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Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, *Past Imperfect: Time and African Decolonization, 1945-60*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. viii + 320 pp. £95.00. (hb). ISBN 9781800348400. £90.00. (eb). ISBN 9781800345461.

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In *Past Imperfect*, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture offers in-depth analysis of a clutch of works by “a Franco-African community of scholars” who wrote about African histories, art and artifacts, societies, literature, and languages (p. 22). Those studied in this highly interdisciplinary monograph include Cheikh Anta Diop, Georges Balandier, Amadou Hampâté-Bâ, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Placide Tempels, and others connected to *Présence Africaine*, a publishing house and academic journal created in 1947. Fraiture’s central question is how and why a “linear and mechanistic” and “progress-based historical model” was “increasingly challenged by alternative temporalities” after World War II (pp. 19-20). The book is a valuable addition to the literatures surrounding temporality and the mid-twentieth-century intellectual history of France and the French empire in west and central Africa, though it is somewhat hampered by a reluctance to problematize the category of modernity.

Fraiture begins his book with a prelude which quotes from the charter that established the United Nations in the wake of World War II. This charter suggested that colonized peoples would govern themselves in the future—but only when imperial powers judged that they were ready to do so. Questions about advancement versus supposed backwardness came to the fore, thereby pointing to one way in which notions of time could “measure and establish difference” in colonial domination.[1] This recalls Dipesh Chakrabarty’s memorable argument that colonized peoples were “consigned...to an imaginary waiting room of history.”[2] In Gary Wilder’s pithy phrase, it was a tactic of “temporal deferral” intended to sustain disenfranchisement.[3] The characters of Fraiture’s study all attempted to break out of—or at least seriously challenge—this model, which rested upon the assumption that colonized societies, and particularly sub-Saharan African societies, were developmentally inferior to European societies.

*Past Imperfect* unfolds in the heady period between the end of World War II and the late 1950s. While Fraiture pays attention to the writings of Césaire, Senghor, Fanon, and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as on his deep knowledge of Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe, he does not always delve deeply into the important historical and political context treated in existing literature. At this time, European governments were coming to the realization that “the colonial endgame had begun.”[4] In a decolonizing world, multiple new and “contingent” futures would come into play.[5] For Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, this would involve

“redefin[ing] native time as the permanent possibility of the emergence of the not-yet.”[6] Work on this period, for example by Adom Getachew and Frederick Cooper, has underscored its sense of rich and diverse possibilities for changed political and social organization.[7] In the Francophone context, proponents of Negritude such as Martinican Aimé Césaire and Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor were rethinking the French empire and even the metropole itself, producing “pragmatic-utopian visions of self-determination.”[8] Fraiture deftly sets out the 1945-60 period as being exceptional in some regards while remaining an inheritor of the nineteenth century in others, noting how the traditional view of historical time was both “maintained” and “contested” (p. 33). The scholars who populate this study were caught between the colonial and the post-colonial worlds—even as they looked towards the latter, they were constrained by the bounds of the former.

The “imperialization of time” (in Harry Harootunian’s phrase) against which these scholars struggled had many features.[9] It could, for instance, involve the imposition of time keeping methods, calendars, work regimes, or time rituals onto other societies—indeed, as Fraiture reminds us, there was no African representation at the 1884 conference, which established a single prime meridian for international use.[10] Fraiture’s focus is not on these practical concerns but on conceptual issues, in particular the way in which sub-Saharan African societies were cast as static and lacking history by colonizers. For instance, a 1948 special issue of the review *Le Musée vivant* (published to commemorate the centenary of the abolition of slavery) criticized the Western tendency to treat art from Africa as though it was timeless, flattening it and stripping it of its historical depth—its authors contended that a statue of a Shongo king from four or five centuries ago could not be compared to a Ba-Kuba mask from fifty years ago.[11] Reinforcing Fraiture’s observations, in the early 1960s, Frantz Fanon would write furiously of the “immobility to which the native is condemned.”[12] Colonization was, in this sense, “a fundamental negation of time” in which the colonized were “located *outside of time*,” lacking any sense of meaningful change or progress.[13] Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe has pointed out that such assumptions can be traced at least as far back as Hegel, who depicted Africa as a blank expanse without history; Mbembe added that this image has endured and still appears in media and commentary today.[14]

