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Along the Borders of the Postcolonial Book

Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World
Richard Watts
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Formally and thematically, the trajectory of postcolonial literatures has always moved along borders, margins, frames and limits, and as such, its history is very much also a *paratextual* narrative. In his book on the postcolonial paratext, Richard Watts provides a much-needed study of the transfers, negotiations, and controlling mechanisms surrounding the so-called francophone literatures during and after colonialism. Beginning with an investigation of the paratextual aspect in early pre-war sub-Saharan African texts, Watts traces a historical development from a fairly limited authorial control to a gradual transfer of authority from colonizer to the colonised. He then meticulously points out the paratextual ambiguities in de-colonial, post-war texts attempting to break free from the colonial discourse; however, a levelling of the vertical power relation embedded in the paratextual framework does not occur until the Seventies, when an actual *postcolonial* identity begins to emerge. Accompanying the rise of postcoloniality is also the growing metropolitan hunger for non-metropolitan texts, and Watts suitably concludes his book with a paratextual reflection on the homogenising and commodifying effects of translation in the global market place.

Packaging Post/Coloniality is divided into three sections, roughly corresponding to three historical epistemes, namely the colonial, de-colonial, and postcolonial. In the first section, "The Colonial Paratext and Its Imperial Desires," Watts discusses the sub-Saharan African writer Ahmadou Mapaté Diagne and his didactic novel *Les trois volontés de Malic* from 1920. The paratextual dimension of Diagne's novel illuminates a complex, *vertical* register of tense and anxious power relations underlying the necessary collaborative manoeuvres of an early colonized author, who, in order to be published, had to comply with a number of discursive regulations which fundamentally compromised his identity as a novelist. Dedicated to the influential colonial administrator A.M. Georges Hardy, Diagne's novel was commissioned by the French publishing company *Larousse*, intended to be used as a propagandist text book in colonial schools. Deliberately avoiding a moral debate about the ethics of collaboration in early, didactic colonized literature, Watts instead

attempts to trace the ways in which the mediations of authority, control, and legitimacy operate at a paratextual level; arguing, with Fanon, that Diagne's novel reveals a "split consciousness" of the colonized, Watts investigates how the novel stages a legitimacy complying with the authoritative regulations of colonial discourse by reproducing a familiar metropolitan realist code, a staging that is *directed* by the paratextual dimension, thus reducing the specificity of the foreign context, in order to be translated into a "white" metropolitan discourse. A more intrusive example of paratextual colonial authority appears in Georges Hardy's preface to Paul Hazoumé's *Doguicimi* (1938), in which a rhetoric is employed to transfer authorial authority from the author to the French colonial system, placing Hazoumé "in debt" to a superior metropolitan culture that alone has the power to legitimise his status as a writer.

Not all texts, however, were inserted within the colonial paratextual frame; the Parisian intellectual Jean-Richard Bloch's preface to Bakary Diallo's *Forcé-Bonté* (1926) re-plugs the text more positively in the metropolitan system of literature, which, however, equally attempts to control, legitimise and direct authorial authority with reference to a context that *removes* Diallo's text from its own context of origins. The French *mission civilisatrice*, which had framed the cultural productions from sub-Saharan Africa, came under pressure in North African and Indochinese regions, where pre-existing infrastructures meant that a different colonial paratextual authority was manifested. Watts traces the popular genre of colonial literature emerging from these regions, often written by colonial administrators, which distinguished itself from metropolitan exotic travel literature by stressing authenticity, rootedness and realism. This emphasis led to an aporetic situation when indigenous North-African and Indochinese literary productions began to emerge; on the one hand, both colonial and indigenous texts seemed to promote the importance of colonial discourse, contrasting metropolitan discourse, while indigenous literature, on the other hand, complicated the situation of colonial literature by rendering it inauthentic or illegitimate. Watts demonstrates how indigenous literature was framed paratextually by colonisers promoting the phantasmatic discourse of *métissage*, an allegedly harmonious and vital form of mixed ethnicity, which nevertheless revealed the distance between colonisers and colonised, exposing a crudely selective colonial phantasm of authenticity, always premised on the basis of the colonizers' cultural paradigm, thus effectively controlling and delegating the threatening and troubling legitimacy and authenticity of the indigenous through an anxious attempt to *close* the gap between colonizer and colonised.

In the second part of the book, titled "The Textual Itineraries of Decolonization," Watts investigates the paratextual dimension in Francophone postcolonial literature that in a dramatic way signalled the changing relations of authority and power between France and its colonies in the post-war era. With the paradigmatic publication of *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948), which was edited by Léopold

Sédar Senghor and prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre, two of the most significant literary patrons of the emerging Francophone postcolonial literature were brought together. Approaching their anti-colonial efforts through the perspective of the paratextual dimension, Watts outlines an elaborated analysis of the more ambiguous aspects of strategies which, despite the explicit anti-colonial intentions, in many ways repeated the rhetorical traps of the colonial discourse. Over the years, Senghor wrote more than thirty prefaces to Francophone texts, and according to Watts they "convey the ambiguity of their chronotope in their reliance on rhetorical strategies of promotion that date from the colonial episteme, even if they are employed in the service of decolonization" (72). Arduously attempting to carve out an autonomous, original space for indigenous, de-colonial literary voices, Senghor's important yet problematic paratextual gestures "belong to an episteme between the colonial and the postcolonial, an episteme where the only apparent response to colonial authority, for Senghor at least, is its symmetrical obverse" (86).

On the other side of the cultural gap, the support of Sartre and other Parisian intellectuals proved equally vital, and equally problematic, for the emerging francophone postcolonial literary voices. Increasingly aware of his own irrelevance as a patron, Sartre's prefaces to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, and later Fanon's *Les danmés de la terre* (1961), nevertheless re-inscribe the authority of metropolitan patronage, revealing the limitations of a discursive paratextual logic in which also Senghor was trapped. Gradually being redefined through the (failed) efforts of de-colonial patrons, the discursive paratextual logic underwent a number of transformations which Watts traces through a paratextual reading of one of the texts which inspired Sartre's anti-colonial interventions—Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, first published in 1939, a text whose history also tells the histories of many different framings and cultural contexts in which it was and still is re-plugged.

In the third and last section of the book, "Postcolonial Transfigurations of the Book," Watts discusses paratextual configurations during the global, postmodernist condition. Using Henri Lopes and Edouard Glissant as examples, Watts argues that in the postcolonial phase, following the colonial and de-colonial phases, the logic of the paratextual architecture of the book is fundamentally questioned, destabilised and exploited in new and more transgressive ways. The self-reflexive, paratextual practice of both Lopes and Glissant attempts to "break down the border between the inside and the outside of the text" (121), using strategies of parody, displacement, doubling, mimicry, dialogue, irony and meta-fiction, thus maintaining the ambivalence which, although present in prefaces in earlier paratextual framings, was too easily repressed and covered up. Although the oppressive shadows of authority cannot be completely erased, Lopes' and Glissant's subversive and transgressive paratextual practices suggest according to Watts, "in the contemporary

episteme, non-metropolitan literature does not require a paratext that functions like a passport" (135).

The success of postcolonial literature in the global market also raises a different set of questions, besides the ones regarding resistance and neo-colonial power structures, namely issues of commodification and marketability. These issues are the subject of the last two chapters, which investigate the paratextual dimensions of gender and translation. In the postcolonial period, Watts argues, "the gender of the author begins to have a transformative effect on the form, that is to say the gender, of the paratext. The paratext is effectively transformed from a masculinized site of authority to a feminized site of exchange in the works of postcolonial women writers" (140). Packaged for metropolitan consumption, women writers are often invested with a *documentary* authority via paratextual interventions: "They simply vouch for the reliability of the woman writer and of her appropriateness as witness to a particular event, or, more often, sociological condition" (146). Counter-examples of this reductive discourse are provided through readings of Assia Djebar, and others, who *feminizes* the paratextual authority in similar, but distinct, ways as in the cases of Lopes and Glissant, by explicitly referring to the history and representation of women's writing within a postcolonial perspective.

In a wider perspective, the paratextual dimension of francophone postcolonial texts registers a transformation of the global commodification, displacing and distorting the contextual origins of the texts through translations into, predominantly, English, as the new dominating mono-linguistic standard. Following the logic of marketability, global paratextual framings often tend to "reduce the text to an easily assimilable form of otherness" (161), since foreign, translated literary texts tend to sell less. Analysing the cultural transformations of the Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau's works, Watts argues that his translated novels often have been inserted under the all-subsuming category of "world literature," which reduces the cultural specificity and locality of the texts, that is, their foreignness. In Watts's view, this in fact reinserts the texts in a new form of exoticising, universalising and a-historical constellation. Chamoiseau's texts, Watts suggests, become migrants in a sense, abandoning their original context and being re-plugged in an adopted culture: "The paratext, in this analogy, is not so much the passport but the garment of integration or assimilation that the text is obliged to wear in order to find its place in the land of immigration" (171).

One of the aspects which Watts to a certain extent evades is the question to what extent postmodernist-oriented postcolonial literary forms must be seen as complicit with the homogenising processes of global, metropolitan appropriation of foreign literatures. Although Watts cogently demonstrates, as we saw earlier, the paratextual postmodernist playfulness in Glissant's and Lopes' practices, one is left with the sense that subversive and transgressive postcolonial strategies are somehow limited to the field of postmodernist explorations of aporetic constellations. It is in this sense that the paratextual limits of Watts' own book appear;

approaching the postcolonial book with a pre-conceived notion of what constitutes "subversive" and "transgressive" textual qualities, corresponding to some of the dominating postmodernist-oriented theories in the field of postcolonial studies, Watts excludes a more elaborated investigation of the ways in which the successfully cosmopolitanised postcolonial text employs what has become a global mono-linguistic standard of exchange, which nonetheless *paratextually* is legitimised through a rhetorical logic of allegedly "subversive" and "transgressive" trans-coding. Despite all the problems involved in the global translational process, Watts argues that there are certain advantages such as the hybridisation and dissemination of foreignness unburdened by the past, thus destabilise fixed paratextual frameworks: "the paratext in translation is free of the colonial ballast that weighed it down in the French publishing context, and the neo-colonial ballast that in certain instances continues to weigh it down" (172). By avoiding ethnocentrism, exoticism and crude generalisations, the paratexts to translated texts, Watts suggests, can potentially be conceived as operating in a similar manner as Edward Said's "Travelling Theory" (1982), that is, as contextual frameworks "reimagined in each chronotope where they appear" (173). The re-imaginations are endless, as are the changing paratextual frameworks, and as such, global translation constitutes a danger as well as a source of possibilities. It constitutes a source of possibilities for all those texts which employ an innovative, transgressive textual modality, while excluding all others. In this sense, the postmodernist-oriented paratext in translation has exactly become the new passport by which texts can claim their validity in the global market. Overall, however, Watts' book provides a detailed study of an aspect which for too long has remained on the border in postcolonial studies.