

BOOK REVIEW

Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier, editors. *Critical Terms for the Study of Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 410 pp. Introduction. List of Contributors. Acknowledgments. Index. \$32.50. Paper. ISBN: 978-0226548975.

Africa comprises fifty-four countries, so any attempt to study it will inevitably conjure up intellectual and methodological obstacles, as is evident in *Critical Terms for the Study of Africa*. Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier, as editors of this elegantly devised volume have, however, risen to this challenge. The word “term” provides the main investigative premise of this ambitious enterprise. It is important to point out that the twenty-five alphabetically ordered “terms” (from “Africa/African,” “Design,” “Modernity,” “Narrative,” “Performance,” “Population,” “Spirit,” and “Theory” to “Value,” “Violence,” and “Witchcraft”) selected to explore the African continent are, in fact, concepts. In everyday speech, “term,” “notion,” and “concept” are indiscriminately used to render what partly escapes language—the impossible correlation between signified and signifiers—and cannot, as such, be captured in unambiguous definitions.

The “terms” deployed by Masquelier, Desai, and their twenty-nine contributors are far-reaching in their conceptual implications and offer thus an excellent basis for examining Africa across time and space. Indeed, the different entries favor interconnectedness, and underscore the idea that the chosen “terms” are semantically fluid and prone to constant mutations. Africa is read in the *longue durée* as a continent whose contours were shaped by pre-colonial history but also irremediably disrupted and transformed by colonial modernity. Therefore, the different authors involved in this project measure contemporary Africa against the changes brought about by colonialism across the continent.

“Belonging,” “Citizenship,” and a series of related concepts such as autochthony, indigeneity, and ethnicity have evolved but are still redolent of the contexts into which they were first introduced by colonial bureaucrats to “define and rule” (246) African populations.

“Environment,” “Health,” “Humanitarianism,” and “Gender and Sexuality” also lend themselves to this interpretive grid. When one looks back at the evolution of these particular concepts, which, incidentally, are all

linked to the individual-society-world nexus, one realizes that they have been employed to seek emancipation for, but also to denigrate, Africa and Africans and to racialize the relationship between the West and the African continent. Africa is thus seen as a wild rather than landscape-able continent, a view compounded by the fact that, while African governments enjoy “territorial sovereignty,” they are still largely denied access to full “resource sovereignty” (108).

“Health,” for its part, provides a fascinating entry point not only to review the historical significance of pandemics—leprosy, malaria, Ebola, and AIDS—but also to assess how the emergence of Western biomedicine has transformed African “biosociality” (172). “Humanitarianism,” a universal idea originally conceived by Henry Dunant to alleviate human pain irrespective of race, nationality, or creed, is often weaponized to develop “binary representations of victim and villain, good and evil, but also further the continued polarizing of Africa’s politics and identities” (185). “Gender and Sexuality,” as an overarching theme, is shown to be manipulated to perpetuate entrenched prejudices about supposedly aberrant practices. However, one of the great heuristic benefits of this volume is that it explores these terms critically and demonstrates that they open new possibilities and offer the opportunity to move away from the dichotomous thinking inherited from “Colonialism” (one of the “terms” examined here).

The focus on “Labor,” “Governance,” “Mobility,” and “Bondage” fulfill an analogous function. For example, “Labor,” while belonging to the classical toolkit of social anthropology, provides an entry into the way in which notions of *chipo* (talent), *zvidobi* (skills), and *ruzivo* (knowledge) inflect the conceptualization of work/labor within the Shona language of Zambia (198). This linguistic dimension is of the utmost significance, and one that the two editors address in their introduction as they deplore the lack of truly “Africa-centered scholarship,” since “most critical debates” on Africa still take place in “European languages” (9). This is a crucial epistemological question explored further under “Liberation” and “Vernacular”; but also under other entries—“Bondage,” “Evidence” (see the significance of “speech” [121]), “Health,” and “Mobility,”—where the semantic resources of English are deemed insufficient to render the conceptual complexity of the African context.

This argument has far-reaching theoretical implications and offers a powerful canvas against which the development of “Theory of or about Africa” (303) has been examined from Georg Hegel to Cheikh Anta Diop and contemporary proponents of African thought and philosophy such as Achille Mbembe, VY Mudimbe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Kwasi Wiredu. One of the most notable qualities of this excellent volume is its ability to bridge the divide between anthropology, politics, thought, history, and literary studies. While answering many questions, there is no doubt that *Critical Terms for the Study of Africa* will also stimulate new conversations about the past, present, and future shape of African Studies in the U.S. and beyond.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Campbell, Horace. 2008. "Ethics and the Enterprise of Studying Africa." *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 149–55. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0120.

Fratkin, Elliot. 2001. "East African Pastoralism in Transition: Maasai, Boran, and Rendille Cases." *African Studies Review* 44 (3): 1–25. doi:10.2307/525591.

Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2009. "Becoming Indigenous in Africa." *African Studies Review* 52 (3): 1–32. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0302.