Fraiture draws on Johannes Fabian’s famous critique of anthropological methods to explore this “denial of coevalness” and the damaging dichotomizations (modern versus pre-modern, peasant societies versus industrial societies) that it engendered (pp. 50-51).[15] The monograph’s first chapter is devoted to the alternative visions of past and future developed by those writing in *Présence Africaine* in response to this denial. Georges Balandier, a “pioneering sociologist of urban Africa” whose “Maussian-inflected” work depended on “on-site and in-depth fieldwork,” was critical of the static representations and sense of mythical time that often appeared in French ethnology (p. 85); and historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, in his essay “Histoire et conscience nègres,” argued that African societies were capable of progress, though this progress might not necessarily be towards Western modernity.[16] As Fraiture notes, Ki-Zerbo argued that ruins could indicate alternative historical trajectories, the paths not taken, pointing away from colonialism and somewhat bypassing Western progress narratives.

Such narratives were particularly open to being questioned during the postwar period, and the shadows of World War II and the Holocaust lurk throughout this book—memories of recent and devastating events often served to curtail Western feelings of superiority. Balandier, for instance, opined that colonialism was even more thorough and more “exploitative” than the Nazi

occupation of France had been (p. 215). In a book about Bantu philosophy, Belgian missionary Placide Tempels contrasted a “will to power” associated with the West and Nazi and colonial atrocities with the idea of an African vital force (p. 105). In the aforementioned issue of *Le Musée vivant*, Jack Howlett (who was on the editorial board of *Présence Africaine*) took a dim view of progress after Hiroshima and Auschwitz: “excessive progress is the prelude to regression” (quoted, p. 18). The push towards ever more destructive technologies had created a situation in which highly advanced scientific research produced extreme brutality and barbarism—progress seemed to be consuming itself.

Evolutionist or developmental models, which continued to view African societies as behind the West or “simply late,” were pervasive, and most of the characters of this study continued to rely at least to some extent on such assumptions.[17] This is especially notable in Fraiture’s second chapter, which begins with an in-depth study of a 1953 film essay commissioned by *Présence Africaine* titled *Les statues meurent aussi*. The film argued that when objects are musealized they enter into the artistic realm but cease to be functional—in other words, they die and, to a certain extent, become inauthentic. Fraiture’s discussion broadens to include Balandier (who was involved in making the film), Tempels, and Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop.[18] These writers, as well as the team behind *Les statues*, were all pushing to decolonize knowledge and challenge the policeman-like ethnographer whose relentless classificatory endeavors stripped African artifacts of meaning and social, cultural, and historical thickness. Nevertheless, in emphasizing the unity of African cultures across time and space or essentializing African art, the characters of this study sometimes ended up falling back on colonial frameworks and assumptions. Fraiture draws on Mudimbe’s writing of Diop, noting that this group of scholars was “located at a crossroads between a new knowledge about Africa” and the old colonial order of knowledge (p. 122).

The final two chapters of *Past Imperfect* are less cohesive than the first two but nonetheless contain a wealth of analysis, including sections on writings about African languages, the linguistic policies of the former colonial administrations, customs and gender, and messianic movements. The sense of a transitional period between the colonial and decolonizing worlds is palpable throughout. Diop, for instance, wanted to use vernacular languages such as Wolof to “to drive...modernity and nationalism” and thereby “dismantle” linguistic hierarchies in which African languages were regarded as primitive (pp. 147-148), but he remained wedded to the “merits of Western modernity” (p. 184). In a section on clitoridectomy, Fraiture describes how Balandier defended the practice on the grounds that it fostered social cohesion, viewing women as “guarantors of timeless traditions” who were capable of binding together their communities in a rapidly changing world (pp. 226-227)—though Balandier did not understand that women might themselves be “agents of...transformation” (p. 225). The sections on the messianic movements that gathered around André Grenard Matswa, Simon Kimbangu, and Nganga Emmanuel are particularly interesting, as Fraiture invites us to consider their syncretic adoption of Christian prayers alongside newer ideas as “sites of creative appropriations on the part of the colonized” (p. 244); the adherents of these movements were no longer willing to “tolerate God’s whiteness” (p. 249). In all these examples, there is the sense of shifting understandings of African pasts and potential futures emerging in the final years of the colonial order.

