

BOOK REVIEW

Pierre-Philippe Fraiture. *Past Imperfect: Time and African Decolonization 1945–1960*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. viii + 320 pp. Bibliography. Index. £95.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781800348400.

The post-Second World War era has long been seen as an important period in the history of Africa, as it was during these years that the final groundworks were laid for the eventual decolonization of the continent and the creation of distinct postcolonial nation-states. In the specific case of Francophone Africa, some scholars have nuanced this general observation by arguing that the postwar juncture also fostered the germs of neocolonialism in the relationship between France and its former colonies. Analyzing the writings of African historical actors and/or their contributions to parliamentary debates, other scholars have cautioned us not to see the formation of distinct nation-states as the necessary end-point of decolonization, since a number of Africans envisioned other forms of political organizations as valid alternatives to the French colonial empire. Pierre-Philippe Fraiture's *Past Imperfect: Time and African Decolonization 1945–1960* makes an erudite contribution to these debates about decolonization in Africa. Like other historically minded analyses, it recognizes the years between 1945 and 1960 as an era of “rupture” and (new) “beginning” for France and its colonies. Unlike the bulk of works on African decolonization, however, this book is interested in the “intellectual exceptionality” of the postwar period, which saw the emergence of “radical experiments in the art and humanities” even as the era remained “haunted by the long 19th century” (20). This mood is captured succinctly by the prelude that opens the book. Thus, while other works look at the process of political decolonization after 1945, *Past Imperfect* relies on postcolonial methodology and an interdisciplinary approach to skillfully focus on cultural decolonization as willed and/or experienced by African and French intellectuals.

Chapter One is devoted to time as a concept and to the issue of historicity. It is informed by the philosophical work of Reinhart Koselleck, whose notion of *Neuzeit* is mobilized to account for and interpret how colonial experts (travelers, missionaries, ethnographers, and others) conceived of African time and the place of Africans in history. Denying the coevalness of African time while viewing their own historicity as progressive led colonists to relegate

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Africans to a state of timelessness. Using the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1945 and its anti-racist agenda as important backdrop (57–59), Fraiture perceptively argues that these assumptions would be challenged in the postwar period, and this opened windows to appreciate, in the Koselleckian phraseology, “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous” (38). Thus, in addition to the literary/cultural magazine *Présence Africaine* and its work to rehabilitate Africa, a number of intellectuals from France (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Balandier) and Africa and its diaspora (Cheikh Anta Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire) are discussed and, at times, put into conversation with one another. Collectively, they reaffirmed, unlike the colonial trope, that Africa was not static. Rather, it was subject to both history and progress, but a progress that was different from Western modernity.

Chapter Two opens with an in-depth analysis of *Les statues meurent aussi*—a 1953 film essay by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais that had been commissioned by *Présence Africaine*. Fraiture argues that the film is “predicated on the idea that decolonization is a concrete process that should also encompass material culture and challenge its essentialization” (103). Continuing the discussion on historicity, a close examination of *Les statues* allows for the unveiling of filiation, indeed, of intertextual dialogues between the film and various canonical contemporary texts in Francophone African cultural/literary studies, including Placide Tempels’ *La philosophie bantoue* and Diop’s *L’unité culturelle de l’Afrique Noire*. While these texts succeeded in re-establishing the historicity of Africa, they appeared to have remained tributary to the nineteenth-century methodological dualism and, thus, dependent on the very order of knowledge that they were trying to debunk. Against these (Afrocentric) intellectuals, *Past Imperfect* seems to suggest that Balandier and Valentin Yves Mudimbe are among those thinkers who were able to move beyond this problematic reliance on the colonial library. In contrast, they emphasized the instances of *reprise* (re-appropriation) as a process inherent in African art. Thus, against the morbid tone of *Les statues*, Fraiture juxtaposes the vitality that both Mudimbe and Balandier saw in the works of African artists. If Diop and Marker/Resnais denounced hybridity, Mudimbe and Balandier appear to celebrate it.

