What compromises are entailed, for a non-metropolitan francophone writer, when choosing (or being chosen) to publish in France and for a predominantly French readership? Is it possible to reap the evident material benefits, in terms of readership and revenue, of publishing with a French publishing house, without replicating neo-colonial, hierarchical patterns of dependence on the former coloniser and of appropriation of ‘marginal’ cultures by the dominant ‘centre’? On what terms, inclusive or exclusionary, are non-metropolitan writers of French expression selected and promoted by their French publishers: as ‘French’ or as ‘francophone’, as same or as other? According to Jean-Marie Le Clézio, the decision of whether to publish or reject non-metropolitan francophone works is frequently made precisely on the basis of their perceived ‘exoticism’:

the French literary establishment […] has always had a deplorable tendency to marginalise any ideas from elsewhere by describing them as “exotic”. […] Even today,
writers from Southern countries are only published here if they agree to be categorised in the “exotic” category.¹

Whilst emphasis upon an author’s or a text’s difference may well be seen to perpetuate the essentialist oppositions and Eurocentric hierarchies of colonial-era exotic literature, there may also be very real material benefits to be gained from the promotion of exotic otherness – a point that Graham Huggan convincingly argues in his study of ‘the global commodification of cultural difference’ that he terms ‘the postcolonial exotic’.²

This article aims to explore these often fraught issues through a study of the recent publishing career of Ananda Devi, who has lived and worked in France for many years, but whose novels continue to draw their main inspiration from the geography, society and culture of her native Mauritius, especially its majority Hindu population. As is typical for francophone writers of the Indian Ocean, Devi’s first works were published almost exclusively with small, local publishing houses: ‘éditions à petit tirage, petits éditeurs, diffusion confidentielle, pratiquement aucun revenu’.³ When eventually her novels began to be published in France, it was initially with L’Harmattan and Dapper, publishing houses which specialise in francophone material.⁴ In 2001, more than twenty years after the publication of her first work, Devi’s novel Pagli was published with Éditions Gallimard, within its Continents Noirs series. Devi published a further three works under the Continents Noirs

From Continents Noirs to Collection Blanche

Before having Ève de ses décombres (2006) and Indian Tango (2007) published in Gallimard’s flagship Collection Blanche. Such a trajectory represents a gradual, step-by-step move from margins to centre: from small, local publishers, to specialist (and therefore peripheral) French publishers, to a specialist (and therefore peripheral) series within the major French publishing house, finally to publication in the main collection of the most prestigious French publisher. This article will examine, first, the issues at stake in the arguably exoticist paratexual packaging of the Continents Noirs series, before moving on to consider the implications of Devi’s shift to Gallimard’s main collection, La Blanche. Does Devi’s move, from marginal series, dedicated to francophone literature from Africa and its diaspora, to the central, keystone collection of France’s major publishing house, represent – as the eloquent titles of the collections might imply – a shift from exotic to familiar, from other to same? Or, following Richard Dyer’s caveats in White, can more problematic, exoticist distinctions between French and francophone writers and texts still be detected in Gallimard’s presentation of Devi and her works, distinctions which belie the collection’s apparent neutrality? By comparing the first two novels that Devi published in the Continents Noirs series with the first two published in the Collection Blanche, this article will consider the ways in which, either thematically or paratextually, Devi seeks subversively to establish different relations between author, text and reader from those constructed by Gallimard’s paratextual presentation and so to resist classification as ‘other’ or ‘exotic’.

Continents Noirs: a new exoticism?

In From Cannibals to Radicals, a study of the nature and development of exoticism, Roger Célestin argues that the notion of the ‘exotic’ is dependent upon a fixed opposition between self

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and other.\footnote{Roger Célestin, \textit{From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)} As a quintessentially western mode of representation of otherness, exoticism necessitates a degree of mediation between the culture represented and the reader’s culture, in so far as the ‘exotic’ culture must be ‘translated’ for the author’s home audience. A triangular relation is thus established between self/author, home audience, and the ‘exotic’ that is represented – a triangle which is a useful model for our current discussions. Underlying this triangle is the assumption that the author and audience hold common cultural and aesthetic values, by which the ‘exotic’ is defined and judged.

Yet when non-metropolitan francophone writers have their works published in France, the neat symmetry of the exoticising triangle is disrupted. The assumption of common cultural values and shared knowledge between author and audience no longer stands: what is ‘exotic’ to the reader is familiar to the author, and vice versa. Hence a rather different triangle is created between author, reader and text, in which the reader is other to both author and text: either the author must ‘translate’ his own text for the reader, from a position of feigned alterity, or the French publishing house, through its selection, packaging and presentation, must do this translation in the place of the ‘exotic’ author. A third triangular relation thus frequently exists, in the publication of ‘francophone’ works, between the metropolitan publisher, their home audience and the ‘exotic’ text (and author). Potential tensions are created between the commercial wishes of the French publisher and the creative wishes of the francophone writer, tensions which come into play in the editorial presentation or ‘translation’ of the ‘exotic’ text (and its writer) to the French reader.

Gallimard’s \textit{Continents Noirs} series, launched in 2000, is a case in point. The creation of a series dedicated solely to francophone literature from Africa and its diaspora has been widely criticised for its essentialist divisiveness. As Bernard Loupias asked at the time of the creation of the series,
‘pourquoi, en l’an 2000, ghettoiser à nouveau ces littératures?’

As well as creating an opposition between French and francophone literature by their establishment of a separate series, Gallimard’s paratextual presentation of the works and writers included, as we shall now examine, repeatedly emphasises their alterity.

The very title chosen for Gallimard’s collection – Continents Noirs – is problematic. Not only does this title, as the collection’s overarching raison d’être, establish an essentialist link between geography and skin colour, but it is also redolent of a Conradian view of the African continent as a fascinating, awe-inspiring and ultimately inexplicable ‘Heart of Darkness’ – the very opposite of civilised, white Europe. Such implicit contrasts are, arguably, carried on in the semiotics of the cover design: minimal black and brown lettering and graphics on a stark, white background.

The general postface, whose function is to offer an explanation, definition and justification for the series, is littered with disturbing racial stereotypes that would not seem out-of-place in a colonial-era, ‘exotic’ text. In L’Exotisme, Roger Mathé notes two defining features of exoticism: ‘un besoin d’évasion’, as an antidote to western spleen, and a desire for a ‘retour à une vie primitive ou découverte d’une autre civilisation’. Jean-Noël Schifano’s series postface can be seen to be based on precisely these two characteristic features. As if as an antidote to European linguistic and literary sterility, he calls upon African writers to ‘dégeler l’esprit romanesque et la langue française’ and describes African francophone writings as being ‘pleines de liberté, de grâce rebelle, d’invention, de force, sans joug dans les mises en joue des mots, de cette fluidité langagière et syntaxique souvent perdue en France et en Europe’. Exoticism’s desire for the ‘découverte d’une autre civilisation’ can be detected in Schifano’s anachronistic references to Africa’s sculptural arts, ‘chargées de la primitive puissance créatrice’, to magic, to fetishes, and to traditional oral

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**Footnotes:**


culture. A series of inter-related binary oppositions is implicitly established between France and Africa, order and spontaneity, restriction and freedom, intellect and nature. This last opposition – between French intellectuality and African instinctiveness – is pushed to offensive extremes as Schifano quotes Henri Lopes’s description of African writing as combining ‘la langue de la Sévigné avec des couilles de nègre’.

