

The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa
Stephanie Newell
255 pages, 2013, \$32.95 (paperback)
Athens, OH, Ohio University Press

Reviewed by Esther de Bruijn, University of Lethbridge, AB

Stephanie Newell's *Power to Name* serves up a robust, multi-pronged challenge: to Western scholarship of anonymity and literature, which frequently centers on uncovering authors' "real" identities; to the common assumption in media history that throughout the colonial period the African press was driven by nationalism and democratically "expressed a homogenous imagined community" (46); to postcolonial criticism that continues to polarize colonizer and colonized in defining "colonial culture." Providing original analysis of African-owned newspapers from colonial West Africa and of British colonial records, Newell hones in on the practices of obscuring or omitting proper names to reveal how writers and their readers confront, manipulate, evade and negotiate with colonial power and its ideologies. This leads to her central intervention, which is to "expand the framework of theories of colonial subjectivity" (181). She does so by showing how African newspapers from the 1880s to the 1940s—specifically, the printed text disconnected from personal authorship—shaped African identity constructions in relation to colonial power. In the newspapers, the printed word—shed of individual identity markers—manifests as public opinion to be debated and contested.

Newell's resistance to the biographical turn from which many anonymity studies proceed is a political move, whereby she asserts that such "biographizing" of colonial-era local authors risks replicating the colonial obsession with reifying singular identities. Countering the "'self-versus-pseudonym' model" (181) of anonymity studies, *Power to Name* effectively demonstrates how in this period names were "compound and mobile" (21), and how anonymity functioned variously in a range of newspaper forums. We may not be surprised to learn that up until the 1930s, West African newspaper editors and contributors to political columns used initials and pseudonyms to evade colonial charges of libel or sedition. However, the finding that the most subversive writing, published from the 1930s onward, is penned, not just by named, but by "celebrity" journalists who inscribed "themselves into the roll call of African heroes" (94) overturns expectations that as writers' criticisms of colonial rule intensified, authors would necessarily hide behind the shield of pseudonymity. Newell further dismisses the notion that anonymity functions to hide subversives: she suggests that folktale submissions entirely stripped of named authorship did not direct poisonous barbs at any colonial authority or legislation; rather, the anonymous text made possible a new literary print aesthetic, whereby authors "shifted agency onto the tale in the name of public opinion" (121). Taking another, important

angle on encounters with colonial authority, *Power to Name* illustrates how both men and women authors ventriloquized as “[n]ominal [l]adies” (158) to play with the subject position of the modern, urban African woman, in response to (and often replication of) the “colonial patrolling of intimacy” (134).

All of these cases work together to illustrate the book’s central aim: to show how the “colonial public sphere” was constructed through the West African-owned press. To this end, Newell incisively revises the Habermasian concept of “public sphere,” noting the hierarchical nature of Habermas’s notion. She does not hesitate to admit that early West African newspapers similarly excluded some local audiences along class and gender lines; the journalists were almost all educated men of elite standing. The significant incursion that Newell makes is to show that whereas Habermas’s public sphere relied upon principles of liberal democratic representation within the nation-state, West Africa’s colonized populations were afforded no such governmental representation. Instead, they turned to newspapers as their one unifying mode of political representation—as one of her cited editorials is entitled, their “Fourth and Only Estate” (31).

Newell’s most fascinating new work on West Africans’ participation in the colonial public sphere is taken up in Parts I and II, where she analyzes West African newspaper columns together with correspondence between London’s Colonial Office and stationed colonial governors. This section reveals how West African journalists were able to take advantage of a contradiction in colonial law to protect their own freedom of expression. Understanding that the Colonial Office’s official policy was to extend the British freedom of the press—including the right to anonymity—to African-owned presses and that individual governors would nonetheless attempt to quash publications deemed libellous or seditious, newspaper writers and editors wielded colonial law to defend their right to publish anonymously; thus, they articulated their agency “through the framework of colonial jurisprudence” (97). Providing her readers with a captivating sample of her source material, Newell includes in the appendix an entertaining court transcript in which newspaperman I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, trickster-like, successfully evades charges of libel and sedition in Sierra Leone’s colonial court by separating his personal-subject from his pen-subject, “acting as a discursive function, rather than a human subject” (91).

Part III explores how colonial West African authors used female pseudonyms to generate imaginative responses to colonial regulation of gender relations. Here, Newell helpfully proposes a replacement method for the problematic “gynocritical” sleuthing (159) that scholars have tended to inflict upon female-voiced pseudonymous texts and that risks essentializing femininity. Instead, Newell suggests, one should judge “the competence of [the authors’] gender performance,” asking how successfully the author “articulate[s] and perform[s] the range of socially mobile gender positions circulating in the culture” and look for the extent to which “‘masculine’ bias” is conveyed by ‘feminine’ narrator[s]” (167). These chapters also provide further historical

substantiation for the groundbreaking claims that Newell makes in *Ghanaian Popular Fiction*—namely, that early West African popular literature is governed by a discursive aesthetic that invites local readers to symbolically mediate matters of public opinion, especially about shifting gender roles. Newell cleverly adopts this aesthetic herself by posing the question of the value of “biographizing” in her Introduction. Indeed, by postponing her individual judgment until the very end of the book, she sets up the question as a dilemma for her own readers to participate in as they read.

At the same time as *Power to Name* brings to light an important historical archive of writing, and offers innovative methods for analyzing such texts, Newell indicates that explorations into West African newspaper literatures as records of cultural history have only just begun (132). Her vibrant analyses of the cross-gender writing experiments of Nigerian journalists—drawn from Karin Barber’s translated edition of I. B. Thomas’s “Sẹgilọla of the Fascinating Eyes” and an archive of J. V. Clinton’s collected writing recently uncovered by David Pratten—underscores the methodological pertinence of collaborative work in the field of African popular arts.

Overall, Newell’s important study demonstrates how lesser-known historical West African texts are able to challenge conventional understandings of subject formation in historical periods. *Power to Name* also highlights the urgency to recover, preserve and digitize texts like these that are buried in disparate archives.