

Borders and comparative media studies: the politics of crossing

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Pier Paolo Frassinelli, *Borders, Media Crossings and the Politics of Translation: The Gaze from Southern Africa*, Routledge: London-New York, 2020 (142 pages)

ABSTRACT

Borders, Media Crossings and the Politics of Translation is a crucial meditation both on the contemporary fate of the humanities, which see their internal borders dissolving, and on the fate of our contemporary world, which sees its borders thriving. Paradoxically, the more the humanities try to bridge the gaps between the written, the oral, the aural, and the visual, the more our contemporary world tries to tear its own body into pieces, enclosing them with material and immaterial fences. Frassinelli tries to scrutinise this critical panorama from the angle of South Africa, with the help of a number of scholars, such as Edward Said, Jean and John Comaroff, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Sandro Mezzadra, Brett Neilson, Naoki Sakai, Walter Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Roland Barthes, and through a number of African novelists (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, NoViolet Bulawayo) and film directors (Tunda wa Munga, Neill Blomkamp, wa Luruli).

Keywords

South, translation, coloniality, novel, media, cyborature

The contemporary world is related to a specific order, the order of neoliberalism. Tellingly, the study opens precisely with this premise: “The neoliberal world order is the scene of a proliferation, rescaling, militarisation, walling, securitisation and externalisation of territorial borders” (1). If this is so, then, Frassinelli’s answer to the partition of social and geopolitical space is the re-evaluation of the concept of translation: translation as a *political* practice of bridging the gap between people separated by physical and cultural walls. In short, we may say that the six chapters which constitute the book try to propose the following claim: if a world alienated by the proliferation of borders is both the scene and the problem, (the study of) media that cross the borders within the humanities is the solution.

The first chapter, titled “The gaze from the south,” echoes the subtitle of the whole study. If according to Mignolo one is where s/he thinks from, Frassinelli *is from* South Africa, where he has lived and thought for the last fifteen years. It is a return gaze (Chakrabarty) from a space which is part of the south-north meta-border, whose hegemony starts with the end of

World War II, when the rhetoric of the civilizing mission was displaced by the one of development and modernisation thriving even more when, in 1989, the West/East division of the Cold War fell.

Of course, Frassinelli participates in the debate of “where the south begins and ends.” His stance is that the south is more a relational concept than a geopolitical category (Comaroff and Comaroff); that the north contains much south and that the south has become part of the north (Balibar). In 2018 India surpassed the UK to become the world’s 5th largest economy, not to mention that Australia and New Zealand are always part of the south. Finally, he aptly states that “the south-north divide designates the main geopolitical displacement of the internal division of capital that Karl Marx taught us to know as class” (3). Therefore, I would conclude, the north/south divide is *geography* but also *sociography*. Along this line of thought, the scholar makes clear that the north/south divide is the aftermath of the expansion of capitalism on a world scale (i.e. colonialism, imperialism, globalisation) and, as the decolonial thinkers would have it, the formation of the colonial matrix of power, which made global capitalism possible.

Above all, Frassinelli stresses the deep heterogeneity of the concept of border (Mezzadra-Neilson), which today has to do with symbolic boundaries no longer articulated by geopolitics alone: “The middle and upper classes who sip cappuccinos or drink craft beer in the cafes of affluent Johannesburg suburbs – Frassinelli points out – are in many ways closer to a global middle class than to the informal settlement dwellers who live just a few kilometres down the road” (10). Hence, the importance of underscoring borders as sites of turbulent transformation of the global capital that includes and excludes human beings and, as a result, of emphasising borders as crucial sites of struggle where rights are claimed and possibly acquired.

