



Toyin Falola. *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency, and Voice*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022; xii + 678 pp. ISBN: 9781648250279.

Prolific Nigerian-American historian, Toyin Falola, has produced a freewheeling and polemical history and handbook to decades-long debates over the decolonisation of African studies. The book is positioned in the context of and in continuity with decolonialisation “from the start of political decolonization (the 1950s) to the present time,” focusing on subsequent waves of “emergent academic elite” (pp. 2-3). In the 21st century, Falola argues the decolonial struggle “has moved almost entirely to academic fields—with an emphasis on the ever-growing importance of research in developing ways to break free of the African socioeconomic squeeze fostered by capitalist structures” (p. 10), so although direct European political dominance over Africa has ended, Falola is wont to remind readers of Africa’s continued marginalization within global capitalism, particularly the global knowledge economy. Epistemological decolonisation is thus defined as the end of “colonial-like relations ... in the knowledge production processes of Africa” (p. 9), or the end of the “Eurocentric monopoly of knowledge and the exclusion or marginalization of African epistemology or perspectives in research methodologies” (p. 11), with later chapters in the rather loosely edited book offering their own additional definitions.

Falola’s introduction promises both radicalism and reasonableness. He seeks to present a “balanced overview of what a feasible decoloniality should look like,” while simultaneously “identifying and critiquing the limitations to decoloniality” (p. 11). At certain points his approach is in keeping with the critical self-reflection ongoing globally in academia for decades, with common professional concerns appearing, such as the inaccessibility of academic jargon, and negotiating insider/outsider dynamics. Falola also reflects on some basic problems in African universities that will be familiar, albeit to lesser degrees, among academics in even wealthy countries like Australia, including a lack of funds and time allocated to research and the limited impact of research on policy. At other points in the book, however, the author envisages a decoloniality far beyond what even radical student activists have been demanding, such as South Africa’s Fallists



whose protests have inspired him. Decolonisation is intertwined with desecularisation for Falola, who would reject the very notion of the secular as un-African. In elevating indigenous subaltern epistemologies he seeks to place traditional African religious practices at the core of public life. Christianity and Islam are conversely presented as perpetually alien intrusions upon the continent, except when required to make the case for “precolonial universities in Africa” (pp. 352-3), also one of the few references to North Africa in the book. Therefore, despite its radical tone—anti-racism protests and anti-capitalist politics are recurrent concerns—there is an inescapable traditionalism to Falola’s argument; modernity is depicted as a moral calamity.

The first section, “Knowledge Production,” offers a substantial and critical overview of aspects of decolonial discourse, focusing on questions of epistemology, and although the focus is very much sub-Saharan Africa, Falola notes the importance of Latin American decolonial theory. The approach in this section, indeed in much of the book, is often quite general and polemical, however, with Falola’s representatively lumping together “explorers and ethnographic researchers,” as if nothing had changed since the times of Sir Richard Burton (p. 115). This depiction of an arrogantly unreflexive Global North fails to acknowledge how central research ethics and debates over representational practices have become in the (social) sciences since the 1970s, nor how ubiquitous postcolonial considerations have become in the humanities. However, precisely because of the ubiquity of postcolonial humanities and reflexive research practices, Chapter 4, on decolonising methodologies, is valuable in arguing for the necessity of “generat[ing] indigenous models of knowledge production or research fueled in proportionate levels by both indigenous and modern ways of knowing” (p. 135). Most scholars will dissent from some of the ways of knowing Falola prescribes—divination, for example—but the chapter demonstrates decoloniality is not merely a matter of reforming dominant paradigms, no matter how ethically aware we have become.

The second section, “Agencies and Voices,” begins with two long chapters engaging with the work of key scholars of decolonisation and decoloniality. Falola draws in Latin American theory, once again, but overviews of key African scholars are painted with broad brushstrokes. The influence of Marxism on decoloniality comes through strongly, albeit



depicted as little more than communitarian critiques of European capitalism, in accord with African moral economies. The conflation is so complete that Falola can claim, in a section on Walter Rodney's economic history, that "[b]efore European contact in the fifteenth century, it was common knowledge in Africa that Marxism and communalism would be useful for collective progress as a culture" (p. 201). Chapter 10 offers a wide-ranging overview of feminist approaches to decolonisation, while Chapter 11, addressing LGBTQ issues, analyses homophobia on the continent, with a few passing references to (de)coloniality, such as criticising homophobic nationalism. Falola assimilates western liberal categories and politics surprisingly uncritically, unlike other scholars such as Joseph Massad who query the adoption of contemporary western sexual categories in non-western cultural contexts.

The third and final section, "The Disciplines," focuses on decolonisation in interrelated fields: education, language, religion and literature. Chapter 15, on "Identity and the African Feminist Writer" is the most tightly argued chapter in the book, along with Chapter 19 on "Decolonizing African Philosophy." Other chapters in this section present many policy ideas, but none are explored in any detail. Taken together, however, they point towards the "African Futurism" Falola outlines in the final chapter, a decolonized Africa incorporating precolonial and postcolonial technologies and epistemologies. Chapter 12, "Decolonizing the African Academy," thus encourages universities to explore nuclear technology while teaching traditional canoe-making, and to Africanise medical and mining research while working with local companies to take pharmaceutical production out of the hands of foreign capitalists—the only thing less welcome than their exports seems to be their investments. In Chapter 18, Falola calls for the establishment of African traditional religions as state religions, granting traditional religious leaders corresponding political power—even if he later rejects these traditional belief systems "as a basis for an African identity and unity" (p. 609). He similarly argues for incorporating traditional religious practices, such as divination, into school curricula, and incorporating traditional religious beliefs, such as spirit possession, ancestor veneration and astrology, into scientific research. It's difficult to reconcile these suggestions with the author's praise of Marxist scholarship and calls for developing national space programs elsewhere in



the book, but Falola envisages the universities of the future teaching both astronomy and astrology. There is value in bringing attention to the modalities and epistemologies that any deep decolonisation program must reckon with, sooner or later, and in moving far beyond the scholarly self-critique that constitutes much decolonial discourse, Falola's book is an engaging read.

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