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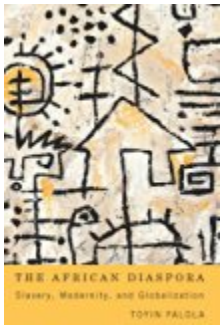
Toyin Falola. *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization.* Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2013. 420 S. ISBN 978-1-58046-452-9.



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T. Falola: The African Diaspora

Toyin Falola, currently occupying the Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin, is one of the most influential African historians working in the United States. An outspoken representative of black activist scholarship, repeatedly distinguished as a university professor, he is also an extremely prolific author with a publishing record including over hundred books. His latest monograph, *The African Diaspora. Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization*, gives evidence of what is at the core of his intellectual engagement: the promotion of black nationalism and Afrocentrism with the aim of giving voice to and acknowledging the value of black and African scholars' distinctive identities, epistemologies, knowledge systems, and political imaginations in the struggle to overcome racial domination and Western hegemonic power.

The issues discussed in the book cover a large time span, from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, in order to connect and analyse the links between the Old Diaspora with its foundations in the transatlantic slave trade and the New Diaspora of contemporary migrants. Geographically, the book is de facto quite focused, mainly referring to the connections between West Africa and the Americas, or more precisely between today's Nigeria and the United States. Moreover, throughout the book Falola develops an ethnic focus on the past and present Yoruba history and culture, which he depicts as a particularly dynamic and powerful force of globalization. His Nigerian and Yoruba examples most vividly illustrate African agency, be it in its violent and disruptive manifestations of imperial conquest, colonial domination and enslavement, or its (re-)creative and integrative forms of popular culture and religion, encompassing the huge commercial enterprise of Nollywood (p. 282 ff.) as well as the prolific artistic and spiritual healing practices based on Orisa traditions (p. 187 ff.).

The formal structure of the book apparently follows a chronological logic. The altogether fifteen chapters are organized in three parts, preceded by an introduction that presents a systematic overview, where the author explains his engagement in the politics of black identity ultimately due to the fact that "knowledge about Africa is not disconnected to from the real world of politics" (p. 4). The following chapters are subsumed under a first part on "The Old Diaspora", which emerged from the slave trade, a middle part on "Yoruba Ethnicity in the Diaspora", which is presented as "An African case study" encompassing old and new diasporas as well as their connections, and a last part on "The New Diaspora" consisting of contemporary migrants. But since Falola is not concerned, at least in this book, with narrating history and giving detailed evidence of historical facts but rather with analysing the consequences of slavery "that survived well into the twentieth century" (p. 18) and the multi-layered interconnections between the Old and New Diasporas, the temporal and geographical framework of his narrative is constantly shifting.

The overall composition of the book suggests that contemporary globalization should be traced back and related to the history of an expansive economy that was founded on chattel slavery. Throughout the book,

Falola's notion of globalization, used in a rather heuristic than theoretical manner, remains highly ambivalent. In several instances, the notion stands for the expansion of capitalism or simply "market expansion" (pp. 328f.) with a clearly negative connotation. Yet, the term also carries positive meanings, namely when it comes to the achievements of "migrants as agents of globalization" (p. 23). Such positive aspects are exemplified with the accomplished careers of three individuals, two artists, and an academic (all of them Nigerian, two among them Yoruba), who represent the intellectual engagement and political struggles of a highly educated elite of African migrants currently living and working in the United States. Hence, Falola links the positive connotation of globalization with a clearly localized geographic centre and a committed Afrocentric orientation. Although globalization "brings gains and pains" (p. 330), he suggests that as long as African cultures and identities are not lost the gains can still prevail in spite of the pains of exile, and the struggle for sustainable development on the African continent can still be successful in the future in spite of massive brain drain.

Among the several highly charged concepts that appear in the title of the book, the notion of "modernity" is the one that Falola is treating in the most explicit and least ambivalent manner. What he sees as lying at the heart of this issue is access to Western education, which is not a bad thing because "modernity should not be seen as implying the end of African 'tradition' " (ibid.) and instead of being conceived as a threat, "modernization" should be conceived as a tool to eradicate "black poverty" (pp. 14–17). In fact, Falola considers education as the key for the improvement of the conditions of black communities on both sides of the Atlantic. His notion of modernization is linked with the opportunities opened up by Western education – opportunities that he is far from dismissing in spite of his otherwise very critical attitude towards Western hegemony and "the West" in general. Although he acknowledges the individual contributions of Western scholars who have produced new and insightful knowledge about Africa and thereby join the efforts of African scholars writing against the colonial library, Falola's combatant anti-Western attitude is as persistent as his insistence on the category of "race" as the foundation of "blackness" and on the centrality of Africa for the "Black Atlantic". In this respect, it would have been interesting to know more about Falola's position towards Paul Gilroy and the latter's decidedly anti-essentialist conception of the "Black Atlantic" and his caution against "the ethnic absolutism that currently dominates black political culture". Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge 1993, p. 5.

Readers who are not already knowledgeable of the factual backgrounds of the history of transatlantic – and for that matter, also continental African – slavery and contemporary migrations will probably find little orientation in the book. I would not recommend it for undergraduate or graduate students who need an introduction to these topics. A further obstacle is the accessibility of the book by white scholars, who are rhetorically excluded from the readership by Falola's use of rhetorical strategies that Gilroy might have identified as "cultural insiderism" Ibid., p. 3. . In combination with his strong sense of black, African, and ethnic (Yoruba) nationalism as well as his pervasive and undifferentiated reference to "the West" as the hegemonic system to be overcome, this implicit "Othering" might be counterproductive regarding a possibly shared "will to understand for purposes of coexistence" Edward W. Said, Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient, London 1979, p. xix. – a will that Edward Said and others in his following have tried to strengthen. Yet, the book is a highly valuable stimulation to confront the issue of race, its intimate relationship with modernity, and its structuring effects on past and present globalization processes. And it invites one to go back to Falola's numerous previous publications in order to discover the sources of knowledge on which he builds the claim that closes the book, namely, that "Africa's destiny must be controlled by Africans, and not by others" (p. 359).

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