Another key component of Gallimard’s paratextual framing is the epigraph, ‘L’Afrique – qui fit – refit – et qui fera’, which precedes all of the novels in the Continents Noirs series. In his seminal essay, ‘Les Épigraphes’, Gérard Genette argues that the main function of an epigraph is to offer a key to, and commentary on, the meanings of the text it precedes. Thus Gallimard’s epigraph seeks pre-emptively to present the novels as emanating from Africa and as representative in some way of the continent’s enduring essence. A further function of the epigraph, Genette argues, is to establish links between the citing author and his work and the cited author of the epigraph’s quotation. It is significant, then, that Gallimard should choose the words of Michel Leiris, a canonical French writer, poet, and ethnographer of African cultures, as their series epigraph, rather than those of an African writer or thinker. Indeed, Célestin argues that the triangular relation at the heart of exoticism is reminiscent of the nature of ethnography, in that the ethnographer only grants value and meaning to the raw material or ‘data’ of the other culture, gathered during field work, when he returns home. Such labels as ‘art’ or ‘literature’, ‘primitive’ or ‘exotic’ are only ascribed to the artefacts of the other culture when judged according, or in opposition, to western cultural values. Choosing a quotation from Leiris as the epigraph to the Continents Noirs series thus implicitly establishes a position of spectatorial distance between European reader and African text. Value and meaning are ascribed to the francophone African novel and writer as a result of the recognition granted them by Leiris’s essentially Eurocentric, ethnographic gaze.

Gallimard’s paratextual framing of the *Continents Noirs* series – the title, the postface, the cover design and the epigraph (not to mention the emphasis placed on the ethnic and geographic origins of the author in the back-cover blurb)\(^\text{11}\) – consistently presents the francophone texts as manifestations of Africa’s essential otherness and seeks to ‘translate’ their ‘exotic’ qualities to the predominantly metropolitan French readership. In publishing terms, and reflecting Le Clézio’s assertion quoted above, it is precisely the works’ perceived ‘exotic’ character – their satisfaction of western readers’ quest for escapism, novelty and adventure – that is presented as constituting their appeal and, hence, their marketability.

**Devi’s counter-paratexts**

So what are the consequences of such editorial packaging and classification, for a possible triangular relation between author, reader and text? Does Gallimard’s exoticising framing and preemptive ‘translation’ leave room for Devi to explain or present her works on her own terms? For the sake of space, we shall attempt to answer these questions with reference to the first two of Devi’s novels to be published in the *Continents Noirs* series, *Pagli* (2001) and *Soupir* (2002), although Devi did go on to publish two further works in the same series.\(^\text{12}\) Whilst the back-cover blurb to the novels, in keeping with the general paratext, seeks to emphasise their geographic situatedness – in Mauritius or Rodrigues, respectively\(^\text{13}\) – Devi includes epigraphs of her own which invite rather different, less literal and less geographically specific interpretations. The epigraph to *Pagli* – which, on the simplest level, tells the story of the tragic, adulterous love affair between the eponymous heroine and Zil, a

\(^{11}\) The authorial blurb accompanying both *Pagli* and *Soupir* states that ‘Ananda Devi est originaire de l’île Maurice.’


\(^{13}\) The first line of *Pagli*’s *quatrième de couverture* is: ‘Terre Rouge, un village au nord-ouest de l’île Maurice.’ *Soupir*’s *quatrième de couverture* starts with the phrase, ‘Au lieu–dit Soupir, dans Rodrigues, dernière île habitée à l’est de l’Afrique […]’
creole fisherman – is ‘Tout roman est un acte d’amour’. Rather than include a quotation from someone else, whether French, African or of another nationality, as her epigraph, Devi uses her own words to ‘translate’ the meanings of her novel for her readers. Going against Genette’s assertion that one of the main functions of an epigraph is to create, via allusion, connections between citing and cited author, Devi’s self-reference implicitly asserts her own and her novel’s individuality and independence. Rather than portraying her novel as representative of a specific location or of specific cultural characteristics, Devi’s epigraph appeals to the universal emotion of love, and so signals the novel’s transcendence of geographic boundaries and its more general, allegorical relevance. The use of the inclusive article ‘tout’ in ‘tout roman’, similarly, asserts the right of any novel to be read on solely literary terms, and on an equal footing with other novels, whatever their provenance, and so implicitly refutes Gallimard’s divisive creation of a separate grouping of specifically African francophone works.

