It can be anywhere, any time, of any duration: nothing is required, nothing is taboo. A happening may be spontaneous, it may be formal, it may be anarchistic, it can generate intoxicating energy. Behind the Happening is the shout ‘Wake up!’ [...] the theory of Happenings is that the spectator is jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him. 

First, it is interesting to note how Brook’s pseudo-religious rhetoric in this paragraph is centred on the theme of revival and how that may be applied to Munk’s idea of revival both thematically and dramatically. Secondly, Brook claims that the revival may take place any time and any place; in other words, the re-enacted ritual may be removed from its immediate context and be re-enacted elsewhere to the same powerful effect, if indeed it carries within it certain essential human traits.

In order for an idea like that of Brook’s ‘Happening’ to be successfully applied to the *mise-en-scène* of a text like Munk’s, it is perhaps not only possible to remove the text from its immediate national/historical/cultural context, but actually necessary to do so. At least, if its spectators are to experience the re-enactment of ritual as the performative shock it was originally intended to be, as well as forcing them into a subsequent dynamic reflection of questions of faith and doubt. The process of defamiliarisation offered by transcultural theatre might enable us to encounter Munk’s resurrection ritual in an unfamiliar context that makes us re-examine the ways in which this ritual is embedded in our cultural perception of ourselves and why. When encountering it in the familiar national/historical/cultural (and of course, Christian) context, we are likely to either take its semantic implications for granted or downright dismiss them as anachronistic. To repeat the earlier quotation of Maria Shevtsova: we might therefore need to look for a performance mode that ‘obliges performers and spectators alike to review routine assumptions about their own culture through its prism of cultures’.

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9 Brook *Empty Space* 61.

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At first glance *Ordet* may certainly be characterised by its national context, that is, its ‘Danishness’. This is evident in the aforementioned setting of the play among farmers and villagers in the West of Jutland as well as in its particular language, in which Munk uses colloquialisms and dialect to emphasise the setting’s contrast to the heightened metaphysical theme. The religious feud between the followers of Grundtvig and the followers of the more fundamentalist Christian segment ‘Indre Mission’, which makes up the outward structure of the play, is likewise only relevant within a Danish historical context. However, these elements have little relevance to a contemporary Danish audience and may ultimately appear just as ‘alien’ as the religious element, or even more so. But whereas no immediate solution can be found for the representation of these contextual elements, the essentialist concepts of faith and the ritual embodied in the miracle of reviving a dead character may easily be approached from outside and beyond a national context. By doing so, one might imagine a production that ultimately brings about a revival of Munk’s play, not via a relativist postmodern modification and appropriation, but via a transcultural encounter. In a production that fails to transport *Ordet* beyond its national context, the play could truly become a ‘dead’ text, irretrievably buried within the Danish canon.

**A Potential Revival of *Ordet***?

Thus we may attempt to re-read Munk’s miracle via Peter Brook’s essentialist aesthetic, which is a fundamental aspect of what has here been described and understood as transcultural theatre. I have argued that a production such as Lars Norén’s presents a ‘safe’, but ultimately deeply problematic reading of Munk’s text because it situates its mythopoetic content in a national historical context that has outgrown that content, or rather has become unable to understand and respond to it. Instead I have suggested that a production which would attempt to transport the way in which its religious and ritualistic elements operate both on thematic and dramatic levels outside its national context, by employing defamiliarising non-Danish (or even non-Western) performance modes or conceptual interpretations, might be appreciated both by international and Danish audiences and, most importantly, highlight the intended effect of the miracle. By comparing Norén’s *mise-en-scène* with imagined alternative practices founded on Brook’s principles, I have tried to open an entirely new set of questions and I want to emphasise the open manner of my enquiry, because this openness is vital to the engagement with transculturalism in theatrical practice. If we are to imagine a potential revival for Munk’s text, transcultural theatre, of the kind that understands the value of theatrical space as a space for the re-enactment of ritual, shock and reflection, may offer us valuable new ways of enquiring whether this play may claim its deserved status as a classic dramatic text and ultimately be brought back to life.
The Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges wrote of the Thousand and One Nights: ‘[I]t is not necessary to have read it, for it is part of our memory.’\(^1\) He was most certainly right: from Sir Richard Burton’s illustrated volumes for Victorian England to contemporary Disney films, the Nights has become a global myth – one might even say it is one of the most global of all texts. The earliest known manuscript of the Thousand and One Nights dates from ninth-century Persia, but versions of the tales have been found from various regions across the ancient Islamic Empire and as far away as China, revealing a process of transmission that was clearly transcultural.\(^2\)

Where an individual tale originated is not always possible to discern, and a game of chicken-and-egg has entertained scholars for generations. Much of the energy spent on investigating the manuscript history of the Nights, however, has been geared towards uncovering origins and purity, especially in regard to creating ‘definitive’ translations.

Two such attempts – one early modern, one postcolonial – by translators to create and promote their work as a faithful representation of an authentic and original Nights are of particular interest. Despite being rooted in two ostensibly opposing projects: orientalism and postcolonialism, the objectives and methods of the two translators are remarkably similar. In both cases the translators tried to erase, cover or ignore the actual history of the Nights: that it is an authorless text, the product not of one nation or people, but of widespread transculturation; it is a text which, because of its long history, is impossible to pin down. The first of these projects was undertaken by Antoine Galland, a Frenchman and orientalist who became the first to translate the stories of the Thousand and One Nights for Europe in the early 1700s. The second project was headed by Husain Haddawy and Muhsin Mahdi in the 1980s and 1990s in an attempt to de-colonise the Nights, to rid them of what they believed were their impure, corrupted parts, and in so doing to reclaim them for Arabs, and, more specifically, to further Arab nationalism.\(^3\)

The comparative analysis that I will pursue here of the methods and ideologies behind these two translations is useful in two ways: 1) it demonstrates the tension between nationalist and transcultural impulses and the continued importance that ideas of nationhood have in the way we seek to study and understand literature and 2)

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\(^3\) This charge has been made by several critics of the Mahdi/Haddawy edition, most seriously by H T Norris (Review of The Arabian Nights: Based on the Text Edited by Muhsin Mahdi by Husain Haddawy, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 55.2 (1992) 330-1), but it is also clear in the anti-Egypt statements made by Haddawy in the introduction to the English edition, as will be discussed later.
it shines a critical light on the great ongoing project of the Enlightenment, the premises of which played a central role in orientalism, that still underlie many postcolonial projects. Before beginning such an analysis, however, an overview of the transcultural manuscript tradition of the *Nights* is necessary for those who may be unacquainted with it.

**The Transcultural Tradition of the Thousand and One Nights**

Stories travelled, and did so with no regard for national boundaries. Choose any tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* and it is likely to be found elsewhere, often slipped into the canons of ‘national’ literature of any number of nations. Storytellers who heard a tale from a travelling merchant, for example, might retell the story as their own, sometimes with slight changes for the tastes of their particular audiences. ‘The Merchant and the Two Sharpers’, also called ‘The Treasure-finders who murder one another’, is found in a thirteenth-century version of the *Nights*, but it is also found in the fifth-century *Jataka* (a collection of folklore literature native to India) and is told as the ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’ in the late fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*. ‘The Tale of the Woman who Wanted to Deceive her Husband’ from the Sindbad cycle of tales (which itself has links to Homer’s *Odyssey* and Vishnu Sarma’s *Panchatantra*) is also found in the eleventh-century Sanskrit *Katha Sarit Sagara*, in the twelfth-century Latin *Disciplina clericalis*, the Middle English tale ‘Dame Sirith’ and in the fourteenth-century Italian *Decameron*.

The earliest written documentation for the existence of the *Nights* is a ninth-century fragment containing little more than a title (*Kitab hadith alf layla*, or *A Book of Tales from a Thousand Nights*) and the names of Shahrazad and Dinarzad. The tenth-century historian Ibn al-Nadim also writes of the existence of *Hazar Afsana*, or *One Thousand Tales* in his catalogue of books, but the manuscript to which he refers has never been found. He does note, however, that despite the book’s title, the work contains less than 200 stories. A discrepancy between ‘1000 Tales’ and ‘1000 Nights’ is also apparent, a subtle difference that caused problems for later European translators, and in particular for Antoine Galland, as will be discussed in the following. The title as we know it today, the *Thousand and One Nights*, first appeared in the record of a twelfth-century bookseller in Cairo. Despite variations in the title in its early history, the manuscripts agree in one respect: the frame-tale was not meant to contain an *actual* number of tales, but to represent the possibility of an *infinite* number of tales. Thus any number of tales could be added, amended or removed to suit the teller or his audience, facilitated by the ingenuity of the frame-tale story in which Shahrazad will die if the storytelling ends.

As a result, the recorded tales show a remarkable flexibility in what was understood or accepted to be the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and it was possible for a storyteller to include tales from different cultures and storytelling traditions at will. Because the material passed through all regions of the far-reaching Islamic Empire (and particularly in Persia and India), F. Rafail Farag remarks that ‘[a]

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juxtaposition of foreign elements imported from the East and elements of pure Arab origin is noticeable. Different versions bear the stamp of different cultures, including changes in plot, adaptations from polite to popular, a replacement of foreign place names with locally known names, an exchange of Christian feasts for general non-religious outings, and sometimes a removal of religious references altogether. Many of the tales are not of Islamic origin – they were translated into Arabic and Arabised as well as Islamised, set in Cairo or Baghdad. The Bulaq edition printed in Cairo in 1835 includes a page-long invocation to Allah that is absent from the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript. Thus the Nights clearly belongs to a world tradition, which is to say that the one-thousand-year history of the Nights reveals a continuous mingling of traditions, cultures, religions, histories, languages and politics that has, for the most part, remained fluid. Even when written down, the text was always open for revisions, exchanges and additions. Despite attempts to claim a definitive version of the Nights, no author, nor any pure origin can be attributed to them.

The history of the Nights is an example par excellence of the transnational, of the transcultural, a tradition which continued after Galland and up through the twentieth century. After the publication and fame of Galland’s error-laden and orientalist eighteenth-century translation of the Nights for European audiences, copyists in Egypt, Syria and even India scrambled to re-translate Galland’s edition back into Arabic to sell original hand-written manuscripts of the Nights to European collectors. In addition, Europeans began compiling their own books of Arabic stories, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s New Arabian Nights (1882) and Guillaume Spitta Bey’s Conte arabes modernes (1883). The latter contained Spitta Bey’s own invention, ‘The Captain’s Tale’, which, in an ironic twist, eventually found its way into Joseph Mardrus’s translation of the Thousand and One Nights in 1899.

Each version, each new story is a testament to the border-crossings and continual mediations referred to by Anne Holden Rønning (in this volume), of the transformations and transgressions theorized by Benita Parry. Thus, postcolonial criticisms of orientalism, while rightly placed, are also overly simplistic in regards to the Nights. Rather than being the product of an East/West power struggle, the stories of the Nights demonstrate a mongrel history, a history created not only by Europeans translators, but by each individual storyteller from around the globe who, for any number of reasons, chose to put his personal cultural stamp on the Nights. Robert Irwin, in his companion to the Arabian Nights, refers to the various and numerous

7 For examples of these types of alterations, see: G.J.H. van Gelder, ‘Slave-Girl Lost and Regained: Transformations of a Story,’ Marvels and Tales 18.2 (2004) 201-17.
9 An interesting debate by customer reviewers at Amazon.com of The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia (ed. by Ulrich Marzolph) testifies to the fact that the ongoing debate between Persian and Indian origins is not confined to the world of academia. 20 July 2010 http://www.amazon.com/revolution /R17E4TZ1D5SCEO/ref=cm_cr_pr_cmt?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1576072045&nodeID=&tag=&linkCode= #wasThisHelpful.
translations as ‘Beautiful Infidels’;\textsuperscript{11} the Nights is a text that came into being precisely because of the unfaithfulness of both the early storytellers and the later European translators, to any ‘original’.

**Pursuing Authenticity: The Early Modern and Postcolonial Projects of Translating the Nights**

The clear goal of Galland’s translation was to introduce the East to Europe. In his Avertissement (Foreword) for the book he writes,

> All the Orientals, Persians, Tartars, and Indians are characterized there and appear as they are, from the sovereigns down to persons of the humblest condition. Thus, without having to endure the hardship of meeting these people in their own land, the reader will enjoy right here the pleasure of seeing them act and hearing them speak.\textsuperscript{12}

Galland was an orientalist in every sense of the word, and had travelled extensively in the Arabic-speaking world, but he belonged to the earlier phase of orientalism entwined with German Romanticism. It is now well known that Galland invented or copied several hundred tales not previously considered to be a part of the tradition of the Nights. Curiously, many of these invented tales are those most famous to Western audiences: the Sindbad Tales, the Ali Baba stories and Aladdin and the Magic Lamp were all inserted by Galland.

On one of his travels in Turkey, Galland came across the Sinbad stories and was informed that they belonged to an even larger collection of tales in Syria. It should be pointed out that no manuscript containing both the Sindbad stories and the stories from the Nights prior to Galland’s translation has ever been found;\textsuperscript{13} thus, he either received incorrect information, or these stories formed part of an oral tradition. Any version of the Nights containing the Sindbad stories must therefore have been compiled post-1720s and based on Galland’s version.\textsuperscript{14}

Galland was, of course, eager to have all of the tales – the complete collection, as it were – and he requested that this manuscript be sent to him in France. He was nearly ready to publish the Sindbad tales as a separate collection when his Syrian manuscript arrived. The manuscript was bound in three thin volumes, but did not meet Galland’s expectations: it contained only 282 nights, and the Sindbad tales were not among them.


\textsuperscript{13} Mahdi 21.

\textsuperscript{14} Such is the case with one of the most famous translations made for English audiences, that of Sir Richard Burton, who based his translation on the Bulaq edition from Cairo, printed after Galland’s version.
This must have come as a deep disappointment for Galland, who, it would seem, could not conceive of a book called the *Thousand and One Nights* that did not actually contain 1001 nights. He wrote repeatedly to Syria asking for the remainder of the stories to be sent and in the meantime began work on translating those stories in his possession with a plan to insert the others when they arrived. He also decided against publishing the Sindbad tales as a separate collection. Galland never received a response from Syria, but this did not discourage him in his belief that the remainder of the stories existed, and he wrote to a friend: ‘A thousand and one Nights! And I have only finished seventy: this can give you an idea of the length of the entire work.’

At some point Galland must have realised that no more stories were coming and decided to publish the Syrian manuscript as a ‘complete’ collection by supplying the missing number of *Nights* himself. To achieve this Galland needed to insert some of the stories he had collected during his travels, and some which he most likely invented himself. (The seventh volume of Galland’s *Nights*, and most of the sixth, for example, contain stories not found in the manuscript Galland received from Syria.)

Remarkably, however, Galland makes every attempt to promote his book as a ‘complete collection’. In his statements in the Avertissement for the book and in his introductions to the separate volumes he clearly leads his audience to believe that he not only possesses a complete version containing 1001 nights, but that it is the work of a single author. For example, the Arabic original from which he translated the story only contains night breaks up to night 60, and thus, for nights 61-90 Galland inserted his own night breaks, but then discontinues them because he found ‘the difficulties so great’. To explain the irregularities in the manuscript, and to justify his decision not to standardise the night breaks further, he invents an author: ‘[N]ot all the Arabs approved of the form given to the stories by the Arab author ... a large number of them were annoyed by these repetitions.’ He then writes: ‘It is enough that the readers be informed of the intention of the Arab author who made the collection.’

The lengths that Galland went to in trying to prove his ruse and disguise his real sources raises a number of questions: Why was it not acceptable to Galland to simply publish the stories under a title such as ‘Tales Gathered on My Travels in the East’? Was the idea of a complete book with a single author required to sell the book to a European public? Would an incomplete set have made Galland less of an authority on the Orient, or was Galland trying to create a comprehensive picture of the Orient with a comprehensive set of its stories?

In attempting to answer these questions it might be useful to look at the corresponding rise of the modern nation-state with the rise of the novel, a study undertaken by Franco Moretti in his *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900*. According to Moretti, ‘[t]he novel functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state’, and, ‘readers needed a symbolic form capable of making sense of the nation-state’. The idea of the novel as a symbolic form by which readers could comprehend the

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16 Mahdi 29-30.
17 Galland *Les Mille* 2: 257; translation in Mahdi 30.
18 Galland *Les Mille* 2: 257; translation in Mahdi 30.
Orient is indeed reflected in Galland’s Avertissement for the Nights in which he informs his audience that they need not travel to the Orient to experience the Orient – they can simply read his book. Here we see clearly the great project of orientalism: writing the Orient was equivalent to creating the nation of the Orient (as a congruent space that could be understood through its literature).\(^{20}\) The project is underlined by Sir Richard Burton’s edition which included an appendix entitled ‘Explanatory Notes on the Manners and Customs of Moslem Men’. Burton’s Nights served not just as storytelling, but as an authoritative guide for understanding the peoples of the ‘nation’ of the Orient.