There is one key respect in which the book could have gone further, however. Fraiture frequently invokes the concept of modernity but seems reluctant really to problematize it. What do we actually mean when we speak of modernity, and what was its relationship to colonization and

then decolonization? Fraiture cites a wealth of literature on temporality (including Peter Fritzsche and Aleida Assman as well as Fabian), but the thinker to whom he turns repeatedly is German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck.[19] Koselleck established much of our current thinking on modernity, arguing that it consisted in a changed understanding of time in which the future was no longer dictated by what had come before.[20] Fraiture's reliance on Koselleck presents two problems. First, recent literature has sought to develop or challenge some of Koselleck's arguments, and some scholars have gone so far as to question whether modernity is a helpful concept at all.[21] Fraiture ends up treating modernity as a stable category which conveys a more or less fixed set of meanings—it is anything but. Second, there may be more relevant literature to turn to for analyzing modernity in the African context. In a seminal book on the Zambian Copperbelt, James Ferguson understood modernity experientially, exploring how it could be alluring but fleeting and disappointing.[22] In a similar vein, Emma Hunter argued that the concept is at its most useful when used as an actors' category, referring not to "processes of social and political change themselves but rather the ways in which change was reflected on." [23] Mbembe probed the instability of the concept of modernity throughout his essay collection *Out of the Dark Night*, and his concept of Afropolitanism contains a call for a version of modernity that is specific to the African continent.[24] Nigerian-American philosopher Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò also differentiates between various conceptions of modernity.[25] More sustained analysis of how the concept was used and understood by the characters of Fraiture's study would have been welcome.

Nevertheless, *Past Imperfect* is valuable for the way in which it brings to the fore a community of Franco-African scholars who deserve to be better known. Fraiture contextualizes the fascinating scholars studied here by drawing out connections with the works of more commonly read thinkers, such as Fanon, Sartre, and Senghor. The group surrounding *Présence Africaine* is particularly interesting for the way in which it offers an insight into (necessarily uneven) partnerships between scholars from metropolitan France and its empire in west and central Africa. Taken together, their works offer a kaleidoscopic perspective on postwar intellectual history and on the ways in which a progress-based understanding of time were complicated and challenged.

## NOTES

[1] Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time, 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 7.

[2] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 7. Chakrabarty made this comment about John Stuart Mill's writings, but it is equally applicable to the UN Charter discussed by Fraiture.

[3] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005), p. 118.

[4] Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 66.

[5] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonisation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 4.

[6] Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 54.

[7] Adom Getachew has recently highlighted that the “transition from empire to nation...appears inevitable,” but the historical reality was different and the range of possibilities was broader than this, see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 1. Cooper emphasised the indistinct and shifting political positions of the period in his *Citizenship between Nation and Empire: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 4. See also Cooper, “Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of African History*, 29/2 (2008), pp. 167–196.

[8] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 7; Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, pp. 149–200.

[9] Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry*, 33/3 (2007), p. 474; Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*.

[10] Giordano Nani, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*; Cooper, “Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa,” in Nicolas B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 209–246.

[11] *Le Musée vivant* was published by the Association Populaire des Amis des Musées.

[12] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, pref. Jean-Paul Sartre (London: Penguin, 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1961), p. 40.

[13] Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 53 (Mbembe’s emphasis).

[14] Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, pp. 9, 11.

[15] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1983), p. 35.

[16] Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 337.

[17] Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, p. 125.

[18] Cheikh Anta Diop was involved in student organizations and, from 1950, he was highly critical of empire, Cooper, *Citizenship between Nation and Empire*, p. 258.

[19] Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Aleida Assman, *Is Time Out of Joint? The Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, trans. Sarah Clift (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

[20] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, tr. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1985); Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[21] Peter Osborne, for example, developed some of Koselleck's arguments, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time," in Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds), *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 69-85; and the essays in Matthew S. Champion (ed.), "Viewpoints: Temporalities," *Past & Present*, 243/1 (2019), pp. 247-327 question the category of modernity, especially A.R.P. Fryxell, "Time and the Modern: Current Trends in the History of Modern Temporalities," pp. 285-298.

[22] James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[23] Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 35. She was partly drawing here on Frederick Cooper's use of the concept of modernity in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[24] Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, pp. 172-222.

[25] Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001).

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