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*'Fièvres d'Afrique', suivi de trois récits inédits: 'La Recluse', 'La Duchesse' et 'Minne Water: Lac d'Amour' (extraits).* By LOUIS CHARBONNEAU. Ed. by ROGER LITTLE and CLAUDE ACHARD. Paris: L'Harmattan. 2014. xxviii+211 pp. €24. ISBN 978-2-343-02555-1.

*Mambu et son amour.* By LOUIS CHARBONNEAU. Ed. by ROGER LITTLE. Paris: L'Harmattan. 2014. xl+163 pp. €21. ISBN 978-2-343-02463-9.

Louis Charbonneau (1865–1951) was a French colonial merchant with the sensibility of an artist. From the late 1880s until 1922 he undertook a variety of commercial and mining enterprises in Africa, shuttling between the French and

Belgian Congos and Portuguese Angola. Although a more or less unremarkable colonial businessman, Charbonneau produced a body of writing that reveals in fascinating detail the complexities of everyday life in colonial West and Central Africa around the turn of the century. A portion of Charbonneau's oeuvre has sadly been lost, but Roger Little's editions of *Fièvres d'Afrique* and *Mambu et son amour* bring his reflections on colonial Africa and rich personal narratives to new, twenty-first-century audiences.

Both of these books offer fictionalized autobiographical accounts of Charbonneau's travels throughout the region as well as his dealings with local administrators, missionaries, and indigenous colonial subjects. He never questions the inherent benevolence of European interests and governance in Africa, but neither does he uncritically accept the idea of African inferiority on which the colonial question hinges. *Fièvres d'Afrique* deals with this ambivalence most directly: in 'Une aube nouvelle', a section of a lengthy dreamscape set off by a feverish delirium, he optimistically and perhaps stubbornly asserts that 'les nations blanches ont enfin compris qu'il n'était pas de prospérité possible pour le continent africain sans le concours de la race noire' (p. 57). The affirmation of a certain idea of indigenous dignity goes hand in hand for Charbonneau with successful colonial rule, and the tension between these two ideas persists throughout the two books, informing his reflections on the colonial situation at its broadest level.

What drives the narratives in both of these texts, however, is Charbonneau's abiding love for an African woman named Mambu, with whom he lived informally for several years during the 1900s. The relationship began awkwardly as Mambu's brother, Charbonneau's local business associate, offered her to the Frenchman as a sort of transactional token. But it went on to become a full-fledged *mariage colonial*, as such liaisons between (often already married) European men and indigenous African women were frequently termed in French. There is little doubt for the reader that Charbonneau remained passionately attached to Mambu for the rest of his life, long after her untimely death in 1906 and his loving pilgrimage to her resting place the following year. Constructed as a series of journal entries and thinly fictionalized (as Little points out in his introduction), *Mambu et son amour* tells their love story and suggests that their intimate contact was responsible for Charbonneau's optimistic openness regarding the future of Africa. Indeed, his friend Raymond Escholier points out in the preface that this is the story of 'la petite négresse qui civilisa un Blanc' (p. 4, emphasis original). Mambu's memory haunts *Fièvres d'Afrique*, which takes place fifteen years after her death and sees Charbonneau (fictionally rendered as 'Libono' or 'Lici') return to the region where he started his African career, come down with a tropical illness, and reflect deliriously on the geological and social history of Africa with his deceased companion serving as spiritual guide.

This romantic relationship, which at times takes the form of a tragic obsession, comes to inflect Charbonneau's sense of literary style as well. The organization of the narratives as journal entries lends no small amount of intimacy to the reader's engagement with the text, and the reading experience is often tinged with a sort of

colonial voyeurism. At the same time, though, Charbonneau's realism infantilizes Mambu: in their dialogues she speaks only in *français petit nègre*, and this feature brings the colonial relationship into the textual renderings of their most intimate interactions: 'Libono, je suis contente! Serre petit peu contre toi... moi aussi... je suis petit poussin pour toi!' (*Mambu*, p. 39). Fascinatingly, Charbonneau's characteristic ambivalence towards race and the colonial situation becomes part of his aesthetics, such that every dialogue or journal entry is both intensely personal and expressive of broader political and racial considerations.

These are rich and illuminating colonial documents, and Little has done well to bring them out in new editions. Aside from 'La Duchesse', a lengthy short story appended to *Fièvres d'Afrique*, the other previously unpublished texts in this collection do not add as much to our understanding of Charbonneau's work as one might hope. Nonetheless, they do testify to Mambu's lifelong hold on his literary psyche. Little's critical introductions to both texts offer helpful overviews of Charbonneau's writerly output as well as the challenges involved in piecing together his biography and literary works. Although he might have drawn out for non-specialists Charbonneau's connections to other colonial writers of his time, Little's editorial work is careful and conscientious in its attention to a colonial writer who reveals himself to be complexly and painfully human on every page.

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