In her next novel, *Soupir*, Devi inserts two epigraphs as part of the paratext, so defracting the unified gaze of Gallimard’s epigraph and multiplying the interpretations or possible ‘translations’ of the novel they precede. The first epigraph, ‘Je ne sais pas qui nous sommes’, is a quotation from one of *Soupir*’s characters, Patrice L’Éclaire. By means of such preemptive self-reference, Devi again signals the novel’s non-representative individuality and its own internal systems of signification. At the same time, the content of the epigraph, with its expression of existential angst and uncertainty, highlights the novel’s desolate exploration of the very nature of humanity – an exploration which refuses the fixity and certainty of Gallimard’s essentialist distinctions.

The second epigraph to *Soupir* is a translated quotation from Umberto Eco: ‘Il n’est pas nécessaire d’avoir été dans un endroit pour savoir tout sur cet endroit, répondait Abdul, sinon les marins seraient plus savants que les théologiens.’ Read in association with the existential identity crisis of the first epigraph, this quotation warns readers not to interpret the novel
as a straightforward representation of the reality of Rodrigues, the island where it is superficially set. This pre-emptive warning goes counter both to Gallimard’s presentation of the novels in the Continents Noirs series as manifestations of an African essence, and to the back-cover blurb’s literal explanation of the novel’s title and geographic setting: ‘Au lieu-dit Soupir, dans Rodrigues, dernière île habitée à l’est de l’Afrique[…].’ The quotation invites pluralistic readings of the novel, as it signals its more general exploration of the nature and limits of human consciousness, identity and knowledge. Importantly, Devi’s choice of Umberto Eco as cited author for her second epigraph – an Italian writer, semiologist and literary critic – also highlights her work’s potential affiliation with literary and philosophical traditions outside a France-Africa or a French-francophone dichotomy.

When questioned about the compromises entailed, as a non-metropolitan francophone writer, in publishing in France, Devi made the following, enlightening comments:

Ce que ces éditeurs ne comprenaient pas, c’est que j’écrivais mon pays de l’intérieur, et pas pour l’expliquer à des lecteurs étrangers. L’exotisme ne pouvait faire partie de mon écriture, puisque je ne cherchais pas à décrire l’île tropicale mais à raconter une histoire de l’intérieur […]. Cette faille entre l’écrivain qui est le même partout, et le lecteur et l’éditeur qui s’attendent à autre chose selon que l’écrivain vient des tropiques ou d’Europe, est toujours présente. J’éprouve encore des difficultés à faire comprendre que ce que je raconte n’est pas nécessairement représentatif de toute la société mauricienne (ou rodrigaise), que je prends un cas particulier et le pousse à l’extrême pour aboutir à quelque chose d’universel.14

Acutely conscious of the material benefits of publishing with Gallimard, Devi chooses to accept the concomitant compromises entailed in the Continents Noirs series’ literal and

14 Ananda Devi, unpublished email interview with Julia Waters (7 May 2002).
essentialist packaging of her works, but then returns its exoticising gaze, from within, by creating her own counter-paratext which offers a more open and universal ‘translation’ of her novels. Devi’s counter-paratextual emphasis upon the universal and allegorical significance of her novels’ interior reality refuses the oppositional exteriority on which the concept of the exotic is built and on which, in turn, Gallimard’s essentialist paratext relies.

Collection Blanche: from francophone to ‘French’?
In 2006, after five years in the ‘ghetto’ of Continents Noirs, Devi’s eighth novel, Ève de ses décombres was published in Gallimard’s signature collection, La Blanche – a move that seems to mark the French publishing establishment’s tardy recognition of Devi’s literary worth and her acceptance into the ‘club’ of French literature on equal terms: that is, according to Devi’s own aspiration, as an ‘écrivain tout d’abord et tout simplement’.15 The legitimation offered to writers, particularly francophone writers, by publication in La Collection Blanche is based on the collection’s long-established reputation at the very heart of recent French literary history. The historic origins of the collection and its central role in the formation of the twentieth-century French canon are emphatically foregrounded throughout Gallimard’s presentation of La Blanche, as seen in the following, opening lines of its website promotional material:

Quelle est la collection qui, sans en être véritablement une, rassemble pourtant sous son enseigne le plus prestigieux générique de la littérature française du vingtième siècle ? La « Blanche » sans conteste – dont l’histoire, on le verra, se confond avec celle de la NRF. La « Blanche », c’est la « griffe » de Gallimard et le lien symboliquement maintenu avec les premiers temps d’une des plus grandes aventures

15 Ibid.
Whereas *Continents Noirs* was only launched in 2000, at the start of a new millennium, and has the explicit remit of promoting non-metropolitan, francophone works, *La Collection Blanche*’s less explicitly defined rationale is insistently linked to its historical and central role within ‘la littérature française’. The publication of Devi’s novels, *Ève de ses décombres* (2006) and *Indian Tango* (2007), under the collection’s aegis therefore seems to represent a symbolic shift from ‘marketing the margins’ (to borrow Huggan’s term), to inclusion at the centre of mainstream ‘French literature’, from separatist emphasis on exotic difference to legitimising similarity on the grounds of purely literary worth. The hierarchical nature of Gallimard’s various collections, with *La Blanche* at the very top, is, indeed, alluded to in the reference to *La Blanche*’s historical relationship with the ‘autres collections de la maison qui, d’année en année, l’ont nourrie et continuent à le faire,’ so confirming the significance of Devi’s intramural move from margins to centre.

The title of *La Blanche* is explicitly linked, in Gallimard’s promotional material, to the colour of the collection’s book covers, itself the result of the NRF’s founder, André Gide’s stated desire for literary and typographical purity: ‘J’attends de cette entreprise un extraordinaire assainissement de la littérature (et de la typographie).’ Not surprisingly, no explicit association is made, as is the case with *Continents Noirs*, between the series’ title and the geographic origins or skin colour of its published authors. Instead, the colour white’s connotations of purity and understatement, hence as a benchmark for refinement and quality, are portrayed as defining characteristics of the collection. This characteristic understatement is explicitly reflected in the fact that the collection has no director, no defining rationale, no series

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.
paratext or epigraph and, for the majority but by no means most of the works published, no individual *quatrième de couverture* or authorial blurb. Throughout Gallimard’s presentation of *La Collection Blanche*, great store is set by the collection’s minimalist typographical presentation and tradition of excellence. The names of ‘Gallimard’ and, above all, ‘La Blanche’ are thus portrayed as understated (and thus not stated) guarantees of literary quality.

Nowhere is a definition offered of what is considered to constitute ‘la littérature française’, with which *La Collection Blanche* is so insistently associated. Yet the recurrent references to history, origins, purity, tradition, excellence and centrality, in the portrayal of the collection’s pivotal role in the development of the twentieth-century French canon, provide us with the essential components of such a definition, the neo-colonialist implications of which are particularly striking when considering the position of non-metropolitan writers within the collection and within its conception of ‘French’ literature. Put schematically, according to Gallimard’s reasoning, *La Blanche* is synonymous with quality which is, in turn, synonymous with ‘French’ literature. The apparent neutrality or universality in Gallimard’s insistence on literary worth as the sole criterion for inclusion in *La Collection Blanche* is strikingly reminiscent of Richard Dyer’s observation, in *White*, that:

> As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.19

Or, according to Gallimard’s own reasoning, French writers are just writers, whereas other writers are African, Mauritian, Caribbean or, more generally, ‘francophone.’

Read against such an analysis, the following inventory of *La Blanche*’s ‘great and good’ is revealing of the potentially

