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Pim Higginson, *The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the Francophone African Crime Novel*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, vii + 216 pp. Notes. £65.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-84631-690-6.

Review by David Platten, University of Leeds, UK.

Higginson's clever title signals the intellectual ambition of this study, which foregrounds the influence of Chester Himes over the incipient development of a crime fiction strand in the work of a selection of sub-Saharan writers. In an extensive Introduction designed to establish a robust theoretical framework for the exemplary analyses that follow, Himes's life and writing are repositioned in the light of debates live in the field of postcolonial studies. Higginson's approach is predicated on the challenge to normative histories of black Africa, and to blunt analyses of race and ethnicity made by Paul Gilroy in his influential *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Gilroy disturbs a liberal consensus over the history of colonialism, slavery and emancipation by redressing commonplace notions of what is understood by "diasporas."

The conventional view of the "diaspora" as mapping a territory occupied by a displaced people exiled from their homeland becomes here a logical extension of the discourse of white, colonialist imperialism, in that both derive from absolute, essentialist notions of race, nation and ethnicity. In contrast Gilroy argues that the slave trade prefigured the delineation of a transnational space for new cultural constructions, with the geographical triangulation of Africa, Europe and the Americas indicating a shift away from thinking in terms of the old binaries of the colonialist and the colonised, and indigenous and migrant peoples, towards a richer, more nuanced understanding of the history of the African American peoples. Within this paradigm of the "Black Atlantic", the European and African journeys of African American writers, especially those who have "returned" to Europe, assume significance. Higginson notes that, in the wake of Gilroy's publication, scholars have explored in some depth the "impact of African American expatriation to Europe" (p. 2).

The life of Chester Himes would appear to manifest some of the complexities and paradoxes suggested by this phenomenon of African American expatriation to Europe. A middle-class upbringing in Missouri led to university studies in Ohio, which were terminated by the handing down of an eight-year prison sentence for armed robbery. While in gaol, Himes began writing short stories that were published in national magazines; however, his subsequent apprenticeship as a Hollywood screenwriter was curtailed by the overt racism of film mogul Jack Warner. In 1953 he moved to France and it was in Paris that he was to taste literary success, with a clutch of crime novels set in Harlem featuring New York City police detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. The all-action sequences, violence and bleak hilarity of *A Rage in Harlem* and *The Real Cool Killers* offer a form of escapism that would seem to contrast markedly with the naturalism of the earlier protest fiction of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Cast the First Stone*.

Higginson navigates a course through the minefield of the critical reception of Himes's work, inverting the prevailing tendency to accentuate the sociological at the expense of the literary and emphasizing instead the humour, wit, and irony of the writing. Crime fiction, he asserts, combines uniquely the apparently irreconcilable qualities of political engagement and comic distance, so that, by embracing the popular genre and thereby potentially eschewing literary respectability, Himes was able to explore African American vernacular culture and language and to use satire, and what Higginson describes as "absurdism", to communicate a particular worldview. Not that such a

cleavage would necessarily liberate a black writer from the strictures of a colonialist cultural heritage. Himes's affiliation to Paris, and to a different, European literary tradition, is viewed with suspicion by Higginson who, writing of the American writer's relationship with *Série noire* publisher Marcel Duhamel, refutes the idea that he might have been drawn into "the powerful gravity of a European movement [...] surrealism...] not unfamiliar with the recruitment and subtle exploitation—despite systematically expressed anti-colonial sentiment—of selected colonial subjects" (p. 13).

Higginson reminds those readers who have not read Derrida, Foucault and Said that acts of colonial appropriation have always been legitimised in writing. Political power is sustained by a dominant discourse, even at those times when that discourse might appear to undermine its own power base. Mindful of the power / language equation, Higginson appeals to the postcolonial paradigms developed by de Certeau and Deleuze. In particular, he shows how Deleuze and Guattari's definition of a "minor" literature can restore the subversive, political attributes of a writer like Himes. Higginson suggests that the circumstances of the publication of Himes's crime novels, which were written in the African American vernacular but translated into French, a language that the Black American never learned to speak, mark him out as an "exemplary case of deterritorialisation" (p. 17), repring Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a "minor" form estranged from the cultural centre. Himes's turn to crime fiction was thus both radical in a literary sense and successful commercially, resulting in a body of work defined here as "the frivolous literary." And it has since served as a model for African writers because, as Higginson explains, Himes "opens up a genre to non-white male writers and characters, while simultaneously authorizing a radically new attitude toward the business of writing itself: pleasure" (p. 27).

