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H-France Review Vol. 13 (June 2013), No. 72

Charlotte Baker, *Enduring Negativity: Representations of Albinism in the Novels of Didier Destremau, Patrick Grainville and Williams Sassine*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2011. viii + 218 pp. Bibliography and index. \$51.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-0179-4; \$51.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-3-0353-0110-6.

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On reading the subtitle of this book, one could be forgiven for anticipating that it addresses a subject of rather limited range and interest, viz., the portrayal of members of a small minority of the population affected by this physiological condition, in works by three authors, among whom only Grainville might be considered anything like a household name. When one then discovers at the very start that the discussion is further limited to the representation of the black African albino, this impression of a rather minority-interest study might indeed seem to be confirmed—but will quickly prove unfounded. It soon becomes apparent that the issues emerging from this selective group study are wide-ranging, and unquestionably fundamental in nature.

Baker has selected four texts as her particular objects of study. Destremau's *Nègre blanc* traces the development of a boy with albinism from birth to adulthood, against the background of the 1960 civil war in Mozambique.[1] Grainville's *Le Tyran éternel* presents at its centre an ironic portrayal of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, first President of Côte d'Ivoire, but the narrative follows a search by a writer, Sylvanus, for the president's lost albino son, Alpha, who might be in a position to offer an alternative to his father's dictatorial regime.[2] To complete the corpus, two novels by Sassine are scrutinised. *Wirriyamu*, set in Mozambique in the colonial period, relates the events over three days as the inhabitants of a village (including the albino, Condélo) await the imminent arrival of the Portuguese soldiers who will massacre them. *Mémoire d'une peau*, published posthumously in 1998, is by contrast set in postcolonial Guinea, and the single narrative voice is that of the homicidal and sociopathic albino, Milo.[3]

The three writers chosen are quite diverse in their background. Grainville and Destremau were both born in France, but while Grainville has made his career there as teacher and novelist, Destremau was brought up in Senegal and Tunisia before pursuing a military and diplomatic career, becoming French ambassador to Mozambique and Swaziland. Sassine, by contrast, was born in Guinea, of mixed Christian-Muslim parentage and, after a period of study in France, worked as a teacher and journalist in various West African countries. Each thus brings a different angle of vision (France- or Africa-centred in varying degrees) to bear on their albino characters and on the African environment which they depict. Baker acknowledges these differences, but largely sets them aside, choosing rather to concentrate on showing how much these figurations by the authors of albino characters have in common.

As the analysis proceeds, these texts, amplified by passing reference to other, English-language, fictions and memoirs on the subject, serve as a resource of observed and imagined insights into the albino experience which can be drawn on to illustrate and corroborate a cluster of theoretical and critical principles and hypotheses derived from Baker's wide and eclectic reading in relevant areas of social science and cultural theory.

The particular visibility of the Black African albino draws acute attention to the threat their bodily appearance poses, from birth onwards, to their social acceptance by either their white or black contemporaries, being neither black in pigmentation nor “properly” white. This makes them victims of isolation or stigmatisation, which can express itself in abuse and violence against them, reinforced by traditional myths and stereotypes. Their status as “abnormal” may qualify them as possessing special access to the spirit world, or (more often) as unnatural embodiments of a curse on family or community. As the fictions under study amply illustrate, the negativity of most such categorisations makes identity formation for these characters highly problematic. Assessing the nature and implications of their experience and their dilemma leads straight into the heart of post-Fanon postcolonial theory, problematising the cultural definitions of black and white which underpinned the colonising project. Moreover, this is not simply an issue for those pursuing the French colonial *mission civilisatrice*: in Grainville’s novel, the tyrant Houphouët-Boigny, discovering that the albino Alpha is his son, sees in him a disturbing challenge to his own image as a black patriarchal ruler.

The negative stereotyping of albinism, often associated in our own entertainment industry with villainy or supernatural strangeness, is also shown as raising wider issues about the role (negative or sometimes necessary or even positive?) which stereotyping plays in interpersonal and social perception. Baker follows Homi Bhabha in seeing stereotyping as a complex and ambivalent mode of representation which betrays anxiety as well as an assertion of superiority. The problem with the prevailing culture lies in seeing difference as deviance from a norm, rather than as individuality. The reaction of the fictional albino characters to this oppressive categorisation is shown as taking various forms: retreat into a forest or wilderness, efforts at “passing” (disguising oneself as belonging to a different ethnic group) or, notably in the case of Milo in Sassine’s *Mémoire d’une peau*, a revindication of physical and psychological power through homicidal revenge and sexual seduction, defiantly asserting rather than denying his “otherness.” Behind these different narratives, the underlying functioning of the negative definition which confronts these characters throws up the whole question of assumptions about what is normal. Baker reproaches her three authors with accepting the marginalisation of their albino characters as a given, but she nevertheless credits them finally with showing how marginal space can be a point from which identity can be performed and contested, and thereby signalling a challenge to conventional definitions and categories.

From its point of departure in an apparently narrow focus of study, Baker’s investigation thus broadens to encompass some quite fundamental issues around the body and identity as conditioned by culture, particularly (but not exclusively) in the post-colonial context, and in so doing it offers a perceptive and thoroughly researched contribution to postcolonial and disability studies.

## NOTES

[1] Didier Destremau, *Nègre blanc* (Paris: Hatier, 2002).

[2] Patrick Grainville, *Le Tyran éternel* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

[3] Williams Sassine, *Wirriyamu* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1976) and Sassine, *Mémoire d’une peau* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1998).

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ISSN 1553-9172