problematic, racial assumptions underlying the collection’s conception of ‘French’ literature: ‘Pour les uns, auteurs et lecteurs, [La Blanche] restera à jamais la collection de Proust, de Claudel ou de Gide, pour les autres celle de Malraux, de Camus ou de Sartre’. All of the authors cited here as exemplars of great French literature and as guarantors of La Blanche’s tradition of excellence are metropolitan French, male and white. Yet, just one paragraph later, a list of collected theatrical works published with La Collection Blanche, includes in parenthesis the names of García Lorca, Ghelderode and Ionesco – Spanish, Belgian and Romanian playwrights respectively (as well, indeed, as that of the only woman writer mentioned, Duras). Just as no definition of ‘French literature’ is given, no reference is made to the grounds on which (previously) ‘other’ (whether francophone or translated) writers such as these come to be accepted under the Blanche label. Can this be seen simply as an extension of Gallimard’s insistence on literary excellence, irrespective of a writer’s origins, as a desire to privilege literary worth over national or linguistic criteria? Or could this be seen, particularly when it comes to the publication of the works of (non-white, non-European) writers from France’s former colonies, as symptomatic of a neo-colonialist appropriation or annexation of ‘marginal’ cultural products by the hegemonic centre?

As we have seen, the origins and underlying rationales of Gallimard’s Continents Noirs and Collection Blanche series are strikingly different. Continents Noirs is a very recently created series, specialising in the publication of francophone literature from Africa and its diaspora. Reflecting the separatist and arguably essentialist motivations behind its creation, the series’ paratextual presentation of the works and authors published under its banner emphasises their fundamental difference. In contrast, Collection Blanche’s promotional material emphasises its historic status at the heart of the Gallimard enterprise, and its central role in twentieth-century French literary history. Whereas the title of Continents Noirs is linked, explicitly, to the geographic and, implicitly, to the racial origins of its writers, La Blanche’s title is linked only to its minimalist design, and its
only stated criterion for judgement and selection is the norm of literary excellence. Yet, as we have seen, when it comes to publishing non-metropolitan writers, potential neo-colonial pitfalls underlie either stance: exoticism in the case of Continents Noirs’ emphasis on difference, or appropriation in the case of Collection Blanche emphasis on normative excellence or similarity.

In Collection Blanche’s general, promotional material, no clear definition is given of what constitutes ‘excellent’ or ‘French’ literature, or therefore of the grounds on which non-metropolitan writers are included under its aegis. How is this apparently all-inclusive neutrality, or similarity in excellence, borne out in the paratextual promotion of individual writers? Can Devi’s move from marginal Continents Noirs to central Collection Blanche really be seen to represent a shift from other to same, from exotic writer to writer tout court? Or is Dyer right to alert us to the racial implications behind the professed neutrality of La Blanche’s stance? So far, our analysis of Collection Blanche has focused on the general promotional material reproduced on Gallimard’s website. We shall now address these issues by turning our attention to the individual paratextual presentation of Ananda Devi’s two novels so far published in the Collection Blanche, Ève de ses décombres and Indian Tango.

The paratexts of Ève de ses décombres and Indian Tango
In keeping with Collection Blanche’s characteristic typographical and formal minimalism, and in contrast to Continents Noirs, no general, series paratext is appended to any of the works in its collection. A reasonably lengthy quatrième de couverture, including authorial blurb, does, however, accompany both Ève de ses décombres and Indian Tango. Although this is far from exceptional, such paratextual accompaniment is not present on the majority of works – and certainly not on the works of unproblematically ‘French’ (white, metropolitan) writers – published in Gallimard’s flagship collection. The very existence of this paratextual
accompaniment indicates that Devi and her work are not included on exactly the same, seemingly neutral terms as all members of the Collection Blanche ‘club’. The collection may make no reference in its generic publicity material to its selection criteria or to the national, linguistic or ethnic assumptions that underlie these, but nonetheless reference is made in the biographical description on the back cover of Ève de ses décombres to Devi’s non-French origins:

Née à l’île Maurice, Ananda Devi est l’auteure de nombreux romans, dont Pagli, Soupir et La vie de Joséphin le fou, aux Éditions Gallimard, collection Continents noirs.

It is also interesting to note the reference here to Devi’s previous, ‘peripheral’ publishing status – within Gallimard, but not in its central, mainstream collection – so underlining the author’s two-stage accession to inclusion and confirming the hierarchical structure of Gallimard’s various series, alluded to in the publisher’s promotional material.