But, as we said earlier, if the world is more and more divided by borders turned into walls, the politics of translation (Spivak) is more and more crucial as a means of bridging what the politics of borders separates. When we talk of translation, we talk primarily about languages or idioms. And idioms are still governed by asymmetries of power that arrange them hierarchically. Africa has two types of language: the language of colonialism and the colonised indigenous language. To Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, the way out of this binary is the idiom spoken among “border communities,” where a variety of languages are adopted (multilingualism), further to a shared lingua franca that is not displaced but coexists alongside them. Also the “decolonial option” connects the question of translation with borders: “border thinking” (Mignolo) describes a way of thinking coming from a dichotomous locus of enunciation. That is to say, a place at the border of the modern/colonial world system, where, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa’s body is crossed by three languages: Spanish-American, Anglo-American, and Nathual. In this manifold position, what may happen is “double translation”: for instance, the translation occurred in the Zapatista movement that translated Marxist cosmology into Amerindian cosmology, which in turn was modified by the language of Marxist cosmology.

A further important critical tool for Frassinelli is Sakai's theorisation of languages as non-homogeneous entities. According to what Sakai calls "heterolingual address," translation takes place between two heterogeneous communities of foreigners, marked by the instability of the 'we', whose 'togetherness' is not grounded on any common homogeneity. Hence, the homolingual address is considered the modern regime of translation, corresponding to the rise of the nation state, which has tried to erase the multilingual African space.

Following Sakai, Frassinelli underscores the fact that as bordering has nothing to do with the sole separation of land, translation is not just about language. Indeed, translation is also about media, especially at the times of media convergence, when words, music, and (moving) images merge on our digital devices and call for a transdisciplinary approach. He favours the label "comparative media studies" with respect to "digital humanities," in that the latter hints at the mere application of computational tools to traditional disciplines. Indeed, he makes clear that it is necessary to move beyond the "two humanities": literature, history and philosophy on one side and communication and media studies on the other. With this in mind, he focuses on different materials (novels, films, photos...) by studying them through a transdisciplinary approach "combining textual and social analysis" (17).

The second chapter "Heading South" focuses on a reappraisal of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), in particular the notion of the appropriation of the European metropolitan canon by writers from the so-called world peripheries. "In the twenty-first century" – Frassinelli points out – "the association of the term 'metropolitan' with the west comes across as an anachronism" (33), if only because of the 20 largest cities on the planet just one (New York) is located in the west, the rest being in the global south. So, extreme urbanisation as well as capitalist exploitation has moved south and, as the Comaroffs semi-seriously would put it, Euro-America is now evolving toward Africa. In other terms, we are witnessing the end of western hegemony, which however is not the end of capitalism. Hence the examination of the mass cultural production today that the global south is imposing with its diverse histories, to paraphrase Said, on the genres of western mass culture, such as thrillers and science fiction. Hence a gangster noir may be set in the streets of Kinshasa, such as Congolese Djo Tunda Wa Munga's *Viva Riva!* (2010), or as in SF movie an alien spaceship hovers in Johannesburg's skies instead of in Washington's, such as in South African Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). Frassinelli's conclusion is that both movies insert themselves "in a historical narrative in which the African urban locations both films use as settings do not represent the backward other of a western-centred modernity, but rather the present of a world of which they prefigure both the impending crisis and how to survive (in) it" (43).

Chapter 3 is about cultural translatability and untranslatability, taking at its core Ntshavheni wa Luruli's *Elelwani* (2012), a film set on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe and shot in Venda (a minor language spoken by 2% of South Africa's population). Above all, it is a film set in the seemingly marginal context of rural Limpopo but packaged for

the circuits of contemporary global media consumption (wa Luruli worked as Spike Lee's assistant director). Specifically, this chapter revolves around the question of entangled plural temporalities (once finished her university studies, Elelwani, the female protagonist, has to go back to her 'traditional' village life and has to face the problem of her arranged marriage), the question of the double bind in which she finds herself caught (the emancipation as a 'modern' woman / the fight against 'emancipated' colonial culture), the question of untranslatability (the protagonist's and her family's world, which she simultaneously lives in, are mutually untranslatable and the use of catachresis to translate what is untranslatable is often the symptom of this condition). Surprisingly, Elelwani yields to her father's command to marry but only to fight him and his culture from within. Frassinelli concludes that *Elelwani* is a significant film not so much because it is "a literal return to authentic African sources, as an attempt to explore new possibilities for local filmmaking that challenge stereotypes of what an African film should look like and its position within world cinema" (64).