Galland’s Nights did not represent a collection of tales that had been understood for more than 800 years as incomplete, alterable, and that could be read in any order to suit the storyteller or the audience. Because Galland understood ‘complete manuscript’ to mean ‘complete book’, he took a literal interpretation of the number 1001 nights rather than the figurative, infinite number traditionally associate with it.\(^{21}\) He turned the tales into a totality – arguably, into a novel.

To publish the tales in a form acceptable to his European readers Galland first ‘completed’ the book by adding a conclusion (a European fairy-tale conclusion, no less, in which the king marries Shahrazad). Second, he professed to his public that the stories came from a single source, a single compiler, whom he even went so far as to call an author. Third, he unified discrepancies in style: older versions of the Nights reveal the traces of many cultures and many voices, demonstrating a remarkable variety in style in poetry, songs, and cultural references.\(^{22}\) Many of these poems and songs Galland simply chose to not include. Fourth, he tried to make the tales look more logical in order and structure by adding night breaks, and ensuring that the stories continued from one volume to the next; thus they had the appearance not of a random collection of tales, but of a unified whole, a story from beginning to middle to end. When there are lacunae in the manuscript, Galland invents endings and then goes back to alter earlier parts to match up with the endings. To give the impression of continuity between the volumes from which he translated, he was forced to insert stories and invent new night breaks.

What emerges from this overview of Galland’s translation is that Galland made a considerable effort not just to translate the Nights but to put them into modern European form: a coherent, unified, original, authoritative book which, one could argue, was a novel. Other translations of the Nights would follow – those great Victorian works by Edward Lane, John Payne, and Sir Richard Burton, to name a few – but it must be emphasized that each of these works entailed corrections, editing and the construction of a ‘collection’ that was based on the idea of the Thousand and One Nights as a complete book, as was first imagined by Galland.

Although Muhsin Mahdi’s endeavours in the 1980s could be categorised with other postcolonial attempts to undo the projects of orientalism by reclaiming the Nights for the East, Mahdi was, no less than Galland, also on a quest for a coherent, unified, original, and authoritative version of the Nights. He hoped to ‘pursue the

\(^{20}\) This view was of course, most famously projected by Edward Said in Orientalism (NY: Vintage, 1979, 1994), which includes strong criticism of the European infatuation with the Nights as The Orient.

\(^{21}\) See fn. 5.

\(^{22}\) Mahdi gives a full description of these and other changes by Galland.
history of the manuscript tradition of the Nights, the fate of the Arabic original in the hands of his [Galland’s] successors in Europe, Egypt and India’. In other words, Mahdi intended to debase all other manuscripts – and in fact excise the entire transcultural history of the Nights that was, for better or for worse, furthered by Galland – by unearthing what in his assessment was the earliest witness to the Nights, a manuscript he deemed to be not only authentic but uncorrupted.

Mahdi began his research by preparing an edition of the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript from which Galland translated his Nights. It is here that Mahdi, by his own admission, came across an uncanny amount of luck: ‘by an act of fate’ he found that the manuscript copied by Galland and now in his possession was in fact the earliest witness for the archetype.

The archetype and original of the stories in this manuscript can be situated at the mid-point between the ninth century when Arab authors first report on the Nights and the nineteenth century when all the four first editions of the Arabic Nights were produced ... Galland’s manuscript includes what all knowledgeable students of the Nights have considered the original core of the work as we know it today, stories that impress even the casual reader as having been strung together with some care rather than merely stacked the one next to the other as was much of the contents of the nineteenth-century editions. Most of the stories strike one as the work of an author who is trying to elaborate variations on a common theme and to develop new structures. And the discourse impresses a student of the history of Arabic language as having been written, or rewritten, in a style that is on the whole uniform, using a vocabulary … that pertains to a particular time and particular region of the Arab world.

The italicised words in the quote above demonstrate a remarkable similarity in the beliefs of Galland and Mahdi regarding authorship and authenticity, uniformity and coherence – beliefs steeped in Enlightenment discourse and modernist epistemology. Galland and Mahdi were both guilty of distorting the Nights for their own purposes, and ultimately of shunning the transcultural, hybrid, mongrel, global traditions that produced what we now know today as the Nights.

The fault cannot be said to rest entirely on Mahdi, however. Husain Haddawy’s introduction to his English translation of the Syrian manuscript Mahdi edited overflows with praise for the Syrian version above all others, while belittling the Egyptian branch in particular. Haddawy writes: ‘If the Syrian branch shows a fortunately stunted growth that helped preserve the original, the Egyptian branch shows a proliferation that produced an abundance of poisonous fruits that proved almost fatal to the original’. Comments like this provoked reviewer H.T. Norris to...

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23 Mahdi vii.
24 Mahdi 8.
25 Mahdi 8-9; italics added for emphasis.
proclaim Haddawy’s introduction as ‘a sort of vendetta’, and he points to Haddawy’s ‘crypto-Ba’athist Arab nationalism’ revealed in statements like the following:

What emerged, of course, was a large, heterogeneous, indiscriminate collection of stories by different hands and from different sources, representing different layers of culture, literary conventions and styles tinged with the Ottoman cast of the time, as work very different from the fundamentally homogeneous original, which was the clear expression of the life, culture, and literary style of a single historical moment, namely, the Mamluk period.

Whether or not Haddawy should be accused of promoting Arab nationalism in his introduction is debatable, but the above quotation certainly shows a view of both culture and nationhood that is distinctly Enlightenmentist in tone, and conspicuously antagonistic towards the transcultural and transnational. Heterogeneity, differing layers of culture and styles mixed with those of other ethnicities does not result in beauty, as Robert Irwin saw it, but in ‘poisonous fruits’.

In short, the sins of stripping the Nights of its true origins, for which Mahdi accuses Galland in his study of the translator, are committed by Mahdi and Haddawy as well, as will be demonstrated in the following. Moreover, and quite incredibly, the very worst cases of injustice to the Nights in Galland’s translation are the very acts Haddawy mentions as the strengths in Mahdi’s edition. For example, Mahdi writes of Galland:

Much of what is usually found to be departures from his manuscript consists of editorial and other liberties he felt free to take in order to complete or embellish the Nuits ... He felt free to abridge, omit, and change with impunity; remove repetitions at will; amplify the text or add explanations where he felt readers could benefit; and link the elements of the story and make it look more logical.

Yet, according to Haddawy, when ‘Mahdi fills lacunae, emends corruptions, and elucidates obscurities ... what emerges is a coherent and precise work of art.’ In fact, Haddawy goes so far as to claim that in Mahdi’s edition a long-standing grievance has been finally redressed, and redressed with a sense of poetic justice, not only because this edition redeems all others from a

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28 Norris 330.
29 Haddawy xiii.
30 Mahdi 34.
31 Haddawy xv.
general curse, but also because it is the work of a man who is at once the product of East and West.\textsuperscript{32}

The conferring of legitimacy visible in this quotation on both Mahdi and his edition of the \textit{Nights} highlights key assumptions at work in the project of Mahdi and Haddawy. In their view, a definitive version of the \textit{Nights} can only be found by someone who has the \textit{authority} to make such a claim, an authority now bestowed on those with an insider’s knowledge of both hemispheres, as well as those with a proper education in postcolonial theory. Mahdi and Haddawy seem not to recognise, however, that the same ideas about authority, grounded in Enlightenment thinking, allowed Galland to produce his translation. Galland had, after all, also claimed a knowledge of both hemispheres, having lived in and travelled throughout the ‘Orient’ over a period of nine years and having learned the language and literature of Turks, Persians and Arabs.

Referring to Galland’s many omissions and alterations, Mahdi writes, ‘It is curious … that [Galland] did not find it useful to take the reader into his confidence and indicate how he arrived at the composition of his \textit{Nuits}.’\textsuperscript{33} But reviewer Michael Beard exposes the similarly furtive actions of Mahdi:

Mahdi’s text gives us, for instance, a narrative where the third old man’s story in ‘The Merchant and the Demon’ doesn’t appear (we simply learn that ‘the third old man told the demon a story that was even stranger and more amazing than the first two’ (Haddawy, 29). Surely this is a logical lacuna that begs to be filled somehow – if only by a footnote informing us that other manuscripts add a story here.\textsuperscript{34}

The comparisons between the early modern project of Galland and the postmodern / postcolonial enterprise of Mahdi are numerous, and I will mention only one more here. At the beginning of his research Mahdi was fascinated by the efforts involved in the Western imagining of the book of the \textit{Thousand and One Nights} and its origins:

How did they come to think that a collection of stories presumably originating in ancient India could survive transmission from one How did it come about that they saw a book that can now be shown to have been compiled, one could almost say fabricated, during the eighteenth century in Paris and Cairo as having been ‘originally’ produced in ancient India or ancient Iran? … How is it that from disparate motifs of uncertain authorship and times they reached conclusions about the origin of a collection of stories not brought under one cover until recent times? culture to another, from one language to another, and from one storyteller to another and yet remain identifiable in eighteenth-century Paris or Cairo as belonging to a particular ancient nation, when

\textsuperscript{32} Haddawy xv.
\textsuperscript{33} Mahdi 35.
\textsuperscript{34} Michael Beard, review of \textit{The Arabian Nights: Based on the Text of the Fourteenth-Century Syrian Manuscript} by Muhsin Mahdi, by Husain Haddawy, \textit{Journal of the American Oriental Society} 112.1 (1992) 144.
common sense should have told them that in such cases the transformation will be so thorough that no original, if such an original ever existed will be recognizable?\textsuperscript{35}

I would like to put the same question to Professor Mahdi: How is it that you, ‘After years of sifting, analysing, and collating virtually all available texts [have] published the definitive edition of the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript …’\textsuperscript{36} declaring it to be ‘of all existing manuscripts the oldest and closet to the original’\textsuperscript{37} version of the Nights that we can ever hope to have?

**Conclusion**

Mahdi and Haddawy seem unaware that their project of stripping a transcultural text like the Nights back to its ‘uncorrupted’ origins left readers with a book that was no longer the Nights. In a slightly more humble introduction to The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories, Haddawy opines:

> Because of the authenticity, or rather the relative purity, of the stories in the Syrian manuscript version … I limited my first-volume translation to this text. But that left out an entire tradition, both written and oral, spanning the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, and comprising hundreds of stories; I was reminded of this omission by both scholars and general readers, particularly those who missed their favorites … [but] to turn from the Syrian version, which is the closest to what one might call the ‘original’ version of the written tradition … seemed inconsistent and somewhat hard to do. Yet, somehow, the gap had to be filled … Therefore I decided to compromise, by selecting among the stories those which, by representing the essential nature of the Nights, have captured the popular imagination.\textsuperscript{38}

The Arabian Nights II takes its place with the centuries-long tradition of hundreds of other translations, editions and redactions in which the selection of the stories is made according to the particular tastes of the audience. Whether invented by Galland or stemming from oral sources from the tenth century, ‘infidel’ stories such as Sindbad and Ali Baba are now widely considered as synonymous with the Nights, and so Haddawy felt a need to re-insert them into the collection. This, of course, testifies to the fact that despite Mahdi and Haddawy’s laborious attempt to produce an ‘original’ version, the same questions that have always plagued the Nights remain: ‘Which Nights? Whose Nights?’ The answers leading to origins, purity and authority have been consistently problematic, perhaps because the easiest answer – that the Nights has no origin and is not pure – is too unsettling.

The literature of a nation, from Robinson Crusoe to Midnight’s Children, has long been viewed as a guidebook for real information about that nation’s history,

\textsuperscript{35} Mahdi 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{36} Haddawy xv.
\textsuperscript{37} Haddawy xii.
people, and culture. Mahdi and Haddawy wanted to believe in the existence of a ‘fundamentally homogenous original, which was the clear expression of the life, culture, and literary style of a single historical moment’\textsuperscript{39} no less than Galland wanted to believe in the existence of a manuscript containing \textit{all} the stories of the East, and no less than Burton believed he could tell Victorian Britain about the customs and manners of the Oriental through a fictional portrayal of him in the \textit{Nights}. 

According to Franco Moretti, a nation is ‘the sum of all its possible stories,’\textsuperscript{40} but in recent years nationhood itself has been placed into question and the terms transnational and transcultural are becoming ubiquitous. An awareness of the processes of transculturation should dismantle the links between nation, literature and identity, rendering a search for origins and authors trivial and requiring us to move beyond an out-dated Enlightenment epistemology in our study of literary traditions and manuscript histories.

\textsuperscript{39} Haddawy \textit{Arabian Nights} xiii.
\textsuperscript{40} Moretti 20.
As the title suggests, this article bears some relationship to Henri Lefebvre’s analysis on the ‘production of space’ even if the context is very different. My topic is the representation of social and interior space – interior in the sense of what we might call psychological depth – in some of the early fiction of one of Zimbabwe’s great writers, Charles Mungoshi. I explore how his literary representations of space (what Lefebvre calls ‘representational space’) feed off and into simultaneous discourses on space (‘represented space’) – in the present case the socio-political discourse of modernity.¹

The fiction I consider in this article was written at different times before independence in a climate of intensifying apartheid politics and at the height of political repression and war. These circumstances inevitably gave issues of literary representation a high political charge. In Mungoshi’s case, the question of representation of space further takes the form of an inquiry into literary form, or more precisely into the effects of the use of ostensibly ‘imported’ literary forms. One of the striking features of Mungoshi’s fiction is his use of recognisably modernist techniques, and the effects of this ‘translation’ of modernism into a black Zimbabwean situation is the central concern of my article.

In what follows, I will demonstrate first, that his stories present social landscapes where zones of ostensible modernity and tradition are at one and the same time strictly separated and overlapping; and second, that they portray black subjectivity as deeply complex and even obscure unto themselves as to their motives, drives, desires and feelings. These may seem banal enough conclusions on their own but they are less so when placed in their proper context. My argument is that Mungoshi’s representations both incorporate and react against then-current powerful discourses on modernity and that the employment of modernist literary techniques was a central part of this.

First, however, I want to make a remark on theoretical terminology and method. In his Rewriting Modernity, David Atwell uses Ortiz’s term ‘transculturation’ to frame his discussion of instances of cultural production in South African history in terms of a negotiation of – and often a struggle for – modernity. In the South African setting, from the early settler days to the development of full-blown apartheid, he argues, modernity (that ‘notoriously baggy’² concept) presented itself as a package of values, phenomena and practices that were seen as having European origin and which were reserved for South Africa’s white population. For the Black South African writers Atwell discusses, the division created the unsettling experience of being excluded from an a priori inclusion in modernity to which there was at the same time no alternative. ‘There [was] no escape clause’, Atwell writes, ‘from the encounter with modernity, unless one [was] to accept isolation or eccentricity’.³ Black South African writers in response sought to appropriate the literary and cultural forms that were associated with it and use them to assert their own modernity. ‘Transculturation’

³ Atwell 4.
in this context names the authors’ practices of turning foreign literary forms into vehicles capable of expressing black South African concerns and identities in a process that involves ‘destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms’. ⁴

The value of the concept ‘transculturation’ for Atwell’s analyses is clear and given that both the topic and the claim of this article are quite close to some of his, it would seem suitable to adopt his terminology. Two theoretical reasons make me hesitate, however. First, it is not always clear to what extent ‘destruction’ or ‘entirely new terms’ figure in his analyses. Atwell’s discussion of the Soweto poets’ appropriation of lyric poetry (and their subsequent turn to epic as a more socially effective genre) is a case in point. Atwell demonstrates how the poets in times of increasingly aggressive apartheid co-opted a genre and gave it a new significance. ‘The answer to the question of why the tradition was useful’, Atwell writes, is surely that the performance of the ‘overheard utterance’ was a defence against the programme of radical humanization that had been under way in apartheid for a generation or more. The lyric poem, in other words, conveyed a distillation of agency to the distinctive human subject, and the instillation of a contemplative (and sometimes angry) voice – these were powerful, appealing weapons in the prevailing climate. ⁵

It can be noted that Atwell’s conclusion does not mention what is ‘destroyed’ in the process of transculturation, nor what the ‘entirely new terms’ entail. Rather, the process seems to demonstrate the taking over and articulating of a promise that the literary genre arguably embodies (of having a voice, being a human agent) but that the overall prevailing ideology of apartheid – that perhaps influences the distribution of reading material and the interpretation of literature directly or indirectly or both – forbids black subjects. Charles Mungoshi’s appropriation of literary modernism is equally difficult to discuss in terms of destruction and reconstruction. For these reasons, although my reading of Mungoshi’s literary space will follow Atwell quite closely in some respects, and despite his claim that ‘translation’ is a weaker concept, I will discuss it as a matter of ‘translating modernity’. ⁶

The choice of this ‘weaker’ term, as Atwell labels it, is not entirely defensive. Ato Quayson has made ‘translation’ the key term in his theoretical elaboration of the transfer of languages (words and phrases) and literary-cultural features (tropes and genres) from one cultural context to another and from one discursive domain to another. Importantly, in his view, the languages or domains in question need in no way be equal for translation to happen; in fact, as the piece of biography Quayson provides as background for the development of his concept reveals, they seldom are: everyday life in the African colony, he notes, was often conducted in and through several different indigenous languages, but

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⁴ Atwell 18.
⁵ Atwell 149.
⁶ Atwell 18.
the language of education was always European, in my case English. This meant that we always had to go through a process of translating the language of the commonplace into the language of reason and vice versa.\footnote{Ato Quayson, \textit{Calibrations: Reading for the Social} (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003) xii.}

(It may be noted in passing that this everyday experience of continuous translation is also Mungoshi’s. Like Quayson, he was educated in both vernacular and colonial languages – Shona and English – and is immersed in different cultural traditions, he writes in both English and Shona, and is used to ‘translating’, in Quayson’s wider sense, the requirements and demands of different languages and cultures. As he has said in an interview, writing in both languages produces different results: ‘The Shona experience would be slightly different from what I would write in English’.\footnote{Carol Sicherman, “‘We Have Still to Shed a Few of Lucifer’s Feathers … ’ Interview with Charles Mungoshi”, ed. Raoul Granqvist, \textit{Canonization and Teaching of African Literatures} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990) 125.} If it may be objected that little is gained by ridding oneself of a difficult task to embrace a term that appears close to vacuous, then so be it; the motivation is that it makes for a better match between theory and case study.