The back-cover descriptions of Pagli and Soupir both begin, as we have seen, by situating the novels within their literal, geographic settings, before introducing characters, themes and an indication of plot. The quatrièmes de couverture of Ève de ses décombres and Indian Tango both begin, however, within a extract from the novel, before then adding a short paragraph of explanatory, contextualising paraphrase. The extract from Ève de ses décombres hints at the style, setting, themes and narrative perspective of the novel:

Je suis Sadiq. Tout le monde m’appelle Sad.
Entre tristesse et cruauté, la ligne est mince.
Ève est ma raison, mais elle prétend ne pas le savoir.
Quand elle me croise, son regard me traverse sans s’arrêter.
Je disparaîs.

Je suis dans un lieu gris. Ou plutôt brun jaunâtre, qui mérite bien son nom : Troumaron. Troumaron, c’est une sorte d’entonnoir ; le dernier goulet où viennent se déverser les eaux usées de tout un pays. Ici, on recase les réfugiés des
cyclones, ceux qui n’ont pas trouvé à se loger après une tempête tropicale et qui, deux ou cinq ou dix ans après, ont toujours les orteils à l’eau et les yeux pâles de pluie.

The reader is thus introduced immediately and without mediation to the textuality of the novel itself, before the publisher’s arguably unnecessary ‘translation’ then re-establishes, though less obtrusively, the exoticising, triangular relationship between publisher, home audience and reader/author, that was so much in evidence in the paratext of the *Continents Noirs* series, with the assertion that: ‘Ananda Devi nous dit l’autre île Maurice du XXIe siècle, celle que n’ignorent pas seulement les dépliants touristiques.’

The very existence of a *quatrième de couverture* signals a distinction, within *Collection Blanche*, between Devi’s work and those of metropolitan, ‘French’ writers, and this *quatrième* further emphasises this difference by referring to the author’s non-French origins and to the geographic alterity of the novel’s setting. Yet there are, nonetheless, subtle but significant differences between *Continents Noirs*’ and *Collection Blanche*’s marketing of author’s and text’s marginality, which indicate Devi’s gradual edging closer and closer towards full ‘membership’ at the centre of the Gallimard institution. Not least of these is the explicit reference, albeit by emphasising the alterity of Devi’s representation (‘l’autre île Maurice’), to the more usual, stereotypical, inherently western images of an exotic, touristic Mauritius that Devi’s text refutes. Such acknowledgement of France’s often dated and exoticising portrayal of other francophone regions is, at least, a step in the direction of genuinely egalitarian inclusion.

The biographical blurb accompanying *Indian Tango*, the second of Devi’s novels to be published with Gallimard’s *Collection Blanche*, again emphasises the author’s non-French origins:

Née à l’île Maurice, Ananda Devi est l’auteur de nombreux romans publiés aux Éditions Gallimard. *Ève de ses*
décombres a obtenu plusieurs prix littéraires en 2006, dont celui des Cinq Continents.

This time, however, reference to Devi’s previous works published with Gallimard makes no mention of Continents Noirs or, thus, of her previously peripheral position within the publishing house. The literary, rather than exotic, worth of Devi’s work is indicated via the reference to the literary prizes awarded for Ève de ses décombres, although notably the only prize listed, the Prix des Cinq Continents, is a prize awarded solely to francophone works and administered by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. Whilst mention of the ‘nombreux romans publiés aux Éditions Gallimard’ seems to indicate Devi’s acceptance as a writer tout court, reference to her Mauritian birthplace and to a francophone (that is, non-French) literary prize again underline a degree of difference.

As with Ève de ses décombres, the extract that commences the quatrième de couverture of Indian Tango, give the reader an unmediated, ‘untranslated’ taster of the style, setting, narrative viewpoint and main themes of the novel:

Elle s’est tournée pour partir sans même me voir, rentrée en elle-même, inatteignable. Elle a resserré le pan de son sari sur ses épaules. Sous la finesse du tissu, l’échancrure de la blouse laisse entrevoir une poitrine abondante. Peut-être n’est-elle-même pas consciente de son attrait ? Peut-être n’y a-t-il eu personne pour le lui apprendre et réveiller en elle quelque orgueil endormi, quelque secrète vanité ? J’ai perçu en elle la promesse d’une musique qui n’avait pas encore été jouée et qui, même désaccordée, contiendrait sa secrète harmonie. Suffirait-il de jouer en virtuose de l’instrument pour l’allumer de lumières et de couleurs nouvelles et franchir ses ténèbres ?