With regard to the composition of the academic monograph, Introductions are usually written late in the process. This one, which is elaborate and complex in terms of argumentation and style, embraces the six chapters that it "introduces", at times rather tightly. In chapter one, the Senegalese author Abasse Ndione, is presented as a pioneer. His 1984 novel *La Vie en spirale*, which was published in 1998 in the *Série noire*, is described as representing Ndione's "turn away from the Promethean ambition of the Francophone African literary tradition" (p. 42), principally on account of a prose style suffused with the vernacular of contemporary Dakar, depicting social attitudes that echo a kind of laissez faire, criminal materialism usually associated with the West. The subject of chapter two is the 1985 novel *Cercueil et Cie* (1985) by Simon Njami, a Paris-based curator of African art and photography who hails from Cameroon. *Cercueil et Cie* is an explicit homage to Himes, an intricate, creative supplement to *Plan B*, the American writer's last, partially finished novel, which both celebrates and subverts the crime genre. Chapter three is devoted to the noir trilogy—*Agence Black Bafoussa* (1996), *Sorcellerie à bout portant* (1998), and *Ballet noir à Château-Rouge* (2001)—produced by Congolese writer Achille Ngoye and published in the *Série noire*, which Higginson labels "the first works of the mature Francophone African crime genre" (p. 91). Ngoye's boldness in pursuit of the "aesthetic potentialities of a vernacular diasporic / African subculture" is admired. However, where other readers such as Patrick Raynal (then editor of the *Série noire*) appreciate the musicality and lyricism of Ngoye's writing, Higginson worries that the "anthropological features" of *Sorcellerie à bout portant* perpetuate the myth of Africa as the "dark continent of poverty, crime and superstition" (p. 109). Contrastingly, he argues in chapter four, *La Polyandre* (1998) by Bolya, another Congolese author, demonstrates how an orthodox detective story can be used as a vehicle for "an elaborate—and highly entertaining—critique of ethnography" (p. 118).

The question with which Higginson wrestles throughout the book—whether or not the turn to noir in francophone African fiction invites a new critical idiom which would be less reliant on the postcolonial metanarrative that has governed the reception of this literature hitherto—is foregrounded in the final two chapters of his book. Chapter five is devoted to an analysis of Malian author Aïda Mady Diallo's *Kouty, mémoire de sang* (1998, 2002), the first novel by an African woman to be published in the *Série noire*, and chapter six to two works of crime fiction by Mongo Beti, a major figure in Cameroonian literature and politics, which also happen to be the last two novels he wrote before his death in 2001. *Kouty, mémoire de sang* transcends western stereotypes of Africa. The extreme intertribal violence of the opening scene is calibrated in such a way as to undermine any notion that this might be in some shape or form a re-enactment of colonial oppression. Likewise,

through the characterisation of Kouty, Diallo sabotages gender norms so completely that to impose the gaze of white, western masculinity as a theoretical grid through which to view her presentation of gender and sexuality in this novel—what Higginson terms “a popular pornography of difference”—would produce a grossly distorted reading. The imprints of popular genres, notably noir and romance, are clearly visible in the text, but spotting the influence of genre seems less important in this instance than showing, as Higginson does, the technical brilliance with which elements of noir and romance are blended to produce a consummate narrative of revenge.

If the entangled plots and epic sweep of *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) and *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000), Mongo Beti's last two novels, are rocambolesque, the sharp political satire and comic irony belong to modern and contemporary noir fiction. However, their importance lies as much with their symbolic status as with their literary qualities. Having spent the best part of four decades in France, Beti returned to Cameroon in 1993 and opened a bookshop, the *Librairie des Peuples noirs*. Aware of the fact that the great works of francophone African literature have been read exclusively by white, middle-class French citizens and a tiny black African elite, he turned, like Himes before him, to the noir, and engaged unapologetically with the vernacular. The questions of access to a wider readership and promotion of a literature written in the vernacular were paramount. Higginson recounts how both novels were initially sold to *Le Messager*, an opposition newspaper, which published them in serial form. The manuscripts were then sold again to the French publisher Julliard. Their subsequent commercial success in France generated revenue that was funnelled back to Cameroon in order to sustain the bookshop in Yaoundé.

Beti strove to liberate a creative space for francophone African literature to flourish on its own terms, to facilitate the production of more works like *Kouty mémoire de sang*. The final phase of his own literary career is an important stage in a journey which, in this book, Higginson has plotted meticulously. His deep understanding of the political, social and cultural ramifications of the postcolonial context is a sure strength; less convincing is a sense gleaned from the analysis that Himes and Raymond Chandler provide a template for the literary noir. Just as there have been subtle and frequent shifts within concepts of race and ethnicity, so the concept of a literary genre should not be seen as immutable. And crime fiction, more than any other popular genre, is famous for its porosity and its pliability; the Noir Atlantic is no more a fixed entity than the Black Atlantic.

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