A second reason for employing Quayson’s theoretical framework, is that it has built into it, as it were, an awareness of the significance of discursive thresholds in the material it investigates, and self-reflexive knowledge of its own analytical delimitations. By bringing attention to the ‘translation’ between different discursive domains, Quayson manages to focus and jointly discuss the complex relations between different fields of activity and meaning such as ‘literature’, ‘political discourse’, ‘culture’, and ‘society’ without eliding their differences and collapsing one into the other. His discussion of the ‘threshold’ figure of the ‘culture hero’, in urban myth, in fiction, and political rhetoric bears this out in brilliant detail.\footnote{Quayson 30-55.} Such analysis serves both as a healthy qualification and a reminder for criticism that makes claims for the social value of literature. It alsoforegrounds its own speculative dimension. The social component Quayson isolates or the relationship he uncovers is the result of extrapolation and analytical abstraction. His is a reading \textit{for} the social, rather than either \textit{through} it or \textit{of} it.\footnote{Quayson xv.}

For the present article, Quayson’s ambition can only be taken as a call to further declaration of scope and expression of modesty. I will make a claim for the cultural and social value of Mungoshi’s writing as \textit{potential}; I will not express views on what role his fiction has played. Mine is a reading \textit{for} the social dimension of his fiction, not an empirical study of its social function. In what follows, I will look at how Mungoshi, under harsh circumstances, channels and modifies features of recognisably European modernism into Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) fiction in a way that could be called social, if not properly political, writing. Using a few short stories from the collection \textit{Setting Sun and the Rolling World} as examples, I will demonstrate that Mungoshi ‘translates’ modernist techniques into a literary aesthetic that allows him to go beyond reductive and prevailing discursive divisions of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ space, and to present black Zimbabwean literary characters as opaque,
psychologically deep, and, by implication, not easily mappable for a colonial administration that had every intention to survey its subjects and exclude them from modernity.

The arrangement and control (including the symbolic control) of different spaces were key concerns in the Rhodesian colonial state from its beginning. Scholars like Terence Ranger and Jocelyn Alexander have shown that the settler state developed out of efforts to consolidate, regulate and administer the land stolen from the native Africans.\footnote{Terence Ranger, \textit{Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7: A Study in African Resistance} (London: Heinemann, 1967).} Once a state, Rhodesia developed and legally enshrined racial segregation and in this way created what Mahmood Mamdani has called a ‘bifurcated state’.\footnote{Mahmood Mamdani, \textit{Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism} (Princeton UP, 1996). Cf also Lawrence Vambe, \textit{From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe} (London: Heinemann, 1976) 50-60.} The result of the laws were that Africans were forced to move to reserves, that vast spaces were allocated to white farms, and that the emerging urban space was marked as white.\footnote{Jocelyn Alexander, \textit{The Unsettled Land: State-Making and the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe 1893-2003} (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Elizabeth Schmidt, \textit{Peasants, Traders, Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1930} (London: Heinemann, 1992) 78-85.} The black population was seen as possible visitors to the city, but not full-blown city-dwellers.\footnote{Alexander 22; Vambe 152.}

The material ordering of space along race lines was accompanied by a cultural coding of space in a register of modernity. ‘Settler discourse’ as Anthony Chennells has called it, both justified and reinforced the categorisation of Rhodesians by associating cities with white, ‘modern’, architecture, administration, and lifestyle, and the village with black, ‘traditional’ belief, customs, and spirituality. Reality, not surprisingly, was more complex and the ideology on modernity was persistently proven wrong by the actual doings of people. Cities relied heavily on black servants and workers, and through the colonial period, as Theresa Barnes and Elizabeth Schmidt have shown, there were steady flows of black Rhodesians journeying between city and village. These commuting men and women put the spaces of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ into contact, established specific forms of modern life in the city and altered the ‘traditional’ ways of the village. The urban mapoto relationships, which ranged from romantic love relations to unveiled prostitution, and the commercialisation of bride-prices, are only two examples of changes this migration brought about.\footnote{Teresa A. Barnes, \textit{‘We Women Worked So Hard’: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956} (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Elizabeth Schmidt, \textit{Peasants, Traders, Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1930} (London: Heinemann, 1992) 78-85.} The state was no doubt aware of the urban dependence on black workers but did its best to uphold the distinction, for instance by refusing to equip townships with amenities such as electricity, sanitation, recreation halls, etc, that belonged to a properly ‘modern’ way of life.\footnote{Vambe 152.} ‘Settler discourse’, Chennells remarks, registered this de facto presence of black people in the cities through paradox: while the idea of modernity presumed that everybody could become modern – at least in theory – black Rhodesians who entered urban space were figured not as participants in modernity but as victims of deeply foreign civilisation processes that
threw them into a ‘limbo of false appearances, immorality, debauchery and brutality’.17

The stratification of physical and social space went hand in hand with more disciplinary forms of government. The conflation of ruling and civilising that Achille Mbembe has singled out as a typical feature of colonial rule18 was a fact also in Rhodesia, and the state adamantly surveyed the cultural education of its black subjects. The school was the primary arena for such efforts and while the majority of black students were not allowed to reach the upper levels of education, certain individuals did. At these levels, literary and cultural tuition played significant parts. Mungoshi has recalled how he was taught in English – the language of ‘reason’ – from secondary school on and how his interest in European literature was formed during his school days.19

An equally important but more ambiguous role was played by the Literature Bureau, a government body set up in 1953 under the Ministry of Education to address the fact that black Rhodesia was becoming a culture of ‘literacy without literature’.20 The Bureau’s task was to foster reading habits and promote and regulate the publication of black Rhodesian writing and it did this by organising competitions, handing out prizes, publishing dictionaries, and by gradually taking on the role of a literary agency for literature in Shona and Ndebele.21 It also ensured that black Rhodesian fiction kept to the acceptable topics and was written in an indigenous language. Politics and religion were not, nor was English an acceptable language for fiction (Mungoshi had his Anglophone fiction published by British and German publishing houses).22

Mungoshi emerged on the writing scene against this general backdrop and in a period of intensifying political struggle against the Rhodesian state, with heightening political segregation and strict surveillance and control of all black literary expression. Political and social segregation took two major forms: the first involved the shaping of geographical and social space according to current ideologies, the second the discourses and ideologies themselves. For authors like Mungoshi, being able to work in the country and be published (as he was, both in and outside the country), meant being pragmatic: adapting to conditions of strict censorship while at the same time trying to stay true to literary visions (even if this did not safeguard the writer: Mungoshi’s Coming of the Dry Season was banned in 1974).23 It was also a period of inward-looking and soul-searching literature, according to Flora Veit-Wild, who has called Mungoshi’s generation the ‘lost’ generation of Zimbabwean literature, remarkable for thematising the cultural alienation and crises of authority that ensued

19 Sicherman 112.
21 Veit-Wild 72-3.
22 Veit-Wild 72; Sicherman 113.
23 Veit-Wild 220.
from the encounter between so-called traditional social forms and colonial modernity.  

In Mungoshi’s early stories, the crises are intimately related to the arrangement and coding of social and mental space, and terms inherited from ‘settler discourse’ register on modernity play a significant part. In ‘The Brother’, a boy about to begin school travels to the city to visit an older brother who is supposed to be his guardian. Excited, and bringing with him letters from their father and his brother’s wife, the boy boards the bus. The meeting turns out to be a disaster; the brother has turned into an alcoholic adulterer who brings home an under-aged girl and coerces her into having sex. The decadence of the older brother’s urban lifestyle contrasts sharply with the moral life of the village, and from the first glimpse of the brother’s dwelling, the difference is brought home:

They sat on the sofas in the living-room. There were some magazine pictures of naked women hung on the walls. For some reason, Tendai had expected to see some pictures of his brother’s recent wedding. There were just those naked women, a big portrait of his brother in dark glasses, like a black pop star, and some out-of-date calendars displaying more naked women.

In the story ‘Coming of the Dry Season’, the difference between rural life and urban decadence is equally stark. The protagonist is a young city-dweller who has promised his mother to return to her village once his salary has been paid. But when the money comes, he squanders it in an extended drinking bout, buys a girl for the night (at least that is what he thinks) and forgets his mother until he is too broke to travel to her village. After the weekend, he receives a letter that she is dead.

This coding of village and city in terms of a morality so consistent with ‘settler discourse’, is partly offset, however, by a more complex rendering of space in which locations are related to, or even folded into, one another. When he can no longer stand his brother’s behaviour, the young protagonist in ‘The Brother’ leaves his house, goes to a nearby church, and finds behind it a few trees under which he sleeps contentedly. In ‘Coming of the Dry Season’ the guilt-ridden protagonist reflects on his mother’s death and recalls how intensely he hated her requests for money and favours. In the social geography Mungoshi’s stories present, pockets of ‘traditional’ space and its accompanying moral behaviour may be found in the city, and the codes of village life have already been transformed under the impact of urban modernity, even to the extent that it estranges its members. Instead of repeating the clear-cut demarcations of ‘settler discourse’, Mungoshi’s fiction shows the transformation of social space to be complex, and only partially tied to geography.

Mungoshi’s fiction, then, both registers and transforms the codes connected with the geographical and social production of Rhodesian space. He inherits elements of a white discourse on modernity according to which black people are not true urbanites but fall into ruin in the city, and in this way sides with a number of black (and white) authors who, in Rino Zhuwarara’s words, made the ‘wickedness’ of the city a ‘favourite theme’ during the early decades of Zimbabwean (Rhodesian)

24 Veit-Wild 154.
26 Mungoshi 59.
But he also refutes the binarism of this discourse – not by abandoning its structuralising terms, but by complicating them, by showing that city and village exist in relation without distinct boundaries.

If Mungoshi’s fiction both relies on and intervenes into Rhodesian discourses on social space in the way it represents city, village, and the relation between them, it also produces its own literary-aesthetic space with important social implications. Through literary form, and in particular through the use of narrative voice, Mungoshi’s fiction projects for his characters an inner space that is deep and not fully explainable.

Formally and stylistically, Mungoshi’s fiction blends features of Shona cultural signification with recognisably modernist elements. The inclusion of animals in the stories, many of which have symbolic meanings – a symbolism which is sometimes explained (revealing the international character of the implied audience), sometimes presumed, and whose conventional meanings are quite often, one would guess, manipulated by the story – is an example of the former. Another is the use of present tense, which, Mungoshi has remarked, is occasionally the result of ‘translating from a Shona thought to English’. Mungoshi’s modernism, on the other hand, can be seen in features like the fragmented narrative form and the use of free indirect discourse – which mark both his English and his Shona fiction. It is the latter in particular that offers a flexible medium for projecting a sense of psychological depth.

The crises of authority in Mungoshi’s stories not only concern already powerful figures such as the father, the mother, the grandfather, or the brother; just as often they involve the protagonist who falls into self-doubt. In many cases, the crises are brought about by sudden shifting moods and impressions with no simple external or internal cause. In ‘White Stones and Red Earth’, for instance, the protagonist travels home on the bus from school to his village to attend the funeral of his brother. He is filled with unease, and he is startled out of his half-slabber by a comment on birds that circle in the sky some distance ahead:

As the bus got nearer the blob became a cluster, then a slow-moving circle of birds. ‘Vultures’.

The voice startled Bishi. And before he could determine who of the old people in the front of him had uttered it another one said: ‘Carrion’. And these two sounds seemed to bewitch the bus which became even quieter.

Carrion.

Of course he knew all about vultures …

The passage, it could be noted, first dramatises the unsettling zooming-in – from blob to cluster to bird – that it presents. Next, the naming of the vultures (which may or may not carry specific Shona or Zimbabwean symbolic meanings) creates an atmosphere that overtakes the bus. Finally, the sensation of unease is explicitly tied to

28 Sicherman 121.
30 Mungoshi 38.
a half-formulated thought. As in a passage by, say, Joyce – who Mungoshi has explained he was influenced by – or Lawrence, sense impression, language, emotion, and thought are connected in ways that are associative and obscure rather than linear and transparent. This kind of stylistic performance, of connection across sense and thought, creates psychological depth in the character. It points to but does not fully illuminate the circuitous processes through which human beings function.

In ‘The Hero’, to take another example, Julius, a young student, is expelled from school after giving what he thinks of as a ‘daring’ speech about the food served there. He returns to class to say goodbye to his friends and feels like the hero of the story’s title when they gather around him. His secret love, Dora, is misty-eyed. Being a protégé of the principal, the protagonist is also convinced that he has the tacit support of the ‘Old Man’ and is only expelled to gratify the headmaster. In this way, he construes the act as proof of his capacity and courage rather than his disobedience. When he stands on the road outside the school compound his mood changes, however:

Later, he was standing on a little rise of the very long road to his home. He held his untidy little bundle of clothes in his right hand and with the left he shaded his eyes as he looked along that road. He felt as bad as when he had missed a ball on the football field. What he had done he felt, had been very childish. It was not as big as he had thought. He had achieved nothing. He saw Dora’s look as he left the classroom – he had lost her too. Now somebody else was going to take her. She would not care about him now. He felt something catch in his throat.

Julius sees the futility of what he has done, and is suddenly certain that Dora’s tears have been tears of pity. In this scene too, there is nothing palpable that effects the change. It is an almost atmospheric transformation: an act of seeing, of, possibly, reflecting on the long way home, on the distance between home and school, and the realisation of the effort it has taken his family and him to get him there. The text does not say, and speculations are in fact the effects of the textual form that simulates psychological depth in a character; what is depicted is Julius looking along the long road.