Titled “Words,” Chapter Three investigates language and the politics of language. It is premised on the idea that “Empires were also linguistic enterprises” and that language planning emerged as “one of the main biopolitical technologies used by the colonizers to *develop* African colonies [...] and open Africa to a Western ‘horizon of expectation’” (145). As in the previous chapters, it starts with the ethnocentric world of the colonizers and their various attempts to map out, compare, and ultimately discount African languages as poor instruments for understanding an entangled and ever more complex world. This colonialist endeavor toward African languages paved the way for establishing the supremacy of European languages in the colonies. It was against this conjuncture and the epistemology that sustained it that Cheikh Anta Diop built his glottopolitical project as laid down in *Nation nègres et culture*, in which the Senegalese intellectual toiled to show filiations


between ancient Egyptian and various (West) African languages, including Wolof. In Fraiture's shrewd analysis, the scholarly effort of the Senegalese thinker became a terrain on which to combat Eurocentrism. If ancient Egyptian as an African language could birth and sustain such a glorious civilization as that of the pharaohs, the Diopian logic went, so could contemporary Africans use African languages to inhabit the modern world. From this perspective, and anticipating Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's now famous call for "decolonizing" language politics in African cultural production, Diop promoted the use of African language, going as far as to ask that schoolchildren be taught in African languages.

The final substantive chapter of *Past Imperfect* is a scrutiny of Georges Balandier's *Afrique ambiguë*, a book that epitomized "a new type of Africanist thought for which the notion of change, and the dynamic processes linking past, present, and future, became the main objects of investigation" (203). In his analysis of this autobiography, Fraiture highlights how the context of decolonization acted as a co-text in Balandier's social science work. Significantly, the transformation that the French Africanist was observing led him to formulate the idea that African time was coeval with the time of the West and to conclude that "our present cannot be understood solely through the prism of chronological history" (208). The methodological implications of such realization were earthshattering. Rather than assuming that Africans were trapped in timeless customs, as colonial ethnology had put it, Balandier emphasized the dynamism of Africans. Concurrently, the urban spaces the Africans inhabited emerged as the locus *par excellence* of his Africanist fieldwork. This approach made Balandier a singular thinker whose concept of "situation coloniale" revolutionized (French) Africanism in the 1950s and thereafter. Despite his sympathetic reading of Balandier's work, Fraiture is not blind to the scholar's shortcomings. His critical discussion of Balandier's views on women's emancipation and defense of clitoridectomy are cases in point (224–27).

Past Imperfect is an engaging book that constantly crosses the borders between intellectual history, cultural theorization, and epistemology to paint a vivid picture of the lifeworlds of Francophone intellectuals in the years that followed the Second World War. While the exegetic focus on canonical Francophone texts is insightful, it sometimes leaves an impression of arbitrariness. If we assume that decolonization was a global phenomenon, we might rightfully wonder if the intertextual exchange that is at the core of the book was solely a Franco-African affair. Given the internationalization of the colonial question in the postwar period, it is intriguing that the authors discussed in the book are portrayed as if they were impervious to ideas and cultural productions from beyond the Francophone world. Revealingly, in the analysis of Balandier's "Sociologie de la dependance," nowhere is dependency theory evoked, let alone mentioned. This is surprising, since Balandier was contemporaneous with the dependency theorists, and the issues he was tackling spoke to the preoccupations of those social scientists. Similarly, one is struck by the fact that the transnational exchanges between Francophone

African intellectuals and their African American peers in the framework of the black internationalism of the 1950s is not productively broached. Finally, while there is a gesture toward an analysis of gender, it is startling that women, both as providers of intellectual labor and subjects involved in the production of cultural decolonization, remain invisible.

Despite these criticisms, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture's opus is an astute book that breaks new ground in the study of decolonization in the twentieth century. An erudite tour de force that deconstructs complex and oftentimes demanding texts, *Past Imperfect* succeeds in bringing to the fore the intertextual dialogues among African, Antillean, and French intellectuals in their effort to unmake colonialism and the epistemologies that informed its implementation. This makes it a must-read for any scholar interested in the decolonial turn in African studies.

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