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The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the Francophone African Crime Novel by Pim Higginson

(review)

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French Forum, Volume 39, Numbers 2-3, Spring/Fall 2014, pp. 215-217
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Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: [10.1353/frf.2014.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/frf.2014.0018)



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But it does shape our understanding of Zola's late work in particular, which continues to demand more analysis. Moreover, Febles's introduction hints at a wider set of implications: the link between anarchism and art in Third Republic France. More work has been done on anarchy in the symbolist and modernist aesthetic, while ignoring its connection to realist and naturalist works that express the everyday of Third Republic France. Scholarship has tended to emphasize the tension between the spatio-temporal and narratological orderliness of the naturalist project, and not without reason, but it has left little room for the troubling unpredictability of the anarchist or other revolutionary politics. One of the book's goals is to make headway for an "integrated theory of anarchy and literature" (20) that discards the assumption that entropy reveals realism and anarchism to be mutually incompatible (27). For Zola's novels at least, Febles provides a useful corrective to that assumption (in Uri Eizensweig's *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, for example) by inviting us to rethink the relation between realism and anarchism, on both historical and aesthetic grounds.

As a final note, Febles's work is solidly grounded in an understanding of by now well established thinking on the role of anarchism in this period and beyond. This includes sources such as Jean Maitron's exhaustive history of *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, but also others dealing with aesthetic form and its relation to anarchy and anarchism, such as Richard Sonn's studies of anarchism in fin de siècle France, David Weir's study of anarchism in aesthetic modernism in *Anarchy and Culture*, and Alexander Varias's examination of *Paris and the Anarchists*. Published in 2010, it is something of a shame that *Explosive Narratives* was unable to engage with John Merriman's work *The Dynamite Club* (2009), in which we learn of Emile Henry's reading of Zola—might there have been a feedback loop at play here? At the very least the proximate appearance of these two works, one with a literary focus and the other historical, tells us that the discussion will proceed.

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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. 216 pp.

France was the setting for Chester Himes' well-known shift from protest fiction inspired by his literary model Richard Wright to the frantic detective

fiction that characterized the second half of his career. Marcel Duhamel, the founder of the *Série Noire*, himself suggested that Himes write noir for his book series, giving him pointers on how to approach the genre. Himes would write nine novels for the French market, where he soon gained the name recognition that had always escaped him in the United States. The French took Himes' increasingly outrageous Harlem noir very seriously. So have many critics since, finding in it traces of the political commitment typical of his earlier protest fiction. Yet to Himes, the *Série Noire* novels were the expression of his finally getting "the handle to the joke" of living black in the Western world and learning to find it funny. Himes' answer to the many pressures and oppressions brought to bear on his writing was to devote himself to what Pim Higginson dubs "the frivolous literary," a writing that emphasizes undervalued notions such as "pleasure, entertainment, humor and profit" rather than the ethnographic, politically-driven fiction expected of black authors in the protest mold (4).

This way of navigating the demands of artistic existence as a black author between New York and Paris—two beacons not simply of black culture, but also of its inscription in, and appropriation, by white Western culture—are what made Himes, Higginson argues in the Introduction to his *Noir Atlantic*, the point of reference for noir made in Francophone Africa. With Himes as a compass rose, Higginson goes on to provide a loose map of African Francophone noir, dedicating his first chapter to the Senegalese author Abasse Nidone's *La Vie en Spirale* (1984), the first African noir novel (eventually published in the *Série Noire* in 1998). Nidone's novel which follows marijuana sellers and consumers in Senegal, remains the most popular African noir novel to date. It embodies a crucial shift in African literature; rather than follow the "utopian idealism motivating most earlier works" of African fiction, *La Vie en spirale* "demands the right to the frivolous, to the defiantly unproductive" (61). Chapter 2 explores Simon Njami's *Cercueil et Cie*, a tongue-in-cheek, metafictional exploration of Himes' relevance to Francophone African culture and its compulsory relationship with the Parisian cultural milieu. In this novel, Njami revives Himes' playful borrowings and emphasizes their relevance to contemporary African contexts. Chapter 3 studies the evolution of Congolese author Achille Ngoye's concerns with language in three novels published in the *Série Noire*. While his first novel uses the artificial argot typical of the *Série Noire*, Ngoye eventually breaks out of this linguistic mold, moving beyond the *Série's* traditional erasure of race-inflected discourse in order to present a broader chorus of Francophone voices. In his fourth chapter, Higginson discusses the Congolese author Bolya Baenga, whose *La Polyandre*

takes readers' expectations to task. The novel's investigation into the titillating world of African polyandry comes in the guise of ethnographic writing, only to deconstruct its mechanisms and underline the active role played by informants in a form of discourse that appears to exclude them. Chapter 5 further considers African noir's engagement with ethnographic expectations, but also with the misogyny endemic in noir fiction, through Aïda Diallo's *Kouty, mémoire de sang*, a revenge story steeped in Malian ethnic strife. Diallo complicates the genre by asserting the possibility of female agency within the bounds of noir. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on the widely recognized Cameroonian author Mongo Beti to discuss his eminently Himesian shift from the "ideological earnestness" of the political fiction of his beginnings in the mid-1950s to the noir novels he published near the end of his career in the 2000s. Higginson argues that Beti's shift to noir is a symptom of his disillusion with post-colonial Cameroonian society and the "ideological earnestness" that corresponded to it in his own writing (183). As Higginson asserts, Beti's turn to noir is a symptom of his understanding that "in the final analysis, profit trumps politics" (191).

The connection between Himes and the diverse set of authors studied here is not always as direct as in Njami's novel, whose protagonists are none other than Chester Himes' own Harlem detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones—or rather, impersonators living in France on the fictional characters' fame. Indeed, Higginson himself notes in the case of Aïda Diallo that such connection is "at best circumspect, if not downright suspicious" (143). Yet the strength of Higginson's study resides precisely in his ability to show the deep affinities between the stakes of Himes' noir writing and those explored by authors in the rising Francophone African noir genre. Steeped in the political discussions and disappointments of post-colonial African countries, the African authors studied by Higginson all find themselves stuck in conundrums not unlike those once faced by Himes. They have to navigate the political and cultural demands of writing in a post-colonial state in the language of the former colonial power, while having to take into account the expectations of the French readership. As Higginson demonstrates compellingly, in such circumstances noir is a trump card that simultaneously lets authors play within rigid rules dictated by French taste and against them. Subversion, Higginson convincingly argues, is delivered in the mode of the frivolous literary, a dedication to the game of genre writing rather than its potential—and often elusive—political outcomes.

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