In his discussion of the ‘colonial aesthetic’ of European modernism, Simon Gikandi argues that the modernist reinvention of the arts not only reflected the technological and socio-economic transformations under way in Europe but also registered a failing belief in the imperial world that had backed up relatively stable notions of self, of historical progress, and of a world which was possible to grasp cognitively. Africa, both in the forms of reified images of Africa and as a source of alternative artistic techniques, became one of the means through which modernist authors and artists could both chart these failures and renew their aesthetic languages – and even seek aesthetic visions of wholeness. In African colonial states like South Africa and Rhodesia the situation was in many cases the reverse, but it was also
similar in some ways. Modernity presented itself as a multi-faceted ideological coding of social space that combined ‘modern’ with ‘white’ or ‘European’ and set them off against ‘traditional’, and ‘black’ or ‘African’. Black South African authors and artists, as Atwell’s examination shows, rendered their modernity legible – indeed used artistry to make claims as to being modern – through the selective adoption of artistic and literary techniques of European origin and merged them with local or indigenous ones – some of which were, then, previous loans from European artists. The appropriation (Atwell’s ‘transculturation’) was sometimes marked by a certain time lag: for South African poets in the 1970s, the lyric poem grounded in a Romantic tradition became a highly relevant vehicle for expressing a kind of modern subjectivity that went against the apartheid regime’s efforts to dehumanise black subjects. In the case of Charles Mungoshi, writing in 1970s Rhodesia in a political and cultural climate similar to that of South Africa, a modernist narrative technique was the appropriate means of registering and answering a crisis of social order and self. By using modernism’s favourite themes, Mungoshi could capture the experiences of individual failure, crumbling authorities and the self-doubt of the modern colonial subject. And adapting modernist formal techniques allowed him to present characters with unquestionably modern psyches – characters whose innermost thoughts and feelings are complex, opaque and connected in unpredictable ways. Modernism, in short, offered to Mungoshi when it was translated onto Zimbabwean soil a notion of individuality where inner space (one could perhaps say an imaginary space) was not completely saturated by discursive elements or simple binaries (‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’) from the colonial regime. For the process of appropriation at stake here, as I suggested above, ‘translation’ is a better term than ‘transculturation’. Mungoshi was (and is) a writer used to translating his thoughts and texts in the ordinary sense of moving them from Shona into English and vice versa. He is also used to translating in Quayson’s wider and more social sense of navigating between idioms, registers, literary devices, and culturally embedded notions with very different cultural status and power. In contrast to Atwell, I do not see this navigation and the cultural transfer this involves in terms of ‘destruction’ and ‘reconstruction on entirely new terms’; for me – and I suggest, for Mungoshi – the operative mode is rather one of transformation. Despite these differences, my assessment on the process as a whole is close to Atwell’s. Like him I hold that the appropriation is not a ‘conservative’ taking over of a given technique but an active adoption of it in order to give shape to new experiences and desires in the form of literature.
Writing Refugee in the Era of Displacement: Reflections on Poetry
Kamal Sbiri

Introduction
The beginning of the twenty-first century will be remembered by mass refugees and forced migrants. Even though the category of refugee writing has been politically defined, it has been overlooked in the present post-colonial debate.\textsuperscript{1} One of the main factors supporting this exclusion in literary criticism can be understood by Said’s statement that refugees have no definite identity and, using his words, are “without a tellable history”.\textsuperscript{2} In this paper, I will show that the term displacement can function to consider refugees’ writing as a device for articulating their subjectivity. An emphasis on estrangement in refugee writing outside the stream of external representation is needed, which will help deconstruct the discourse that sees refugees as either victims or rootless identities. The idea stemming from this belief urges us to deterritorialise the corpus within which refugees are narrated so as to include them in the post-colonial debate. The main issues this article seeks to address are: 1) the effects of dislocation and nostalgia on refugee writing, and 2) the ways liminality becomes a permanent feature in reconstructing refugee identity. These issues will be addressed by applying Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of deterritorialisation as a literary approach to the selected poems by refugees that problematise the notions of home and belonging.

The sources discussed in this paper have been mainly collected from the Exiled Writers’ Ink! website with emphasis placed on selected poems by refugees. The criteria for selecting the poems are based mainly on the effect of place on the construction of refugee identity and the re-constitution of their writing. In other words, the effects of the presence of the notion of homeland on refugee identity is paramount in the selected poems, especially in noting that the refugee identity is in a state of \textit{becoming}. It is in constant flux and changing in a dialogic relationship with the points of their transit/ion. As a result, home and belonging become problematic constructs in refugee poetry and therefore constitute important features in the construction of refugee identities. It is my intention in this paper to show that through literary criticism, such studies as this will also explore the forms of identity construction and will reveal the complexities surrounding the (re-)construction of the notion of ‘home’ and identity in an era of transculturation.

(Dis-)placing Refugees
Throughout the colonial period, the notion of travel tracks a movement from Europe to Africa and Asia. The movement was claimed to be free from international

\textsuperscript{1} Some works have tried to contribute to such a debate, one of which is Jopi Nyman’s \textit{Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction} (Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2009). Nyman devotes a full chapter to the question of identity qua refugee writings. This has also been modified in his article ‘Refugee(s) Writing’, where he analyzes refugee writing vis-à-vis dislocation. (Jopi Nyman, ‘Refugee(s) Writing: Displacement in Contemporary Narratives of Forced Migration’, \textit{Africa Writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement}, eds. Maria Olaussen and Christina Angelfors (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 245-68.)

boundaries and the crossing of frontiers took place without a ‘passport’. Since then, the colonial enterprise has been achieved and the process of de-colonisation reached its peak at the end of the twentieth century. Subsequently, geographical boundaries now mark a territorial distinction between cultures, languages, and nations opening the space for endless, violent fights over hunger, health, and education in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. Such conditions forced certain people to migrate, and as a consequence, the passport was introduced in the early twentieth century and became significant along with new legal restrictions. What remains for refugees are movements of escape, organised or clandestine, out of struggle to face new structures of resistance over recognition and to search for identity in the new home. Moreover, refugee poetry would be considered a new category that debates the notion of forced migration in the era of globalisation. It allows the dynamics of movement and culture to intertwine in re-constructing refugee identity in our world today.

In the meantime it might be problematic to understand these movements and processes without paying attention to the enormity of the term globalisation. In Roland Robertson’s words, globalisation ‘refers to the compression of the world’, whereas for Martin Albrow it ‘means that societies now cannot be as systems in an environment of other systems, but as sub-systems of the larger inclusive world society’. Consequently, the term globalisation seem to suggest that when the world is encoded as a single global village, displacement has been incorporated in the stories and histories of orphaned people, marginalised minorities, and disconcerted species.

Yet the prolific discussions of the term globalisation provide a wide range of concepts and phrases, mostly concise, to describe the current state of this millennium. Those succinct descriptions, however, alert us to the fact that the term itself is contested as far as travel and displacement are concerned. Travel without boundaries is one aspect of these concepts that was enacted before, and ‘banned’ today. In this context, war, displacement, disengagement, and refugees become characteristic of the twenty-first century. Caren Kaplan reminds us that the ‘prevalence of metaphors of travel and displacement [...] suggests that the modern era is fascinated by the experience of distance and estrangement’.

Displacement can be approached from various perspectives, historical, political, or cultural. Many have come to experience travel, but the difference lies in the rationale behind such travel. History has marked the continuous movement of humans. Yet pertinent to displacement, glorifying exile over other aspects of displacements, such as refugees, remains critical in such a context. Many critics make exile worthless to refugees. In Eva Hoffman’s article, ‘The New Nomad’, for instance, refugees are relegated to a position that is below all other movements of displacement. To glorify exile over refugees or diaspora over exile is to construct a hyperreality that connotes the perspective of the binary opposition – exile/refugee or diaspora/exile. Perhaps this glorification pertains to the myth of living in a story that is not one’s own, but diaspora has helped to decentre the bipolar model of dislocation.

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Hybridised borders and hyphenated identities assume a painstaking projection of dislocation in its contemporary global diasporic features.

The term refugee becomes the construct that has emerged out of globalisation, yet the subsequent emergence of concepts such as diaspora and exile in literary and cultural studies has retained the word ‘refugee’ as a mere political phenomenon. The word ‘refugee’ is a political construct because a number of factors are connected to enforce displacement in a massive way. Refugees ‘are produced by political upheavals, persecution, war, and economic debacles engendering considerable losses ... and traumas’. This idea does not seem worthy of exultation in the twenty-first century, simply, because ‘Said’s ideas are based on the modernist cult of the exilic writers ... whose creative process is triggered by the “solitude” which allows him to see more clearly.’

In addition, identity reconstruction is critical to refugees. Maria Olaussen points out that the act of seeking refuge in the nation-states of Europe presumes that the refugee urgently needs to change his/her name as a way to avoid some legal restrictions that may lead to her/his deportation. Furthermore, the change of names cannot be viewed as a mere solitary act, but a contingent one that springs from the intangible chain of a hide-and-seek game with the self and agency in the host country. In effect, this constitutes a problem regarding the multiple identities that a refugee may inhabit for her/himself, which risks, I think, the possibility for self-representation: to inhabit a fake name may distort the image that a refugee seeks to represent as the real image of refugees. Simon Lewis, in this regard, asks: ‘under such circumstances, when individual identity ... appears problematic ... what kind of imagined communities’ does the refugee affiliate her/himself with?

Camino and Krulfeld, in the ‘Introduction’ to Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning, point out that ‘in the process of losing country, community, family, status, property, culture, and even a sense of personal identity, replacement for these losses must be created.’ The changing circumstances at home and in ‘exile’ may justify, accordingly, the process of fabricating stories to secure the refugee’s future. Nevertheless, the question of authenticity is crucial to the construction of refugee identity. Such a double identity is the result of being ‘undocumented’. Said, thus, rightly concludes that there are those ‘awful forlorn waste of “undocumented” people suddenly lost, without a tellable history’.

Of course not all refugees are necessarily undocumented, yet disparity is apparent between those forced migrants who seek refuge in Africa and the Arab World, and refugees who succeed in entering

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7 Nyman ‘Refugee(s)’ 247; emphasis added.
9 Nyman ‘Refugee(s)’ 248.
11 Camino and Krulfeld x.
13 Camino and Krulfeld x.
14 Said 176.
the nation-states of Europe (one for instance could compare the Palestinians in Jordan and Iraq with those in Finland and Norway): the difference is in that the former are lost suddenly because they escape from war and the instability at home only to meet with dispersion on border camps. In short, refugees who succeed at entering the nation-states of Europe seem to have a better chance to retell their stories to the world, whereas those who fail in their journey to Europe also fail to make their voices heard. It can be argued that these conditions partly explain the publication of refugee poetry and writing by refugees who live in the Euro-America zone only in Britain. As a result, both Said and Olaussen propose a new paradigm of representation that is needed by refugees. Whether mediatised or articulated through literature, the refugee is far from representing her/himself; rather, they are represented. The obvious pattern of refugees can be glimpsed from media representations that ‘turn the refugee problem into a spectacle where migrants attempt to reach Europe in overloaded boats, often failing in the process’.

The asylum-seeker is depicted in media discourse in the same way as the colonised were represented by the colonisers: as ‘uneducated, vulgar parasite ... barbarian others’. Moreover, this racialised discourse is conveyed in the name of national security.

One way to deterritorise these territorial couplings is to follow Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of deterritorialisation. In order for the refugee’s voice to be heard s/he needs to deterritorialise the position where s/he is situated. Accordingly, deterritorialisation assumes that a refugee may be able to leave the territory of external representation (deterritorialisation) and immediately establish his/her own space (reterritorialisation). In this regard, the process of deterritorialisation affirms Deleuze and Guattari’s model of changing locations by defining the term as ‘the movement by which one leaves a territory’.

In effect, both processes function dialogically: the moment deterritorialisation is achieved, it is be followed by reterritorialisation. Deterritorialisation in the present analysis is viewed as a process of dislocation.

For a refugee, the process of deterritorialisation becomes the location that marks the territory of her/his identity, i.e. the space of refugee identity reconstruction. Most often, when a refugee arrives in the nation-state of Europe, she/he has already crossed and traversed a number of hotlines and points of struggle, suggesting that she/he is already dislocated. Camino and Krulfeld point out that ‘this process usually necessitates unplanned and rapid adjustment to ... resettlement in places within alien cultures’. Therefore, to endure the confusion of the journey from home and ‘temporary sanctuaries’, a refugee must be prepared to cope with the new situation of location, dislocation, and relocation.

This dynamic also suggests that the act of moving from a static point to an undetermined one juxtaposes the formation of the

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16 Nyman Refugee(s) 245.
19 Camino and Krulfeld x.
20 Camino and Krulfeld x.
refugee’s ethnic identity with that of the new culture. This process, called ‘liminality’, locates the refugee in a ‘betwixt, and between all fixed points’. Such a position implies that a refugee’s identity can be constructed anew as a form of rapid innovative structures that set aside, at least in part, those forms of homeland traditions and cultures that are carried by refugees. The refugee, throughout the process of dislocation, faces certain impossibilities that wax and wane according to the ‘new configurations of ethnic identities’. It should be noted that the process of changing locations, by force or by choice, inspires a transcultural understanding that enables the refugee to speak the unspeakable as a liminal hybrid subject.

Subsequently, the elasticity of the term liminality poses certain questions as to whether a refugee can be considered a hybrid. The term hybridity recalls Homi Bhabha’s notion of the middle passage and of in-betweeness. According to Bhabha, ‘hybridity is the perplexity of the living ... it is an instance of iteration, in minority discourse’ that leaves meanings of culture open to scrutiny. However, in ‘Debating Hybridity’, Shailja Sharma argues that, although hybridity may function as a goal, sometimes it becomes a burden to be avoided because ‘it degenerates into a simplistic, ahistorical “fusion” aesthetic’. The ‘fusion aesthetic’ may imply the economy of resisting the act of self-representation and xenophobic behaviour that surround minorities in general and refugees in particular. Hybridity, according to Werbner, deconstructs identity and thereby offers the basis for negotiating the refugee’s identity in, for example, the nation-states of Europe. The notion of hybridity is significant to the construction of refugee writing. It construes the psychological dimension of refugee writing and points to the gaps that displacement leaves on the psyche of the refugee. Hybridity can also function to explain the occurrence of such gaps left by the process of deterritorialisation on the constructed identity of refugees.

Though these gaps question the notion of belonging for refugees, the right to belong becomes equal to the construction of identity. The escape a refugee makes remains a counterpoint for a refugee identity in escaping from the trauma of the past and longing for a transcultural belonging in the present. Yet when a refugee makes the first escape from war, she/he seeks to challenge and traverse international barriers and boundaries in order to justify her/his existence in the host culture. The need for protection that ends with a struggle for identity construction does not mean to encourage or romanticise the mass refuge taking place in the world today. Quite the opposite, the aim is to establish a background from which one can begin analysing and reading ‘new literatures’ in English such as refugee poetry. I wish to stress the notion of newness because post-colonial literature was perceived as ‘new’ before it was canonised. Accordingly, I aim to argue, the refugee is underrepresented in contemporary post-colonial studies. She/he is a subject, colonised at home, chaotic in her/his journey, stigmatised in the new home, and split: these are the implications that

23 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 314.
24 Shailja Sharma, ‘Debating Hybridity’, Neo-colonial Mentalities, 35.
encourage one to begin debating refugees’ writing and specifically the poetry of refugees.

Refusing to speak as a victim may promote the process of deterritorialisation that would enable refugees to crack the mainstream discourse in which they are viewed as minorities. Efforts have already been made in this respect, though the act of re-writing refugee identity remains inadequate. In the following section I will discuss some poems produced by refugees from the Arab world, Asia and Africa. These readings aim at introducing refugee writing into the post-colonial debate. They also seek to analyse the effects of concepts such as displacement, nostalgia and liminality on the construction of refugee identity and how they seek to deterritorialise the present status in contemporary post-colonial discourse.

**Liminality, nostalgia, and homelessness in refugee poetry**

In the previous section I sought to demonstrate how the notion of deterritorialisation as a literary approach helps to dismantle the discourse that marginalises refugees’ writing. I also explained how dislocation positions the refugee identity in a liminal space of betwixity. However, the cultural tension and the feeling of exile that a refugee experiences remain sites of confusion in the poems of refugees, which further problematises the notions of home and belonging. In this section I will focus on concepts of liminality, nostalgia, and homelessness as aspects of this problematisation. I will show how the process of deterritorialisation forces the refugee to be positioned between two realities: Whereas being home becomes a source of inspiration, being away turns out to be a no more than the possibility of having a voice.

In her poem ‘Here and There’ Sozan Mohammed (from Kurdistan) describes the sense of alienation in the ‘new’ home (England) and her aspirations for the journey back to her native country:

My steps are dragging me along the road
My remote imagination demanding an inspiration
They are sailing through the ocean
Walking in a dark field
And flying through the space
Just to find an inspiration
I used to find inspiration by the sun ... the moon
... the sea and the sky
Even the walls of my bedroom were inspiring.

The first lines of this poem depict the forceful drive that pushes the speaker toward her homeland. The word ‘drag’ may imply the forced movement with which the poet crosses the ocean and meets with her past. It also reminds us of the forced migration the poet first made from home to England. Thus the word ‘drag’ implies two parallel movements: from and to. The ensuing lines reveal the purpose behind the need for a second journey: to seek an environment for inspiration. The speaker in the poem seems to experience a process of silence characterised by the sequence of the sound of silence.

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26 Sozan Mohammed, ‘Here and There’, *Exiled Writers Ink: Voices in a Strange Land*. 1 Sept. 2009
http://www.exiledwriters.co.uk/writers.shtml#Mohamed
‘s’ (steps, sailing, inspiration, sea, sky, splashing, etc.). The failure to at least imagine the homeland can be attributed to this silence. As a result, it can be said that the speaker in the poem already makes her choice to stay in the host land but against her will, because only home gives her the inspiration to write. Britain is described as a ruthless place (she equates the word ‘ocean’ with ‘dark field’) in comparison to the sunny Iraq, and the ‘beautiful’ rivers of Dijla and Furat. In the adverb ‘even’ there seems to be a sense of alienation: in spite of having been forced out of the country, the imagined homeland remains the desired place. By the end of the poem, the speaker confesses that

I am an unfinished portrait
left shuttered in the middle of nowhere
Or perhaps
I am a lost individual
Left divided between here and there.  

The speaker assumes inspirations only in her home country; however, she is not sure whether it is time to go back. This state of indecisiveness is a result of dislocation where the construction of identity has been scattered among different points. According to Nyman, this is one aspect of liminality described by Victor Turner, which is ‘woven into the narratives of forced migration through the use of languages and images of confusion, where the sense of exile and exhaustion creates an uncanny sense of inbetweenness’.  

‘Here and There’, in this regard, expresses the feeling of being neither here nor there but, as Turner puts it, ‘in betwixt’, where the feeling of going back is not a desirable one, but one driven by force. For Bhabha, this inbetwixtness is a salient feature to nation-building, and should not be conceived of only in a negative connotation. Bhabha points out that

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated ... Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively.  

The aspect of cultural liminality represented in this poem can thus point to the dynamic process of transculturation belonging in the host country. Instead of being neither here nor there, liminality assumes that identity is constructed vis-à-vis nation. Furthermore, to be a ‘lost individual’ may also suggest that the speaker experiences another process of uncanniness in which the familiar becomes strange. The desire to be at home while the speaker is away may explain the failure of deterritorialisation. Even though the speaker has left her territory she seems unable to establish one of her own. Simply, because the place she wants to create is not a new one as reterritorialisation might suggest, but a way to retain her old territory. This

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27 Mohammed.
28 Nyman Refugee(s) 251.
29 Bhabha 2.
uncanniness is best described when the speaker says that she is ‘left divided between here and there’.

It can be argued that the identity formation of refugees remains visible in the dynamic of dislocations. This dialogic is apparent in Nahida Izzat’s (born in Jerusalem) poem ‘Will I Ever Grow Up Again?’ The speaker declares that during her thirty-seven years in exile, she fails to recall any memories except those connected to her childhood in her country of origin:

My internal clock is shattered into pieces
The 37 years of forced exile
Have no record in my book of memories
blank sheets; Page after page

…
A sad story with an unwritten scripts.30

Her stay in the host country that interrogates her identity formation turns her life into disenchantment. The speaker’s relief is contemplated through the time before she was exiled.

I was seven
I am seven
And I will stay seven
Until the day of my return.31

In these lines, the speaker’s aim is to make the journey back home, which she believes can make her life start anew. The speaker refuses to grow old until she can return home; her life will start, figuratively, at the age of seven, the time when she last saw her home. The act of forgetting here (no records, lost titles, blank sheets, unseen pictures) is juxtaposed with the act of remembering. In other words, she can only remember her past through forgetting her present. The speaker’s moment of consciousness lies in the moment she seeks to forget her present through remembering the past. As Paul Ricoeur writes:

When remembering, the emphasis is placed on the return to awakened consciousness of an event recognized as having occurred before the moment when consciousness declares having experienced, perceived, learned it. The temporal mark of the before, thus constitutes the distinctive feature of remembering.32

The ‘before’ moment for the speaker is the age of seven and the present remains a void that ‘blank sheets’ and fragments of ‘unseen picture’ represent. Yet memory does not function as the moderator between the home culture and the culture of exile.

31 Izzat.
The invocation of memory by the speaker may suggest the years of silence represented by the refrain ‘life on hold’. The use of contradicted forms in this poem implies that the speaker not only longs for nostalgia to imagine her home country, but that nostalgia (unseen/pictures; images/no colour; mysterious characters/no faces) also carries with it the notion of loneliness and lack of freedom, and homelessness. A refugee in diaspora lives in two places at once, and aspires to compensate for the loss of homeland with an ‘imagined community’. To be ‘without a tellable history’ is replaced by nostalgia.

This sentiment of ‘longing-for’ is repeatedly articulated in narratives by refugees, as in the case in the poem ‘In the Name of Kabul’ by Berang Kohdomani (an Afghani refugee):

My presence is here but
My heart is in the alley-ways of Kabul
My tongue utters its name
My lips sing a song of Kabul. 33

The dream of returning is often met with drastic problems. Deterritorialisation can hardly be achieved because the emphasis is placed on the old territory (home). Identity in this poem is represented as being split and set in between: not here and not yet there. The speaker seems to be physically here (in exile) but emotionally there (home country) and to make a decision whether to go back home is not an easy process as it would turn into ‘an adventure without conclusion’. The ensuing lines of the poem describe the silent cry of the country where ‘the sick children and orphans of Kabul’ are in need of urgent ‘release from destruction and annihilation’. The majority of the poem is reminiscent of an elegy (or prayer, lamentation). The focus seems to be the desperate present of Kabul.

In contrast to the state of indecisiveness, Hilton Mendelsohn inquires in ‘Another African Catastrophe’ why he cannot now hear those voices and see those men and women who have fought against Apartheid to free the country from the new colonial ‘native’?

Another African Catastrophe
Born out of apathy
Black men and women
Will always talk
And talk
Bring up Apartheid
And slave boats,
And exploitation
By white folks
But what about when it is our own?
...
when we fight to be free

From the brutality
Of African tyranny
I don’t see you
...
I just don’t know.  

The speaker of the poem seeks to understand the reason behind the silencing of those voices that called for an end to colonialism. The main point that the poem addresses rests in the very cause behind the existence of mass refugees in the world today: The chaotic struggles over hunger, worsened by ethnic cleansing and religious conflicts, have forced people to migrate in huge groups to the neighbouring countries. It is noteworthy that the condition of refugee does not designate merely those people whom Said calls ‘forlorn’, but also individuals who seek to point to the power that forced their exile and which delays their return home.

This issue is strikingly presented in the poem ‘Promised Prophecy’ by Eric Charles (from Cameroon).  

The first stanza introduces the scene where the speaker, an old man, meets with a sage on the peak of a mountain. This scenery is important as it shows the hope aspired to when a refugee seeks to retain her/his territory. However, this action coalesces with the age of the speaker, as he is not a young man, but elderly. The second stanza points to the dream that ‘your children shall inherit the earth’. Inheritance can be understood in the process of going back to the native home. This return is not yet accessible, because, instead of ‘stars’ referring to hope, the old man discovers that ‘the land [is] filled with dried leaves/the heavenly smell of “white phosphorous***”. The ‘white phosphorous’ suggests that the speaker’s homeland is in a state of war and ethnic cleansing, which threatens the native with extinction. The old man may represent the end of one generation, but the younger generation may not actually live longer because their ‘land [is] filled with dried leaves’. This poem also represents the state of indecisiveness in which the refugees are positioned. The fact that one needs to go back to her/his home is an inspiring, yet unfulfilled project because of the many obstacles – mainly war and ethnic conflicts – that thwart the refugee from making the journey back.

**Conclusion**

To conclude: dislocation, nostalgia, and liminality – the three main concepts of this paper and of refugee poetry – could stand as a platform for studying refugee poetry. The first level concerns the role of the ‘unconscious’ in which nostalgia represents a major part of a refugee’s identity. The second level concerns the transition of the subject from stability to liminality. As has been discussed in this paper, liminality is understood in its symbolic phase. Both levels can be summoned to negotiate the ethnic identity of a refugee in literary studies. The third level is the issue of dislocation. Dislocation appears as an important criterion that strives for a recognition of the narratives of refugees and removes them from the margins. It is important to

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note that dislocation is identified in relation to the state of homesickness, wherein nostalgia forces the refugee to live in a story that is not his/her own. The three levels of abstraction are introduced to carve out methods in a manner similar to the approach taken by post-colonial minoritarians. They also show how the refugee fails in the process of deterritorialisation the moment s/he seeks to retain the old territory rather than creating one of his/her own.

Nevertheless, there is a feasible space that enables the minoritarian (including refugees) to represent their identity. Whether fixed, imagined or otherwise, refugee narratives cross the frontiers from afar and negotiate the transculturation engendered by globalisation. Incommensurability implies recognition of refugee narratives and helps negotiate their identity in the host cultures. Through this, transculturation assumes a wider context that postulates an ethics of encounters in our world today.
Choosing Self-Hatred: How Canadian Ethnic Minority Novels of the 1950s Reflect Racist Ideas Propagated Earlier by the Dominant Majority

Milda Danyte

Introduction
The process of transculturation, which Mary Louise Pratt refers to as a ‘phenomenon of the contact zone’, interests me because both terms, transculturation and contact zones, are useful in analysing issues that have long puzzled me in my work on the early fiction produced in English by East European ethnic minorities in Canada. Ideas about transculturation are often made more difficult to apply in Canadian studies because this country’s colonial history is more complex than that of many other countries analysed by postcolonial theory. Long after supposedly gaining an independent status in 1867, Canada still remained legally subordinate to Britain, with the approval of most British-origin inhabitants. In this way, when the twentieth century brought newer waves of immigration that did not belong to the dominant Anglo-Celtic majority, these members of ethnic minorities experienced a kind of double colonial status, with imperial centres both within Canada and outside it in Britain.

With the exception of Jewish Canadian literature, most ethnic minority literature appeared since the beginnings of the 1990s when the Canadian government funding of programs for writers and publishers that began in the 1980s finally bore fruit. However, in the 1950s, the transitional decade from British Empire identity to the Canadian cultural renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, there were a number of novels in English written by second-generation members of East European ethnic minority communities or about them. One of these, Mountain Shadows (1955) by the Lithuanian Magdelana Eggleston, was given to me to read by my father in the mid-1960s; he said, in a half-apologetic tone, that I might find it interesting. When I read the novel, I understood and shared his ambivalence: true, Lithuanians were named as such, their food traditions described and Lithuanian words appeared in an English novel, something I had never seen before. Yet, as the child of intensely patriotic Lithuanian political refugees, the novel disturbed me because the references to Lithuania itself were scant and all were openly negative. Only much later, when I came across other ethnic minority fiction of the 1950s with the same undertone of self-hatred did it occur to me that Eggleston’s attitude could be related to the specific status of East Europeans in the Canada of the early twentieth century. Then I began to consider how the transcultural process with its menu of values and ideas offered by the dominant to the subordinate could explain the self-derogatory attitudes adopted by these writers. At the same time philosophical studies about the Western creation of the animal / human binary opposition and Mary Midgley’s notion of the ‘human non-human’ helped explain the animal imagery used in these novels to describe East European immigrants. This led me to look more closely at the ideology and rhetoric of eugenics, taken up in the early twentieth century by influential spokesmen for the


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dominant majority in their troubled discourse about East and Central European immigrants within Canadian society, and, as I argue, absorbed by the children of these immigrants and used in specific ways in their fiction to find an acceptable place for members of ethnic minorities.

In this paper, I examine the specific colonial nature of Canadian society in which the Anglo-Celts are both subordinate to the British imperial centre and try to constitute a national identity in which they become the dominant group for immigrants who are not British. Concepts drawn in a transcultural process provide an ideology and rhetoric of racism for the dominant colonial group, the Anglo-Celts, which they apply to new immigrants from Europe in their need to assert a more autonomous kind of identity. In this way, within the formation of a national Canadian self-concept, the new East and Central Europeans became a useful Other. In turn, the contact zones in which transculturation takes place are different for the Anglo-Celtic Canadians than for the non-British immigrants: instead of a discourse with London and Europe, the new immigrants have one with English-speaking Canadians. I leave outside my discussion all other ethnic minorities, including the French-speaking Canadians, whose path to national self-identity was very different.

The specific analysis in this paper considers four ethnic minority novels of the 1950s written by authors who grew up exposed to the notion that the new immigrants were radically Other, more animal than human: Ukrainian Vera Lysenko’s *Yellow Boots* (1954), Lithuanian Magdelana Eggleston’s *Mountain Shadows* (1955), Hungarian John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957) and Scottish Luella Creighton’s *High Bright Buggy Wheels* (1951).

Transculturation and Contact Zones in Twentieth-Century Canada

Definitions of the process of transculturation can be optimistic or, as in Mary Louise Pratt’s assessment, pessimistic in tone. She writes, ‘Ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.’ Here the process of transculturation is conceived of as a one-way phenomenon, the dominant culture supplying the subordinate one. Other definitions are closer to the notion of intercultural exchange, as with Bill Ashcroft, who writes of transculturation as ‘that mutual alteration which occurs when two cultures come into contact’ and argues that ‘individual cultures are never cocooned from the dynamic flow of cultural interchange.’ A problem in Canadian studies with both definitions is that they assume a degree of stability in the two sides engaged in transcultural communication. However, in this particular case, when the trajectory of ideas is being followed over a period of time, first as used by Anglo-Celtic Canadians and later by writers from ethnic minorities, the fluidity of the Canadian situation means that the contact zones are not the same from one decade to another. Anglo-Celtic Canadians deal not so much with the British metropolis (they had formulated a version that worked for them at an earlier stage of settlement) but instead have to contend with the challenges posed, decade after decade, in the altered make-up of the immigrating ethnic

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minorities that populate their contact zones. In the specific situation I am analysing, I follow Pratt in emphasizing that very significant ideological concepts and their rhetoric tend to move from top to bottom and that the ‘cultural interchange’ which does take place is far from being a dialogue between equals.

Cultural Discourse about Animals and the Human Non-Human
One major ideological concept that appears as part of the transcultural menu offered to non-British immigrants in early twentieth-century Canada is related to cultural discourse about humans and animals. According to many philosophers and cultural anthropologists, animals have most often been used in Western thinking to mark off the boundaries between what is fully human and what is not: this is a very powerful binary distinction in most Western cultures. Tim Ingold, for example, argues that the whole issue of drawing distinctions between the animal and the human is in fact ‘a question about ourselves.’5 Similarly, Steve Baker indicates that the proliferation of animal archetypes in Western thought springs from the vital role of the Other that human beings assign to animals in their attempt to develop a clearer sense of human identity.6 Richard Twine states that ‘the boundary between human and animal is in important ways socially constructed and historical and cultural variations may be noted.’7

Furthermore, animal imagery applied to human beings is often used to emphasise the distinction between insiders and outsiders within a society, as Baker points out,8 while Ingold reminds his readers that early anthropological studies labelled certain peoples as merely ‘emergent humanity’, societies in the early stages of ‘becoming human’.9 A particularly useful term, as has been mentioned earlier, has been created by Mary Midgley: she calls the people who are stigmatised in this way ‘human non-humans’; they are those whose cultural differences seem so strong to the dominant group that they are pushed out of the circle of humanity altogether.10

Anglo-Celtic Attempts to Form a Canadian Identity: The Early Stages
The rhetoric associating East and Central European immigrants with the brutal or disgusting features of animals seems to have been a defensive transcultural discourse developed in Canada only in the first decades of the twentieth century when such immigration suddenly increased. Earlier, Anglo-Celtic identity in Canada developed according to a pattern quite different from that in the United States. Immigrants from the British Isles began to settle in the colony in significant numbers from the beginning of the nineteenth century so that the North America that they encountered was no longer the New World of previous centuries. The British settlers came by ship and first saw the French settlements, already developed farms, villages and towns

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8 Baker 79.
9 Ingold 5.
10 Midgley 109.

along the St Lawrence River, culminating in the city of Montreal. They then travelled to what is now southern Ontario, to land which had not only been surveyed but had a functioning infrastructure of roads, local government and trade with the Americans to the south. In this area Canadian aboriginals were settled in their own specific territories. Because of this, in Canada the powerful myths of pioneering struggles with nature, wild animals and aboriginals never formed in the same way as in the American consciousness.

Historians like J.M. Bumsted point out that the English Canadian colonies developed within an imperial foreign policy: from the point of view of the British metropolis, this settlement was necessary to form a barrier directed against the United States of America. When it first began to offer cheap land in Canada, the British government was alarmed by the rapid movement north of American settlers, bringing with them an American ideology. A special campaign was then mounted in Britain to attract British immigrants. Among those who responded was Susanna Moodie, a middle-class intellectual who analysed her difficulties in Roughing It in the Bush, published in 1852, but describing the immigrant experience of the 1830s. This has become a canonical text for Canadian literature from the pre-Confederation period. For Moodie, the principal Other in her contact zone is the American immigrant, brash, rude and confident that British class values and manners are completely out of place in this New World.

