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## Ruth Bush. *Publishing Africa in French: Literary Institutions and Decolonization, 1945-1967*. Liverpool UP, 2016.

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**Abstract**

Review of Ruth Bush. *Publishing Africa in French: Literary Institutions and Decolonization, 1945-1967*. Liverpool UP, 2016. 224 pp.

**Keywords**

Ruth Bush, publishing, Africa, French, literary institutions, decolonization

Ruth Bush. *Publishing Africa in French: Literary Institutions and Decolonization, 1945-1967*. Liverpool UP, 2016. 224 pp.

The sociologist of literature Clayton Childress provocatively argued in his 2017 book *Under the Cover*, “If creation, production, and reception all matter, what is lost by independently studying these processes and the transitions between them is actually most things” (4). Ruth Bush’s recent study proves him right, showing scholars just how much is gained when we examine these interconnected steps of writing, selection, editing, packaging, distribution and reading. Bush investigates the institutional conditions of the construction of literary value in postwar African texts written in and translated into French. She succeeds in bridging two significant scholarly divides: first, between specialists of Anglophone African literature and scholars of Francophone African literature and, second, between important work in book history and scholarship by sociologists of literature.

Combining these approaches, Bush considers multiple forces that exert pressure on writers and their publishers such as politics or ideology (stemming from the end of WWII, independence movements later on, and processes of decolonization) and the growing commercialization of the book trade, including the rise of book clubs and the creation of the “livre de poche,” a popular pocket-sized book format sold at reduced prices. Bush reveals how these phenomena, along with other institutions and mediators in France and on the African continent, promoted African literature but at the same time placed restrictions on the texts. In doing so, Bush disproves the myth of the neutrality of editorial work.

The originality of Bush’s approach lies in her methods and examined materials. Drawing on an eclectic combination of methods (book history, reader-response theory, reception studies, postcolonial studies, and sociological analysis), Bush’s book answers recent calls for a change in the way we study literature. Her inclusion of close readings of literary texts is both convincing and strategic, effectively sidestepping the critique that sociological approaches to literature neglect the details of textual form. Her impressive range of materials includes interviews, surveys, and archival sources such as reader reports, correspondence between authors and publishers, press files, and manuscripts from the archives of publishing houses like Seuil, Présence Africaine, Grasset and Albin Michel. She takes seriously the materiality of the book, often studying editorial paratexts such as prefaces. Other unique objects of analysis include the successive name changes of a particular prize-granting institution, the ANEMOM (Association nationale des écrivains de la mer et de l’outre-mer), as well as a publisher’s catalogue (the 182 books published by Présence Africaine from 1949 to 1967), and the use of a male African pseudonym by the white French author Christine Garnier.

Bush’s book also touches on the ways in which institutions and intermediaries shape canonical definitions of what counts as African literature. The

first section, “Institutions,” examines anthologies, publishing houses, and prizes. The second section “Mediations,” focuses on the different processes of intervention (or sometimes interference) by the brokers of literary value: publishers, translators, booksellers, critics, printers, and readers. In an especially compelling move, Bush traces the trajectories of manuscripts that were first rejected by the prestigious Le Seuil publishers because they didn’t meet existing expectations for African texts. She unearths the fascinating publication history of the classic *L’Aventure ambiguë* (*The Ambiguous Adventure*) by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, as well as the lesser-known *La Plaie* (*The Wound*) by Malick Fall. Not only does she make the case to pay more critical attention to the power of literary mediators, she also proves that studying the publishing contexts of both canonical and forgotten texts helps scholars pinpoint how authors circumvent editorial pressures regarding content, language, and style. In doing so, she considerably nuances the idea of agency omnipresent in discussions of postcolonial literature.

Another strength of Bush’s study lies in her challenge of the dichotomous treatment of “African” and “French” literature by literary historians. By studying African and French literary history together, Bush provides a more nuanced understanding of “a literary field in transition” (132). She skillfully compares editorial structures both in and outside of Paris, drawing interesting parallels between *Présence Africaine* and *Maspero*, contrasting the printer Abdoulaye Diop in Dakar with Seuil, and highlighting the importance of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas alongside Paul Flamand and Guy Lévis Mano. In doing so, she unveils a “more multidirectional mode of mediation” (146) and points to “multiple centres and multiple peripheries” (180) existing beyond the metropole in this period. In this way, her work responds to Lydie Moudileno’s injunction in her article “The Postcolonial Provinces” for postcolonial scholarship to move away from Paris-centered studies and adopt a “multifocal” approach in order to locate “non-Parisian sites of (post)colonial encounters, productions, and identity formations” (54).

Bush’s study, however, could have been more inclusive with regards to gender. Although scholars like Adèle King have convincingly shown that women played an important role as *passseurs* ‘cultural brokers’ in this period, Bush focuses on men, with the exception of a brief mention of Mayotte Capécia. Bush could have filled this gap by including Christiane Diop and elaborating upon her role in *Présence Africaine*. A discussion of female readership both in France and in francophone Africa seems missing given the book’s interest in the anxieties surrounding “expanding print cultures” and the middlebrow.

As her recent award from the African Literature Association suggests, Bush’s book is a necessary contribution to scholarship on African literature. But its intervention extends beyond this field, as she deliberately chooses not to limit her study to “an Afrocentric account of literary history” (8). Indeed, scholars of French

literature and history will find Bush's study immensely useful as well. Not only does this monograph offer many stimulating leads for scholars, such as the need for work on the history of educational publishing in francophone Africa, but it also serves as a methodological model for future research.

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