Yet a second, editorial paragraph again provides the reader with the novel’s geographic and cultural context and the sketchy outlines of its plot. The triangular relation between publisher, audience and author/text is, however, disrupted by the shift of
setting from Mauritius, however allegorical and symbolic, to India – a location and culture that is ostensibly, albeit to differing degrees, ‘other’ to both publisher/reader and author. The novel’s setting in modern-day India – a British rather than French postcolonial site – together with its untranslated, English-language title do much to disrupt the potentially neo-colonial nature of the relation between French publisher, French reader and francophone writer.

**Conclusion**

Whilst Gallimard’s promotional publicity for its *Collection Blanche* asserts the purely qualitative, literary criteria that constitute its understanding and hence selection of ‘French literature’, occluding all reference to non-French works that might contest such a view, its paratextual presentation of the novels of Ananda Devi reveal an altogether more divisive and hierarchical structure, dictated by the author’s geographical and ethnic origins. Gallimard’s presentation of Devi and her work does indeed seem to confirm our earlier suspicion, following Dyer, that, in *La Collection Blanche*, ‘Other writers are raced, French writers are just writers.’ Yet, as we have seen, a gradual, if all too slow, evolution can be detected in the paratextual presentation of Devi and in her corresponding position within the hierarchical structure of the Gallimard publishing house.

Devi once described a novel’s paratext, whether written by the author or the publisher, as ‘une tentative de passerelle entre le lecteur qui ne connaît pas du tout ces lieux, et des textes qui les écrivent de l’intérieur et ne concèdent pas des descriptions objectives aux lecteurs’. 20 It is perhaps significant then that neither *Ève de ses décombres* nor *Indian Tango* contains an epigraph – either the publisher’s or the author’s – and so offers one fewer layer of mediation or ‘translation’ between reader and text. It remains to be seen whether and at what point, Devi will ‘earn her stripes’ as a fully-fledged member of Gallimard’s exclusive ‘club’ and, with them, the right to a truly similar or

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20 Ananda Devi, unpublished email interview with Julia Waters (7 May 2002).
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neutral, hence ‘untranslated’ presentation of her works. In the meantime, Devi’s lucid and pragmatic acceptance of both the benefits and the compromises entailed in publishing with the major French publishing house could be seen to exemplify Spivak’s notion of ‘strategic essentialism’²¹: that is, as a necessary, short-term step on the way to the French literary establishment’s eventual recognition of her worth as an ‘écrivain tout d’abord et tout simplement.’²²

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²¹ Whilst highly critical of the prevailing essentialist categories which label some groups as dominant and others as minority, Spivak famously advocates the short-term ‘strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.’ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Methuen, 1989), p. 25.
²² Ananda Devi, unpublished email interview with Julia Waters (7 May 2002).


Gulab Devi looks like a rural woman from Rajasthan in north-west India. She can neither read nor write, but is a successful pioneer in the Barefoot Solar Engineering Project, a scheme to bring solar power to hundreds of villages across India. The availability of solar power women from the arduous task of searching for wood for fuel and also reduces their to unhealthy wood smoke. Gulab is her family’s sole breadwinner. Use the word given in capitals at the end of some of the lines to form a word that fits in the gap in the same line. There is an example at the beginning. Write your answers IN CAPITAL LETTERS on the separate answer sheet. Example: (0) ABILITY. Camels in the Arctic? 13-1606575 - Le Long d’Sir, Ananda Devi, Gallimard, 2003, French bookseller. Add to Cart. Other Sellers on Amazon. Add to Cart. $42.00 + Free Shipping. by Ananda Devi Nirsimloo (Author). See all formats and editions Hide other formats and editions. Price. New from. Used from. Paperback. “Please retry”. 