Chapter 4 "Living in translation" starts from Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's notion of "cyborature" that labels the transformation of orature and literature in the age of the Internet and social media, deeming modern western culture and its colonially imposed hierarchy between the written (the master) and the oral (the bondsman) a sort of "aesthetic feudalism." In the age of cyborature, then, the digital "performances" of the best-known African writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole and Binyavanga Wainaina are overwhelming. Seemingly, "new-media-driven narratives" is the phrase coined to describe the border crossing between written literature and the cyborature of novels like Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and, I would add, Adrian Igoni Barrett's *Blackass*, which incorporates (and plays with) blog writing and social media chatting. But NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) is Frassinelli's main concern here, in that this novel puts at centre stage the crossing of both mediatic and physical borders. This book would belong to the new form of "digital migrant novel" that thematises issues of migrant psychology with a focus on media and (cultural/linguistic) translation.

The final two chapters are somehow devoted to post-apartheid South Africa and the failure of the rainbow nation, as South Africa was called after the first democratic election in 1994 for its multi-coloured whole. The failure was disclosed with the xenophobic attacks of 2008, when gangs of armed South Africans attacked ethnic minorities. This racist turmoil, anticipating the current global resurgence of xenophobia, has been mainly understood through the rhetoric of South African exceptionalism. Nevertheless, Frassinelli points out, its class character cannot be overestimated, since those who had been harmed were poor Africans and migrants, easily turned into targetable scapegoats because of the socioeconomic crisis. The post-apartheid crisis has been examined by crossing the border separating the novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and the film *Man on Ground*, considered by the author to be creative responses to that crisis, an offer of a utopian world without borders.

The very last chapter is ingeniously dedicated to the Marikana miners' protest and #RhodesMustFall students' movement at the University of Cape Town. Both events are brilliantly connected and commented, considering them as political signs of hope in post-apartheid crisis. During the Marikana protest, a relevant number of miners were massacred and among them Mgcineni Noki, known as Mambush. This man, thanks to a photo that went viral, showing him in a green blanket while speaking in front of a camera before his murder, became "the man in the green blanket," i.e., a myth-image (Barthes), a signifier not only of the striking miners but also of the decolonial movement #RhodesMustFall. If the symbolic target of the "fallists" was, indeed, the overthrowing of the colonialist Cecil Rhodes statue in the university campus, the material aim was the decolonisation of university curricula. At some point, a "remember Marikana" stencil, portraying the man in the green blanket, appeared on the pedestal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, reminding us how monuments become sites of conflict at moments of political disjuncture. To Frassinelli, this disjuncture "lies in the persistence of colonial and neo-colonial structures of inequality in postcolonial and post-apartheid society still in need to be decolonised" (129).

This persistence is the persistence of the colonial matrix of power or 'coloniality': the cultural logic of modernity that has dominated the world since the conquest of America, still enduring today in South Africa after formal independence and desegregation. In conclusion, de-westernisation or de-northernization may be successful but it does not end coloniality and its capitalist order, neoliberal or authoritarian. In order for coloniality to end, one should not dispute the control of the colonial matrix of power but should delink from it: decoloniality rather than denorthernization is the watchword. As a result, going back to the *incipit* of Frassinelli's study, the scene of the proliferation of borders is not so much the world order of (Euroamerican) neoliberal capitalism as the order of old capitalism 'evolving' toward the south.

Luigi Cazzato was born in Lecce (Italy), studied at the University of Pisa, Italy (BA), the University of Leicester, England (MA), and the University of Bari, Italy (PhD). He currently teaches Literatures and Cultures in English at the University of Bari. He is the author of several essays on the re-reading of the cultural relations between England and the South from a postcolonial and decolonial perspective. He has recently edited *S/Murare il Mediterraneo. Un/Walling the Mediterranean* (Pensa Multimedia 2016). His latest book is *Sguardo inglese e Mediterraneo italiano. Alle radici del meridionismo* (Mimesis 2017).