From this point on until the middle of the twentieth century, Anglo-Celts in Canada constructed a series of national identities which accommodated both British and American features. The official and most often popular one was British Empire identity: even after Canada was granted a peculiar kind of semi-autonomy in 1867, Britain continued de facto and de jure to run Canadian foreign relations and dictate much of internal policy. Iconically, the daily reminder for Canadians of the British Empire was on their banknotes, which pictured first governor-generals and their wives, later lesser members of the Royal Family and eventually the monarch. However, the banknotes themselves were not pounds but dollars, as already by 1867 the economy of Canada was embedded in that of the United States.

The degree to which British Empire identity satisfied the dominant Anglo-Celtic group in Canada can be seen by the fact that for many decades it felt no need for a Canadian flag or anthem, school programs in Canadian literature, Canadian citizenship or the legal power to change the constitution. It was only after World War I, which deeply shook the perception of British power, that quiet steps were taken in Canada to set up embassies and promote Canadian cultural autonomy. By the interwar period, however, attempts to proclaim that Canada was a mature nation were directed predominantly not against Britain but against the old enemy, the United States, whose mass culture, from chewing gum and candy bars, comic books, cinema and radio programs were highly popular products of consumption. The fact was that the contact zone in which the typical Anglo-Celtic Canadian moved rarely included anyone who embodied British power, but was crowded with economic, political and cultural

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figures from the United States: true transcultural discourse went on with Americans as the dominant group, the real metropolis.

New Immigrants, Racism and Canadian Eugenics
At the beginning of the twentieth century, the rise of Canadian national feeling coincided with the appearance in significant numbers of immigrants from East and Central Europe. Earlier, such ethnic minorities had existed in fairly small numbers and did not play much of a role in contact zones. Now, with this new immigration becoming a visible phenomenon, the rhetoric of nationalism became intertwined in Canada, as in many other western countries, with a racist ideology based on pseudoscientific interpretations of evolutionary theory. In particular, social Darwinism and eugenics played important roles in new nationalisms; eugenics was the belief that peoples should be bred selectively as domestic animals are, and that policies ensuring racial purity are an essential foundation for any nation-state. The primary necessary Other remained the American, but now, within Canada itself, it also became the East and Central European immigrants and their children. Although earlier wild animals had not figured much as dangerous Others in Canadian thinking, these people were equated with wild animals.

The racist ideology that classified these immigrants as not fully human was not indigenous to Canada: it was a transcultural import that had developed in the nineteenth century in Britain, Germany, France, the United States and other countries; in the Canadian case it was apparently triggered by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of East, Central and Southern Europeans into Canada. Considering that Anglo-Celtic Canadianism was a fragile and shifting form of national identity, it is not surprising that, as in daily contact zones both ordinary members of this dominant majority and their leaders increasingly encountered these new immigrants, they reacted with intolerance and even hysteria. During an exploratory trip across the country in 1907, Rudyard Kipling, himself an expert on racial tensions in a variety of British colonies, was struck by the Canadian variety. The poem which he wrote at this time, ‘The Stranger (Canadian)’, ironically exposes Anglo-Celtic racism about, in his words ‘strangers within our gates’. The phrase was adopted without any self-irony by Canadians to express alarm about the influx of new ethnic minorities.

Research on eugenics in Canada by Ian Dowbiggin (1995) and Angus McLaren (1990) has shown how, in the first decades of the twentieth century, those concerned with ‘crime, intemperance, dependence, insanity and sexual morality’ focused on East and Central Europeans as the source of these problems in an increasingly complex Canadian society. Dowbiggin states that this fear was connected with the belief that only those of British origin could be true Canadians: ‘Many native-born Canadians believed that Anglo-Saxons were being overwhelmed by unfit social and national groups and might one day commit race suicide.’

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14 Ian Dowbiggin, “‘Keeping This Young Country Sane’: C.K. Clarke, Immigration Restriction and Canadian Psychiatry, 1890-1925”, Canadian Historical Review 76 (September 1995) 607.
15 Dowbiggin 607.
Reading the declarations made by politicians, doctors, sociologists and other leading figures of the period, one is struck by the frequent use of animal imagery to describe these ethnic minorities. For example, the psychologist Charles Kirk Clarke, after whom the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto is named, wrote in 1919: ‘We are nursing a reptile that may easily prove our undoing when it is fully developed.’\(^{16}\) James Woodsworth, later the founder of the social-democratic CCF party in Canada and personally often sympathetic to East and Central Europeans, borrowed Kipling’s phrase for the title of his book: he declares that while the Scots are ‘thrifty’ and the Germans distinguished by ‘self-conscious order’, Ukrainians have mostly bad features: ‘Centuries of poverty and oppression have, to some extent, animalized him. Drunk, he is quarrelsome and dangerous.’\(^{17}\) Robert England, a school inspector of British origin who studied ethnic minorities in Saskatchewan in the 1920s, does find Ukrainians, for example, ‘very industrious, thrifty, frugal’ but still asserts that they represent a ‘serious menace to our own civilization’\(^{18}\) and, in the opening chapter of his book, italicises an alarmist sentence: ‘British stock is outnumbered in northern rural Saskatchewan by two to one,’\(^{19}\) using the breeding term ‘stock’ in the manner typical of eugenic rhetoric.

Eugenists did not merely study these human non-humans but also advocated restrictions on further immigration and the implementation of reproduction controls such as isolation and sterilisation of those deemed mentally and physically unfit. Mental instability was associated with those who did not speak English well and, indeed, as McLaren found, when sterilisation of the so-called unfit was actually carried out in Alberta and British Columbia, East Europeans in disproportionate numbers were sterilised.\(^{20}\)

**Transculturation in Practice: The Movement of Racist Ideology into Ethnic Minority Fiction**

All of the novelists considered in this analysis, John Marlyn, Magdelana Eggleston, Vera Lysenko and Luella Creighton, grew up in the earlier decades of the twentieth century in Canada, when the dominant group in contact zones was Anglo-Celtic and ethnic minorities occupied a distinctly subordinate place. As has been stated, in this period the ideology of eugenics and its rhetoric about ethnic minorities as ‘human non-humans’ was commonplace in official discourse. It can be found in public statements by figures who are regarded as progressive in Canadian history, such as the future founder of the New Democratic Party, Tommy Douglas; Canada’s first woman member of the federal parliament, Agnes MacPhail; the noted historian A.M. Lower; one of the first and most influential of women doctors, Helen MacMurchy; and the premier of the province of Ontario, Mitchell Hepburn.\(^{21}\) Therefore, it is not surprising that these novelists absorbed such ideas and images and used them in their novels,

\(^{16}\) Clarke, cited in Dowbiggin 622.

\(^{17}\) James S. Woodsworth, *Strangers within Our Gates, or, Coming Canadians* (1909; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) 40, 114.


\(^{19}\) England 6.


\(^{21}\) MacLaren 30-46; 121-2.
even though for the three of them who were members of the despised minorities, this meant propagating something painfully close to contempt for many members of their own community. In effect, the novels oscillate between celebration and denigration of ethnicity, creating a highly ambivalent effect.\(^{22}\)

When the four 1950s novels about ethnic minorities are analysed, it turns out that only characters who are members of ethnic minorities become ‘human non-humans’, usually through metaphorical language which links them in an unfavourable sense to animals. In all four texts, there is only one instance in which an Anglo-Celtic Canadian is compared to an animal, and this is neutral in tone: Vera Lysenko’s Scottish schoolmaster Ian MacTavish is said to look like a fox.\(^{23}\) To be sure, some animal images may also be applied to an ethnic minority character in neutral or even favourable terms: for example, bird imagery is used in a positive way to describe the female hero of Creighton’s and especially that of Lysenko’s novel. Creighton’s protagonist Tillie is compared to a bird in her longing for freedom from her Mennonite community,\(^{24}\) while Lysenko’s Lilli, who has a wonderful voice, is repeatedly associated with birds.\(^{25}\)

Of the four novels that are under consideration, only John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death* has been accepted into the Canadian literary canon. *Yellow Boots*, despite efforts by Ukrainian Canadians, has stayed on the margins of the canon, while Creighton’s *High Bright Buggy Wheels* and Eggleston’s *Mountain Shadows* have long been forgotten by critics and literary historians. Luella Creighton was both by birth and marriage a member of the Scottish Ontarian intellectual elite, not a member of an ethnic minority. Her novel has been included because her choice of German Mennonites as a subject was very unusual in the immediate postwar period so that it was interesting to see how her treatment of an ethnic minority might differ from those who were ethnic insiders. As it turns out, there are no really significant differences, suggesting that Creighton and the other three authors shared a common rhetoric in the 1950s about East European ethnic minorities which had come to be part of their thinking through the process of transculturation from the period when eugenics was treated as a serious science. The result is novels that, paradoxically, foreground Central and East European immigrants and yet continue to use the earlier discourse of intolerance.

To structure their plots, all four novelists employ variants of what may be called the narrative of assimilation. In each case, the protagonist is the child of immigrants and is already partially assimilated into Anglo-Celtic Canada through language and education. At one point or another, each rebels against family and ethnic regulations, though the closing episodes of the novels offer some form of personal reconciliation. Still, the conclusions of these novels place the protagonists outside the ethnic community and, to a greater or lesser degree, within the Anglo-Celtic one. The specific mode of attempting to escape the ethnic community involves choices of

\(^{25}\) Lysenko 9, 31, 49, 216, 338.

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careers, as well as, for the three female protagonists, marriage to a member of the dominant majority.

In all these texts the language used both by third-person narrators and some characters expresses powerful revulsion against certain members of the ethnic minority community. In Yellow Boots, for example, Lilli, the protagonist of the novel, is first seen as a child who seems to be dying. The Scottish schoolmaster Ian MacTavish says of her, ‘She looks more like a wild animal than a child,’ though it is not clear what he means. The term ‘wild’ is used repeatedly afterwards to describe Lilli, first by her teacher and then by the Austrian choirmaster who falls in love with her. What is odd about this rhetoric is that Lilli is consistently presented as extremely sensitive and not wild at all. Her so-called ‘wildness’ is clearly part of the transcultural discourse about Ukrainians in Canada in the early twentieth century.

In the other three novels, some minority characters are depicted as caricatures of the current stereotype of the bestial East and Central European. What is significant is that these feelings are just as often expressed by the heroes of the novels, young second-generation men and women who move consciously away from their ethnic identity, motivated in part by a revulsion against certain members of their communities. For example, the narrator of Creighton’s High Bright Buggy Wheels states that young German Mennonites at a prayer meeting show ‘common evidence of purity of spirit and vacuity of mind’, while the English Canadian man who courts Tillie thinks of them as ‘those black freaks’.

The harshest epithets are reserved for Simon Goudy, the Mennonite who is engaged to marry Tillie. His feelings for the girl are said to be those of a ‘dumb animal obeying an instinct that was beyond his understanding’. Gradually he degenerates into a true ‘human non-human’; when he kisses Tillie, for example, the narrator’s language turns him into an aggressive beast: he ‘pulled her close to him with a fierce convulsive movement, pushing his mouth on hers until she could feel the shape of his long strong teeth behind his lips’. Simon is also associated with the dangerous boar that later attacks him, leaving him without normal intellect but with a brute instinct to pursue Tillie. In one of the novel’s most effective scenes, she has a hallucination that he is chasing her down a street. He is the ethnicity that she has denied but still feels haunted by. The novel makes it clear that, in order to bring out what is positive in Tillie and let her enter the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, she must marry an Anglo-Celt, while marrying Simon would have been a step back down the evolutionary ladder.

In Eggleston’s Mountain Shadows, a similar kind of animal imagery is used to characterise the protagonist Maggy’s mother, the chief obstacle to her passage into Anglo-Celtic society. At different points in the novel she is compared to a ‘raging tiger’ and a ‘wild animal in a trap’ with ‘hands like claws’. The sense of physical revulsion in this novel is focalised by her daughter Maggy, as in a key scene of

26 Lysenko 3.
27 Lysenko 56, 61, 272, 315.
28 Creighton 3, 269.
29 Creighton 22.
30 Creighton 217.
conflict: ‘She [the mother] paused for breath, saliva coating her lips. Then she 
resumed, her voice dropped to a deep, throaty snarl. Maggy cringing, looking on in 
horror, didn’t know which was worse, the screaming or the snarling.’\textsuperscript{32} Structurally, 
these equations of ethnicity with animality appear at turning points in the narratives, 
helping Tillie and Maggy move decisively away from their ethnic ties.

In a similar way, in John Marlyn’s \textit{Under the Ribs of Death}, the crisis for the 
young Hungarian Canadian Alex is signalled by the rising physical disgust he feels 
for Mr Nagy, the Hungarian businessman in Winnipeg for whom he works and who, 
for many years, he has regarded as a model. Suddenly Alex sees him as ‘an old, lean 
and hungry wolf. One could almost hear those teeth cutting through bone and tissue, 
and hear them crunch as they bit into their victim.’\textsuperscript{33} Disgust with other Hungarians 
and eventually with himself as he fails to enter Anglo-Celt society becomes Alex’s 
dominant emotion, reaching a powerful climax in a late episode when he hunts down 
a rat in his apartment: “‘Blind him,’” he shouted, “‘Blind the son-of-a-bitch’... he 
raised the shovel and brought it down again and again until the thing on the floor was 
a pulp.’\textsuperscript{34} He then feels ashamed, identifying himself with the rat, as he also does later 
in the story with an ant and a beetle. In this way the rhetoric of East and Central 
Europeans as vermin and insects is confirmed within the character’s mind.

Nevertheless, a degree of resistance to this dominant discourse can also be 
found. The novels themselves are set in the interwar period when their authors 
underwent formative experiences. After World War II, though, when the novels were 
being written, a new Canadian nationalist rhetoric began to appear. By taking 
advantage of it, Creighton and Marlyn to some degree, and Eggleston and Lysenko 
more confidently, propagate a new definition of the Canadian national self-concept 
that has nothing to do with the now crumbling British Empire and instead proposes a 
fruitful blending of ethnicities treated as equals, something between American 
melting-pot assimilation and the later Canadian multiculturalism.

Lysenko does this through the plot device of having her hero Lilli become the 
lead singer in a choir that performs the songs of different ethnic groups, while 
Eggleston, whose novel is the most programmatic, has Maggie decide not to flee the 
small Alberta mining community for good, but to train as a teacher who can return to 
teach mutual tolerance to children of different ethnicities, including those of British 
origin.

\textbf{Conclusion}

These novels of the 1950s did not make fiction about and by ethnic minorities 
popular. From the point of view of ethnic minority readers, the element of ethnic self-
hatred in them was not in line with the new ethnic pride of the 1960s and the attempt, 
strongly pushed by East and Central European Canadians, to establish at the state 
level a mosaic concept of national identity, eventually known as Canadian 
multiculturalism. Still, it was to take several decades more before the literary canon 
found room for ethnic minority topics. The Anglo-Celtic majority, which dominated 
the literary scene as writers, publishers, government funding administrators and

\textsuperscript{32} Eggleston 159.
\textsuperscript{34} Marilyn 248.
readers, supported the Canadian literary renaissance but welcomed fiction that wrote about their own concerns and Canadian history: successful novelists of this period, like Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, Marian Engel and Margaret Atwood, wrote at first of the Anglo-Celtic Canadian experience. It is possible, too, that the eugenic rhetoric that underlies the four novels discussed in this analysis repelled readers who, since the revelation of Nazi death camps for Jews and others in the immediate post-war years, found doctrines classifying certain groups as non-human too patently racist. Furthermore, the contact zones in which Canadians lived continued to alter, as second and third-generation East and Central Europeans entered the middle class and even, to some extent, penetrated power circles within the Canadian metropolis. In the 1950s, with the mass immigration of South Europeans the more northern East and Central Europeans, by now long present in Canadian society, began to seem less alien.

As a purely literary phenomenon, the novels written by Vera Lysenko, Magdelana Eggleston, John Marlyn and Luella Creighton occupy a minor place in Canadian literary history: they did not start a tradition of such novels at the time and are so different in their assumptions about the value of belonging to an ethnic minority that they cannot be easily discussed along with the ethnic minority novels of the past twenty years. However, they do provide an interesting example of how ideas travel from dominant to subordinate groups in the context of postcolonialism. A racist ideology of a hierarchy of superior and inferior ethnicities, buttressed by the so-called science of eugenics, proved useful to Anglo-Celtic Canadians attempting to forge a national identity distinct from both the British and the American model, because it allowed them to position themselves as superior to the rather alarming masses of foreign immigrants entering the country. The same ideology was then absorbed and accepted, to a certain degree, by children of these alien immigrants who then tried to create a new version of Canadianism that allowed some members of their groups to enter the dominant Anglo-Celtic world. From the point of view of transculturation the result is not a happy one: the ideas taken from the dominant group offer too little to the subordinate one, and the writers’ enthusiasm seems too close to self-derogation. More fruitful solutions to the question of how non-British cultures can be integrated into a culture that is still dominated by British-origin inhabitants lie further ahead. Yet the fact that these novels were written and published still attests to the growing flexibility of Canadian culture in the 1950s, a major period of transition.
Historically, road and quest stories have presented us with archetypal narrative models of transculturation, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as ‘a phenomenon of the contact zone’ constituted by ‘the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures ... whose trajectories now intersect’.\(^1\) Encounters with the Other have always been part of the nature of European travel writing, particularly when depicting the unfamiliar, the mysterious, and the desirable qualities that have long been associated with the Orient and the Americas. Late medieval and Renaissance literatures abound in explorers’ accounts of European voyagers’ fascination with or repulsion at manifestations of the (largely incomprehensible) ‘strangeness’ of the Other. One may think of Marco Polo’s stories about China or John Mandeville’s inspiring tall tales about Oriental locations he never, in fact, visited. The extent to which travel writing and alterity have been pivotal to Western cartography, especially as pertaining to early colonisation, has been meticulously studied in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions*, where he shows us how deftly the discourse of the marvellous was used in establishing the European colonial presence in the New World. At the heart of the early Western quest for dominance, Greenblatt points out, lay the experience of wonder, which institutionalised Europe’s imperial desires and legitimated its political campaigns and ensuing assets. More importantly still, wonder operated as a hermeneutic practice in facing all forms of alterity and coming to terms with it: ‘The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience.’\(^2\) In this, wonder served as a fundamental means of transcultural communication between the Europeans and the Natives as well as a mode of cultural, political and economic appropriation.

The praxis of wonder as regards the marvellousness of the New World is perhaps nowhere as suggestive as in what was to become Canada, or in Jacques Cartier’s words, ‘the land that God gave to Cain’. Here, we are reminded of Europe’s reluctance to let go of its medieval imagination, which projected monstrosity onto all that was remote, alien and potentially hazardous. W H New’s *A History of Canadian Literature* makes a case in point by saying that ‘a Giacomo Gastaldi (fl. 16th century) map of 1556 depicts the “Isola de Demoni” north of Newfoundland, ornamenting it with a humanoid creature with wings and a tail. Onshore and off, these maps filled blank spaces with lizards, sea monsters, beasts and beastmen.’\(^3\) The alterity of the space that is foreign both culturally and intellectually is emphasized here by resorting to the conventions of the marvellous, whereby it is not only perceived within the framework of the binary opposition Us vs Them, but is also given the value of

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aberration, anomaly and deviance. Susan Sontag extends a similar remark in her essay on travel writing, suggesting that

to be foreign was to be abnormal, often represented as physical abnormality: and the persistence of those accounts of monstrous peoples, of ‘men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders’ (Othello’s winning tale), of anthropophagi, Cyclopes, and the like illustrates to us the astonishing gullibility of past ages.4

While we need not agree with Sontag that the practice of demonising the unfamiliar was an exclusive sign of historical naïveté, we should, I think, be alerted to the ideological dimension that the bias of the marvellous in cultural representation entailed. Rather conspicuously, the marvellous has always been the territory of the marginal, the alien, and the deviant. In recent decades it also became the intellectual province of the postcolonial inquiry. An often-confusing terrain of scholarly endeavour, as testified by publications such as Graham Huggan’s The Postcolonial Exotic and Cynthia Sugars’s edited collection of essays titled Unhomely States: Theorizing English Canadian Postcolonialism, postcolonial studies have nevertheless been instrumental in explicating the link between the historical practices of political, economic and cultural appropriation and the discursive formation of the Other in the West. Thus in postcolonial terms, the praxis of wonder, which accompanied the imperial subordination of cultural difference, may be described as a distinct mode of perception which rendered alterity as simultaneously strange and familiar, in other words, marvellous, and, of course, available to the European observer.

For Huggan, this mode of aesthetic perception in cross-cultural encounter defines the mechanism of exoticism, a hermeneutic procedure ‘which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’.5 The term gains particular valence in debates over current consumerist attitudes to cultural difference in discourse whereby transcultural fictions court public interest by promoting stereotypical representations of cultural difference as merchandise to be purchased, sanitised, consumed and forgotten. Huggan’s observations seem to extend Greenblatt’s comments on the discourse of the marvellous in Renaissance Europe, even if Huggan uses his ideas to scrutinise the postcolonial field rather than analyse the discursive laws of colonial history as Greenblatt does in his Marvelous Possessions. Huggan’s suggestion that ‘... cultural difference also has an aesthetic value, a value often measured explicitly or implicitly in terms of the exotic’6 raises important points about the nature of transcultural relations and the human ability to understand and adequately respond to otherness. The fact that Huggan identifies exoticising practices within the postcolonial field itself opens up a new debate around issues of postcolonial agency and the asymmetrical nature of cultural dialogue so key to our understanding of contemporary transcultural (not singularly ethnic minority) narratives.

6 Huggan 13.

Sarah Brouillette’s recent study *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace* provides a wonderfully perspicacious critical response to Huggan’s arguments and a powerful reconsideration of the politics of literary marketing. On the one hand, she agrees with Huggan’s observation that ‘The postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location.’ At the same time, though, Brouillette remains duly critical of Huggan’s generalisation about ‘an unspecified global reader in pursuit of exotic access to what is culturally other’, pointing out that the global marketplace, in which transcultural narratives circulate, condition the rise of authorial self-consciousness which simultaneously accedes to capitalist demands and exposes the mechanism of the culture industry, thus challenging the reader’s own values and cognitive procedures. In other words, both writing (literary criticism and fiction) and reading in the postcolonial field are imbriated with complicity in exoticising practices, which makes the field’s epistemological apparatus as ambivalent as it is.

For Brouillette, the ‘tourist gaze’ and the ‘commodifying spirit’ are at the heart of the postcolonial aesthetic mediated as it is through the codes of global capitalism:

Writers are marketed to appeal to specific subject positions or as representatives of particular political locales, they have frequently used their works not to suggest their distance from the material or the political, but to register precisely the connections between the two, beneficial or otherwise. In their texts narratives of all kinds are already commodities; there is little space of separation from the market, but there is a continual engagement with its boundaries and implications, and with its many diverse and often conflicting audiences.

Significantly, this also instigates a complicitous relationship between the author and the reader as they meet in the shared ideological terrain of aesthetic aspiration, cultural accommodation and political commitment. While iconic scholars like Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha and the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* seek to educate their readers about the textual strategies of appropriation and abrogation in postcolonial discourse, Brouillette’s analysis of global market relations suggests that today’s writers and readers already share a common matrix of references as well as views about cultural operations and they seek to ‘ exempt themselves from certain undesirable practices’. This is to say that contemporary transcultural fictions acknowledge their complicity in the highly stratified, asymmetrical space of ‘contact zones’, orchestrating an intricate dynamic between whatever happens to be centre and periphery at a given time. Arguably, then, the contradictory nature of transcultural narratives exemplifies the paradox of literature where the underlying principle is that of ambivalence, unpredictability and uncertainty, whether aesthetical, cultural or

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8 Brouillette 5-6.
9 Brouillette 74-5.
10 Brouillette 43.
ideological. This echoes Juri Lotman’s ideas in *Culture and Explosion* about the correlation between art and external reality in culture conceived as a semiosphere: “unpredictability in art is simultaneously a cause and a consequence of unpredictability in life”.11

The unpredictability and ambivalence of transcultural experience is the focus of Douglas Glover’s Governor General-winning tale *Elle: A Novel* (2003). This historical novel takes up the story of a sixteenth-century French noblewoman Marguerite de la Rocque de Roberval, who becomes marooned on the Isle of Demons by a family relative who is also the commander of the colonial expedition she has joined on her father’s demand. Much in line with the postmodern drive of Glover’s fiction, Marguerite is the narrator for the majority of the novel, constructing her narrative as a memoir that challenges the official representations of her experience: ‘I write this memoir as a protest against all the uplifting, inspirational and exemplary texts claiming to be about my life. I am myself, not what they have written’ (114). In protest to multiple simplifications of her life story, the narrator resorts to Greek and Native myth, Rabelaisian humour, derision of the Church, sexual banter and ‘the wild and eerie laughter of the otherwise silenced “madwoman in the attic”’, 12 as Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein put it in their analysis of postcolonial comic writing. Her narrative is thus to be read as a critical commentary on the social codes of her time as well as a rethinking of discursive strategies through which European explorers conceived the image of *terra nulla* that would become Canada: ‘It is bigger than Europe, empty of people and strange as the moon’ (28).

Glover’s choice of a female narrator and protagonist suggests his acute awareness of the complexity of early colonial history and the verbal nature of representations of the past. Although otherwise complicit in the French colonial enterprise, his Marguerite is marginal in a number of ways: as an unmarried woman in a highly hierarchical and patriarchal society, as female rebel keen on breaking the laws of social decorum, as a castaway on a periphery of the colonial world and finally, as a writer, whose voice is drowned in the narrative deluge of her male counterparts. In this sense, the novel reads simultaneously as a historical metafiction and a story of a female coming-of-age. The narrator’s Canadian quest for survival is rearticulated in her quest for authorship: the journey she takes through the wilds of Canada is also the intellectual and emotional journey that we follow when reading her story. The book she is writing becomes a testimony to her role as a historical subject in a male-dominated society as well as a manifestation of her new identity as an explorer.

Arguably, though, it is through her role as a European explorer that Glover’s novel uncovers the ambivalence of Marguerite’s experience of the ‘contact zone’. As John Clement Ball has convincingly shown in his article ‘Canadian Crusoes from Sea to Sea’, 13 in isolating its protagonist on an island and scrutinising her complex relationship with the alien environment, Glover’s narrative self-consciously and

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ironically reconsiders the ideological legacy of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. A female Crusoe, Marguerite seemingly borrows from the matrix of imperial conquest, yet at the same time subverts it by exposing her own oppression as a female: ‘What do you do with a headstrong girl? ... Kill her, maim her ... Forget her’ (29). Likewise, *Elle* partakes of the conventions of male explorers’ accounts, which are suggestive of the imperial agenda the protagonist’s own narrative is measured against:

I had read *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, mostly for his description of the land of Lamory, where everyone goes naked, women give themselves freely to any man, and adults eat children, a novel form of population control. I knew Dicuil’s account (in *De mensera orbis terrae*) of St. Brendan’s voyage to the Fortunate Isles, with his Irish monks in their peculiar round boats, carrying their books, bells and crosiers. I had dreamed of the Northmen’s Thule, the Isles of the Blest written of by the ancients, Anthilia, Saluaga and the Isle of the Seven Cities, Satanaxes. I had seen five savages from Brazil in Paris, looking like Tartars with their fierce tattoos and empty faces. (31)

Marguerite’s remarks about unfamiliar places, the Brazilian ‘savages’ and later the indigenous people of Canada are characteristic of her aristocratic upbringing steeped in the idea of Europe’s cultural superiority, which explains her inability to ‘read’ the faces of people who constitute the cultural Other in Paris. However, as her wanderings on the island continue, *Elle*’s protagonist is made to rethink her own categories of knowledge, perception of alterity and the boundaries of the discourses about the world available to her: ‘I have entered a place where old definitions, words themselves, no longer apply’ (37).

As a postmodern novel, *Elle* falls within the fault lines of what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern historiographic metafiction, as Glover’s protagonist shares her views on books ranging from Erasmus’s treatise, Marguerite de Navarre’s *Mirror of a Sinful Soul* to François Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a story Rabelais writes while treating Glover’s narrator after she is brought back to France. In fact, it seems that Marguerite’s personal experience on the alien shore contributes in no small measure to the Rabelaisian imagination: ‘He has just finished a third book about the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel but despairs of publishing it in the present atmosphere of suspicion, excessive religious zeal (irrespective of what religion), ill humour, illiberality and lack of irony’ (186). We may also be duly reminded of Rabelais’ conception of the world as co-extensive with the spirit of sixteenth-century geographical explorations for, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out, Rabelais’ famous contemporary Jacques Cartier advanced a new plan: to shift the itinerary to the north polar regions. In 1540 Cartier made his way to Canada. In 1541 Francis I sent him to colonize this newly discovered territory of North America. So Rabelais, too, changed his hero’s itinerary and made him sail to the northwest, to the polar regions, to which Cartier was pointing.14

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This historical isomorphism complicates our reading of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as it brings to light the ideological ambiguity of the Rabelaisian discourse. For while courting comic effect by parodying “all the elements of medieval teachings and sacraments”, 15 Rabelais’ masterpiece simultaneously dismantles the structures of oppressive power and sustains their dynamics. Perhaps in doing so the book itself becomes an embodiment of the ambivalence of the carnival festivities from which it borrows its imagination. An analogous ideological ambivalence resonates in Glover’s fondness for Rabelaisian humour in *Elle*. By using Rabelais as a linchpin for narrative (often humorous) set-ups, the novel operates as a palimpsest which foregrounds a critical inquiry into the discourse of geographical exploration and its role in the colonisation of the New World. Yet the novel also shows a concern for travesty as a source of both humour and crossover identities (from Latin *trans* ‘over’ + *vestire* ‘to clothe’; Italian *travestire* ‘to disguise’) in that Glover ‘disguises’ Pantagruel’s spirit in the figure of his female protagonist who completes the original itinerary (which was Cartier’s itinerary in the first place) and thereby solicits our critical attention to the ambivalences of the heterogeneous discourses underlying the imperial dreams of Rabelais’ France.

Marguerite’s account of her journey and physical ordeal in the wilds of colonial Canada is rendered through a narrative taste for what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, discursive structures rooted in the culture of the medieval marketplace where comic rituals of the feast of fools were used to dismantle the prevalent social order by temporarily suspending ‘prohibitions and hierarchical barriers’. 16 The ideological fulcrum of the carnival spirit, as Bakhtin shows, is the subversion of authority (particularly that of the Church) by way of mockery and a penchant for obscenity and the grotesque. The carnivalesque, in other words, may be seen as a temporary legitimation of the transgressive that was particularly associated with the life of the body and its ‘material bodily lower stratum’. 17 Glover’s protagonist has a similar gift for tugging at the beard of the feudal and ecclesiastical world. For one, she gleans comic purpose from her description of the General who maroons her on the island: “His hair is cropped short like a sheep pasture, but his moustaches hang long and lank down the sides of his thin dour mouth. A strip of black beard sprouts beneath his lower lip” (27). In lampooning the General and thus denigrating his authority on board, Marguerite bites the thumb of the patriarchal society that puts constraints on her social identity as a woman in medieval Europe. Her sense of freedom and rebellion find their carnivalesque expression in the excessive pleasures of the flesh she shares on the ship with her suitor Richard:

But remembering a certain apostate nun I saw burned last summer drives me to my peak, and I come, shouting Hail Mary. My body heaves voluptuously. At the same moment, Richard, the so-called etc., vomits toward the shit bucket and the inquisitive rat, then lies there spent, feverish, the colour of parchment. (21)

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15 Bakhtin 379.  
16 Bakhtin 89.  
17 Bakhtin 395.
Marguerite’s verbal dexterity partakes of the grotesque, which, as Bakhtin observes, “was the basis of all the abuses, uncrowning, teasing, and impertinent gestures (as pointing at the nose or the buttocks, spitting, and others).” Characteristically, the comic footprint of this rhetoric is twofold, for it brings together the opposing poles of life and death. Marguerite’s sexual pleasure derives, at least partly, from her memory of a nun’s death, which is suggestive of her sexual passion (the nun was burned, thus sharing in the Passion of Christ) as much as her invective attitude towards ecclesiastical power. By directing our gaze at the nether regions of the body and its fluids, Glover also highlights the metaphorical implications of the body in Elle. The discourse of obscenity Marguerite uses is suggestive of Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque body, which is conceived as ’a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed.’ Much like Marguerite’s sexual fantasy, the grotesque body merges life and death; it is a body that is conscious of its own deconstructive and transitive force, a body in need of the Other.

This may explain why Glover uses the body as a metaphor for Marguerite’s colonial agency: the body as a sexual territory becomes coextensive with the colonial map of the Canadian wilderness. Predictably, Glover mocks the geographical exploration of the colonial territory through a carnivalised depiction of his protagonist’s sexual activity. Desire is at the heart of Marguerite’s colonial effort:

“Founding a colony in the New World is like the act of love. You make camp in the heart of the other. Nothing is the way you expected it. You have to learn to talk another language. Translation fails. The languages get mixed up with each other. You’re both disappointed. You ask yourself why you came there in the first place. You both feel invaded. You try harder and harder to make the other person do as you want, all the while feeling that this defeats the purpose. You would rather be alone. The thing you love seems altered, even dead. You are not the same as you were before you fell in love. When it’s over, you leave part of yourself behind. If you survive, you are worse off than when you started.” (108)

While extending the metaphors of love and translation to colonisation is symptomatic of Marguerite’s ambivalent position in the colonial quest (being a woman she is both the subject and object of the discourse of power), her observation about the reciprocity of the epistemological shift taking place in the encounter with alterity suggests that Glover is primarily interested in the bilateral effect of transculturation in the course of which ‘you are not the same as you were before’. In this sense, transculturation unfolds as an act of metamorphosis, in which disparate cultural consciousnesses collide and become aware of their own epistemological constraints.

Marguerite’s observation that ‘Translation fails.’ seems to be crucial here for it reminds us of Lotman’s observations about the semiotic structure of culture. For Lotman, culture is a semiosphere, a heterogeneous space composed of different languages, each of which constitutes ‘a cluster of semiotic spaces and their

\[18\] Bakhtin 341.

\[19\] Bakhtin 317.
boundaries’.\textsuperscript{20} The boundary is key to the efficiency of the dialogue between cultures and different languages within the same cultural universe. In Lotman’s words, ‘The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into “our” language, it is where what is “external” is transformed into what is “internal”’.\textsuperscript{21} To use Pratt’s terminology, the boundary is not unlike a ‘contact zone’, where the communication between Self and Other takes place. In Marguerite’s case, her body becomes the ever-shifting boundary whose range she examines every time she encounters the cultural Other in the New World. Her perception of failed translation may be attributed to her ambivalent status both in France and in Canada. As a French aristocrat, she is promised access to power, yet as a woman, she is made cognizant of her disenfranchisement. Similarly, as an imperial subject in the colonial territory, she embodies the ‘imperial eyes’, to use Pratt’s phrasing, yet as a single European woman in the Canadian wilderness she finds herself vulnerable to the reality of cultural difference. Her identity is effectively constituted by liminality: ‘You go on a journey, but instead of returning you find yourself frozen on the periphery, the place between places, in a state of being neither one nor the other’ (167).

The protagonist’s journey over the ocean and across the Canadian wilderness is a powerful evocation of etymological memory: the young woman is literally subjected to transculturation, thrown beyond the parameters of her own culture, in the sense of ‘trans-’ as Latin ‘across, over, beyond’. Stranded on the Isle of Demons, Marguerite resorts to the scanty vocabulary of the ‘savage’ tongue as taught by Jacques Cartier: ‘The native word for girl is agnyaquesta. For friend, aguyase. Pubic hair, aggonson. Look at me, quatgathoma. The moon, assomaha. Give me supper, quazahoa quatfream. Testicles, xista’ (44). This may be read as her attempt to move beyond the familiar linguistic universe and connect with the alien world. Curiously, the words she has learned testify both to her reliance on the European cultural codes, which posit her as ‘superior’ to the Natives (notice the imperative constructions she employs), and her rebellious nature as signalled by the fair share of sexual argot not necessarily instrumental to her survival. Ironically, she also soon learns that Cartier’s glossary, much like the European idea of the New World, is not adequate for the North American reality: ‘They speak a different language here. Or maybe M. Cartier made up those lexicons out of his imagination’ (78). Glover mocks the colonial discourse that invented the New World, turning his female protagonist into a voice of the boundary on which transcultural experiences are inscribed and examined. In so far as she embodies the consciousness of the boundary, Marguerite’s thoughts reflect the ambivalence of power dynamics in the process of the cultural dialogue: ‘Or maybe the savages purposely misled him. Okay, okay, let’s give him aguyase, I have bird shit on my face’ (78). On the one hand, her discourse steps into the territory of obscenity to challenge Cartier’s authority on the meaning of the unfamiliar cultural world, thus simultaneously bringing to doubt the whole conception of her cognitive universe. On the other hand, though, she remains within the shackles of the binary opposition Us/Them, unable to look at the Native inhabitants as ‘different’ rather than ‘savages’. Substantially, then, the ideological ambiguity of Marguerite’s rhetoric is contiguous with the aura of the ‘grotesque’ that surrounds her body. She welcomes

\textsuperscript{21} Lotman \textit{Universe} 136-7.
the Other, but only to the extent where it can be assimilated to the boundaries of the Self.

The context of colonial history in Elle emphasises the incommensurability of the process of transculturation. The novel juxtaposes two models of the experience of the ‘contact zone’: Marguerite’s somewhat privileged narrative and the haunting silence of the Native girl, Comes Winter, that Cartier has brought from Canada. While Glover’s protagonist survives her quest, the indigenous woman is shown slowly dying in the captivity of ‘civilisation’: ‘There are dark stains down her breast, a bracket of dried blood inside one nostril. Her dark skin is ashen with pallor. She smells sourly of death’ (177). What most compromises Marguerite’s triumph is the inaccessibility of the Native girl’s own epistemological terms: her silence taints Marguerite’s (and our) transcultural understanding by denying us the possibility of knowing her mind. Marguerite’s voice displaces that of the indigenous girl’s much like the ‘contact zone’ in the Canadian wilderness becomes displaced in the ‘prison’ of the French household, which remains beyond access to the language of the Other and thereby beyond understanding. Although likened to her French counterpart in terms of her gendered marginality and migration, the Aboriginal girl gains her presence and meaning in the narrative only through bodily gestures as interpreted by Marguerite. It is her body that mirrors the boundaries of the ‘contact zone’, bemoaning the destruction of selfhood that her encounter with the French colonists has brought about:

She coughs till it seems something will snap inside her slender frame. She gags, spits blood, heaves, clutching her ribs with bone-thin fingers, her eyes inward and terror-struck. Will I drown? they ask. Will it be now? So far from home? ... When the New and the Old World meet, first we exchange corpses. (178)

Symptomatically, Comes Winter gains meaning primarily as an object of the imperial gaze, whose observations paradoxically reiterate Marguerite’s own sexual ‘heaving’ and ‘clutching’ on her way to Canada. In effect, the Aboriginal woman is an inversion of Marguerite herself, as she, too, finds herself in exile, living with a foreign man, and fighting for survival. Their connection is further reinforced in Marguerite’s taking over of the care of a bear that the indigenous girl looked after in Cartier’s home.

The figure of the bear is central to Marguerite’s experience of Canada and its cultural universe. Her confrontation with and slaying of a female bear in the wilderness is followed by her meeting of Itslk, an Inuk hunter, who stays to live with her. With her lover Richard and her nurse Bastienne dead, Marguerite is left all alone except for the child she is expecting, a child that will also die upon birth. In her starving solitude she meets ‘a man with tennis rackets on his feet’ (78). She tries to speak to the man using Cartier’s ‘vocabulary’, but the man does not seem to understand: ‘In my confusion, I think I tell him to come to bed. It doesn’t matter, he doesn’t seem to understand ... It is always thus when one encounters another – child, father, friend, enemy, savage, astral being. A world of confusion, just like love’ (78). Ironically, when the man does respond, he addresses the narrator in French and not only explains that he is hunting a bear in order to save his community from starvation, but also comments on her sexual appeal: ‘I don’t like to mention it, but you are so
ugly it will be difficult to sleep with you. (Laughter)’ (80). What is particularly interesting here, is our awareness of the Native man’s aesthetic gaze which challenges the female protagonist’s colonial quest and the relations of power entailed in it as well as reminds her of her own vulnerability as an object of male desire: ‘I feel suddenly naked, shy’ (79).

Marguerite’s relationship with Itslk lies at the heart of the novel’s problematising of transculturation. In so far as they are elements of two distinct cultural worlds, their engagement with each other is suggestive of a dialogue between cultures, where each party seeks to understand the Other. This is especially true of Itslk, who examines the objects he finds with Marguerite: ‘He brought me my English Bible. What’s this? he said. These are words, I said, pointing to the text. He put his ear to the pages and listened intently, looked disappointed’ (85). In line with what Lotman says about cultural translation as an assimilation of foreign elements into one’s own cultural system, Itslk attempts to explain the phenomena associated with Marguerite by way of translating them into his own cognitive universe. Yet again, translation fails because as part of an oral culture, he does not share in the code of conventional reality accepted by the societies of writing. Similarly, when looking at Richard’s tennis racquet, Itslk recognises the image of his own snowshoes: ‘He brought in Richard’s tennis racquet. And this? he asked. He pointed to his snowshoes’ (85). In this we are made aware of the contingency of the meaning of things on the cultural system of which they are a part.

Marguerite, too, develops an awareness of the contingency of cultural categories and her reliance on Eurocentrism:

Instead of all the appurtenances of civilized life, I have Itslk (as close as I can come to spelling his name), my fat, bustling, talkative savage paramour. I use the words ‘savage’ and ‘paramour’ ironically. Itslk insists that all the savages live south of us, up the Great River. His people live to the north and call themselves the People, as if they were the only ones. (83)

Itslk’s suggestion that the ‘savages’ live south of his people is reminiscent of Lotman’s proposition that ‘Every culture begins by dividing the world into “its own” internal space and “their” external space.’ Thus, Marguerite’s own earlier observations about the wildness of the alien territory may also be considered in light of the structural mapping inherent to all cultures. As she faces the reality of the Canadian wilderness, though, Glover’s protagonist comes to realise that the alien space makes her question her own habitual ways of thinking: ‘The Old World is based on a dream of order, with God at the top and descending through the angels to men to the nobler animals to plants to inanimate objects. Once this vision was real to me, but now I am of the opinion that it is only a hopeful metaphor’ (107). As she struggles to survive, eating up the salt fish, the seabirds and even the books in her possession, the narrator becomes aware of the extent to which the otherness of the alien territory has invaded her own body: ‘I cannot bear to look at myself covered as I am with red mud, insect bites, scrapes, calluses and bruises. In my own country, I would be laughed at and taken for a savage’ (49). She becomes conscious of both the

22 Lotman Universe 131.
limitations of her Old-World identity and the transformative effective of her experience in the wilderness.

The transformative force of the cross-cultural encounter affects both Itslk and Marguerite. In truth, one may say that transculturation gears Itslk towards his meeting of Glover’s protagonist because his hunting of the bear is a response to the European ‘visitors’ who intruded into the life of his family and community and disrupted its natural flow: ‘They gutted, split and salted the fish and left them on the racks to dry ... The men made free with his wife when she visited, but the hunter did not mind because there was a custom in his land about sharing wives. Though the visitors seemed not to understand the custom and laughed at him and abused his wife’ (92-3). At the same time, his interaction with the intruders uncovers his own gift for languages (and thus a potential understanding of the Other’s terms): ‘I can speak a little Basque. Not so much. You speak Portuguese? We could practise together. I don’t like the Spanish, always making the sign of the cross’ (80). Arguably, Itslk’s exposure to cultural difference suggests that transculturation need not, strictly speaking, be seen as an axiological term. If anything, Itslk’s experience shows that cultural constructs are capable of accommodating otherness without complete assimilation, so long as they seek understanding rather than appropriation and eventual subjugation. Itslk’s suspicion that Marguerite may be a cannibal becomes an ironic reminder of her role as a colonial agent in Canada: ‘He says he dreamed I had turned into a cannibal and was going to eat him’ (88). In fact, the narrative abounds in imagery (presented in similes) suggestive of the protagonist’s starved mind: Bastienne’s face is compared to ‘an old turnip’ (25), Richard’s death is accompanied by a sudden appearance of a seal (56), her dead baby is visualised as a fish (102). Eating is a denied pleasure Marguerite is looking for everywhere on the island. Glover extends the metaphor of colonisation as cultural ingestion, building the ambiguity of cannibalistic activity around the female agent of the colonial quest.

It is in this respect that Marguerite’s experience of transculturation unveils its own ambivalence as well. Facing the interface of two cultural systems, French and Aboriginal, her metamorphosis may be related to Lotman’s idea of ‘explosion’. For Lotman, culture is a mobile system generated by ‘dynamic (explosive) and gradual processes’. Explosion is an outcome of the unpredictability, which results from the intersection of different semiotic systems in a cognitive framework. Such explosive cultural phenomena have the power to remodel both individual and collective consciousness. But, as Lotman points out,

The transformation, which occurs at the true moment of explosion, having been filtered by the lattice of the modelling of consciousness which converts the random into the regular, does not as yet complete the process of consciousness. This mechanism must also include the act of memory, which allows us to return once more to the moment preceding the explosion and to replay the entire process retrospectively. There are now, three layers of consciousness: the moment of primary explosion, the moment it is realized by the mechanisms of consciousness and at the moment of its redoubling in the structure of memory. The last layer is the mechanism of art.24

23 Lotman Culture 8.
24 Lotman Culture 150.
Within the context of Glover’s novel, the ‘explosive’ reach of Marguerite’s experience in Canada is made manifest most evidently in the episodes of her encounter with the she-bear and a female shaman who teaches her how to turn into a bear. The parallel between Marguerite and the bear is foregrounded throughout the entire narrative: in the beginning we discover that her family coat of arms features ‘two bears rampant over a field of waves’ (32), the narrator observes the Bear constellations in the Canadian sky (49) and she recurrently claims that her situation is ‘unbearable’. Finally, she confronts a white bear in the Canadian wilderness: ‘The bear is skin and bones, mostly bones, much as I am myself.’ (68) Another inverted image of the protagonist, the bear operates as a sacrificial figure suggestive of Marguerite’s loss of her old identity and attainment of a new one: ‘Oh bear, I think. Oh, my saviour bear. Then I forget myself and thank the Lord Cudragny for his bounty and fall asleep and dream I am a bear, young and strong, hunting seals along some distant arctic coastline’ (71). The bear’s blood, one might say, inscribes her with transcultural knowledge, which is later extended in her apprenticeship as a shape-shifter. The protagonist’s partaking of the bear’s identity – having learned to shape-shift – may be interpreted as an act of the Lotmanian ‘explosion’, which reshapes her own cognitive world (her sense of cultural identity) as much as the cultural universe to which she returns. After all, the ‘explosive’ force of transculturation affects both the peripheral world of the colonies and the imperial centre.

The most immediate impact of transculturation on the imperial world emerges as Marguerite returns to France to practice shape-shifting and eventually kill the man who abandoned her on the Isle of Demons: ‘Beside myself (or not myself) with rage, dim-eyed, scenting blood, I slash the General’s moaning form’ (201). Her memory of the events in the wilderness as well as her need to arrange them into a story are suggestive of the completion of the ‘three layers of consciousness’ Lotman observes in the consequence of cultural explosion: ‘I have told my story over and over to anyone who will listen, have alienated erstwhile friends, lovers and well-wishers’ (195). In effect, it is because her story has an ‘explosive’ force that it alerts us to the ambivalent nature of the transcultural experience, suggesting that engagement with cultural difference always brings us to the edge of the cognitive universe we inhabit and prompts us to expose ourselves to the unpredictability of cultural translation, which is bound to result in a deconstruction of familiar codes and perceptions. This may not, as Glover shows, altogether subvert the dominant dynamics of power, but it reminds us how instrumental discourse is in mediating our knowledge and understanding of cultural sameness and difference.

Marguerite’s experience of the ‘contact zone’ poses a serious question about what it means to be savage and civilised, emphasising that these concepts are not givens, but rather discursive constructs through which we organise our cultural space. Glover refuses to uphold the simplistic opposition familiar vs strange as representations of the dichotomy Western civilisation vs indigenous Other, pointing out that Marguerite’s transcultural experience uncovers her own alterity she has not been aware of. While offering a powerfully symbolic commentary on European colonial practices, the novel focuses on the impact these practices had not only on the indigenous populations, but also on the colonial settlers themselves. For Glover,
discourse is the ‘contact zone’ par excellence, a topos of storytelling that initiates ‘explosive’ epistemological shifts in readers who allow their minds to travel and metamorphose. In this sense, transculturation may be conceived as a defamiliarisation of patterns and codes of the cognitive universe (both one’s own and that of the Other) that results in ‘epistemic transcoding’ in the course of the encounter with alterity, fictional as much as empirical.