

February 2014

## Review of Honwana, Alcinda. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012, xiv + 222 pp.

Mwenda Ntarangwi  
Calvin College, [mgn2@calvin.edu](mailto:mgn2@calvin.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ntarangwi, Mwenda. "Review of Honwana, Alcinda. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012, xiv + 222 pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2014): 59-61. <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol1/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Retracing Africa by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Honwana, Alcinda. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012, xiv + 222 pp.**

In *The Time of Youth*, anthropologist Alcinda Honwana focuses on youth experiences of what she terms waithood, that is that prolonged stage between childhood and adulthood, a phenomenon resulting from failed neoliberal and global socioeconomic and political crises. Organized around eight chapters, this book tells a very coherent story of how youth that are undergoing the prevailing challenges of globalization are seeking “creative” ways of managing their lives. In articulating this story, Honwana focuses on the phenomenon of waithood and argues that it encompasses the lives of the majority of young Africans regardless of where they live. It shows that the class dimension provides an important window through which to understand the experiences of youth in the global south. But she also notes that despite the constraints youth face, waithood is both creative and transformative. Using data collected from Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal, and Tunisia, Honwana does a good job of providing useful historical contexts of these countries that allow readers to understand her arguments without losing the ethnographic narrative.

In chapter one, Honwana frames her book within existing studies of youth, and defines youth and waithood before providing historical contexts of the four African countries on which she focuses and the interconnectedness of the stories of their youth. In the second chapter, she expands on her use of the phenomenon of waithood as it affects not only youth in Africa but also in developed countries. In chapters three and four, we respectively get an analysis of the specific aspirations youth have as they face the challenges of waithood and the coping mechanisms they apply. Chapter five focuses on sexuality and intimacy as new ways of coping with waithood. Honwana then provides an analysis of how youth reject old-fashioned party politics (chapter 6) through social movements that bring about social change in Tunisia (chapter 7) and the ways that waithood is assuming a global phenomenon that affects youth in Madrid, London, New York, and Dakar, among other global locations (chapter 8).

Honwana writes well and is able to balance theory with ethnographic data that she gathered in the field while acknowledging and engaging with vast strands of literature on the topic. Her analysis of waithood is centered on experiences of African youth but she is also able to show both its particularities and similarities with other continents and varied ways youth respond to it. Some of the common strategies for coping with waithood include: “border crossing,” exemplified by the physical crossing of national borders for immigrants from Guinea trying to eke a

living on the streets of Dakar, Senegal; young women traders bringing goods into Mozambique from South Africa and trying to pay as little tax as possible or none at all; and Senegalese youth crossing through the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in search of greener pastures. There are youth also who are living in waithood despite being in formal work, as is the case of young Tunisian young females Honwana interviewed who were working in European telemarketing call centers located in Tunisia that hire university graduates to meet customer relations needs for the European market. Outside of these coping strategies employed by youth in both informal and formal sectors, Honwana devotes a chapter on intimacy, a phenomenon that entails the reconfiguration of masculine and feminine identities. Men who traditionally have had power over women because of their ability to provide materially now cannot project such masculine identities because their economic instability does not allow them to be “real men.” As a result, Honwana argues that because unemployed young men in waithood lack the economic advantage that employed men have over women, sexual power becomes the only tool left to them (102). On the other hand, young women through intimate relations with multiple men strategically engineer sexual relationships to achieve their goals and maximize their gains (93). Further, by ensuring that the material benefits of sexual engagements do not come from a single man who could exercise control over them, these women try to guarantee their relative independence.

There are two other discussions that Honwana makes that are very important in understanding youth in Africa today — citizenship and social change. Regarding citizenship, Honwana shows that youth have rejected formal party politics but have rallied behind movements that seek to right the social ills caused by corruption, bad governance, failed political promises, and other administrative challenges. Here Honwana provides examples of youth engagement in hip-hop music that challenge the status quo and of social movements that change political arrangements as happened in Senegal and Tunisia. In this way, Honwana confronts traditional theories of citizenship that tended to understand it as the gradual (and passive) acquisition of civil, political, and social rights. The stories that she provides of youth across Africa show that rights are not a given but rather something that youth have to fight for, which leads to an approach to rights that encompasses both rights and participation.

Finally, Honwana shows that youth do not just participate in social movements but also bring about much needed social change. By providing a detailed account of the processes that led to Tunisia’s political change, including the careful coalition that youth were able to form with workers, politicians, and other social groups, Honwana shows what it takes for youth social movements to bring about change. When Tunisian youth’s desire for social change became relevant to

the broader spectrum of Tunisia's population, Tunisian youth were able to bring about the fall of Ben Ali's regime. Although this book is engaging, repeating some information in different chapters is unhelpful. Nonetheless, anyone working on issues of youth in both in Africa in particular and other continents in general will find this book useful.

Dr. Mwenda Ntarangwi  
Associate Professor of Anthropology  
Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI.