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## HARD-BOILED MASCULINITIES

Christopher Breu, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005

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Since Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the study of popular fiction has generally fallen into two different theoretical and methodological camps. Theoretical orientations often derive from the Frankfurt School, where all forms of popular culture are commodified, alienated, and shot through with capitalist ideology, or from scholars like Michael Denning who celebrate popular culture for its rejection of cultural hierarchy and appeal to groups excluded from zones of cultural power. Methodologically, studies of popular fiction either attempt to legitimate such fiction as an object of inquiry by contextualizing it in the consideration of more canonical works, or by celebrating them alone, as subjects of study worthy of consideration in and of themselves. Christopher Breu's recent volume *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* functions as a text that bridges both these theoretical and methodological gaps. Using dialectical concepts of culture derived from the work of Frederick Jameson, Andreas Huyssen, and Slavoj Žižek, Breu couches his subject in terms of what he calls "cultural fantasy," a space where representations are both imagined and read as imaginary. These figurations are neither ideologically determined nor are they always liberatory. Instead, they exhibit a cultural anxiety surrounding masculinity in the interwar years.

Breu's study is the latest example of a recent critical interest in hard-boiled fiction, that tough guy fiction associated with the 1920s and 1930s, with pulp magazines (especially *Black Mask*), and with writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. In it, he acknowledges his debt to two excellent books that preceded his, namely Sean McCann's *Gumshoe America* and Erin A. Smith's *Hard-Boiled*, both of which deal exclusively with hard-boiled fiction. *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, like these earlier studies, shows evidence of archival work in pulp magazines, but also deals with a number of canonical writers that serve to extend Breu's notions about twentieth century masculinity to the realm of "high" culture.

Especially valuable in Breu's text is his theoretical grounding in the early chapters. It is here that he lays out his concept of the "cultural fantasy," a concept originating in what Breu describes as a "psycho-Marxist" theoretical orientation. The use of theoretical principles derived from both Freud and Marx allows Breu to acknowledge the roots of *noir* fiction (different, but related to the hard-boiled), which run deep into the psychological affect of nineteenth century Gothic fiction and the sociological distance of the police gazettes and adventure stories. By reading early issues of *Black Mask* before the hard-boiled style emerged, Breu is able to identify both of these threads of *noir*, the psychological and the sociological, in pulp fiction. The hard-boiled fiction of Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett proves to be the ultimate union of these two nineteenth century strands in which a sociological distancing masks a psychological crisis.

This crisis in masculinity is partially attenuated, Breu argues, through a complex appropriation and transformation of racist discourse. In perhaps the most ground-breaking critical move of the book, Breu literalizes the concept of the "black mask," implicit in the title of the genre's most well-known pulp magazine, arguing that white hard-boiled masculinity draws on racialist notions about black male strength and virility (in particular, "the fantasy figure of the black rapist" [33]) to distinguish itself from Victorian no-

tions of white "manliness," which "emphasized physical restraint and conscious sexual renunciation" (6). Using this model, Breu moves through a number of crucial texts at a roughly chronological pace, devoting chapters to Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), and Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1947). In each case, Breu delineates the ways in which the adoption of racist codes of violence, sexuality, and psychological distancing informs the construction of masculinity in these works.

Breu's paradigm produces a particularly compelling reading of the figure of *Light in August's* Joe Christmas whose racial ambiguity and pulp reading are closely intertwined in Breu's analysis. Christmas becomes a figure of what Breu calls "anti-passing" (134), who exploits his racial indeterminacy to become an outsider in every community, an equivalent of the "drifter" in hard-boiled fiction. Opposed to this text, Breu's theoretical construction also provides a grounding for understanding the relationships between fantasy and reality in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, in which an African-American hard-boiled protagonist is already inscribed by a cultural fantasy from which he has no escape. With a central character limited by cultural notions of the "black rapist," Himes' novel "hold[s] up a funhouse mirror to the racial and sexual imaginary of postwar American culture, reflecting back, in distorted and often parodic ways, the already fantastic sexual fantasies of a white-supremacist American culture" (144).

Breu's conclusion and his chapter on Hammett's *Red Harvest* exemplify the difficulties inherent in this notion of "cultural fantasy." *Red Harvest*, he argues, is the genre's "first autocritique" (57), but even in this novel it remains difficult to transcend the "lethal misogyny" that underwrites the fantasy (80). In a conclusion that returns to the pages of *Black Mask*, he reads a number of letters to the editor in light of recent reader-response theory, acknowledging the degree to which readers felt invested in these magazines. What results, however, is an understanding that readers frequently accepted the cultural fantasy of "unemotive violent masculinity" to the degree that it persists as a rather dominant fantasy in American culture, with little or no critical examination (188).

The strength of Breu's readings, particularly of Hammett, Faulkner, and Himes, serves to point out a few gaps in the construction of his overall project. The use of archival work on pulp magazines, while theoretically informative, is brief. These magazines contained writing in a variety of genres (Westerns, fantasy, war stories, etc.), much of which is cast aside (by Breu and others working in this field) in favor of purely hard-boiled crime fiction. While Breu does deal with Daly and Hammett, some consideration of the vast number of other writers in the pulps might serve to complicate and enrich his later readings. Also, the fifteen year gap between *Light in August* and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is relatively unaddressed. This period, a moment that has been called "the cultural front," saw a connection between collectivist left-wing movements and these very notions of individualized masculinity. An examination of the intersection of these two seemingly opposed world-views might complicate – or validate – his already interesting reading of Himes.

Ultimately, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* stands as a useful contribution to the study of gender and race in American interwar writing. Breu makes a convincing case that ideas about masculinity in the early twentieth century cross boundaries between canonical and popular fiction, and that notions of hard-boiled masculinity are inextricable from ideas about race in America during this period. His study, like earlier works by McCann and Smith, demonstrate that serious archival work in popular culture can provide crucial insights into our study of American culture and a deeper appreciation for those works we consider classics.