“Obama and the idea(s) of Africa: Epistemic In/Justice in Rhetorical Scholarship”

Since at least the sophistic doctrine of probable and perspectival truth, through Nietzsche, Foucault and recent social epistemology scholarship (Fricker 2007, Geuskens 2014, Kurs & Grinshpoon 2017), we have known that ideological and political baggage are necessary companions to assertions about what is worth knowing. In this paper I explore the relations among power, epistemological ethics and what is worth knowing as displayed in the rhetorical scholarship on Barack Obama. I argue that the discipline must continuously diversify the sources from which we draw the normative bases for our critical appraisals of discourse to uphold our obligations to epistemic justice—the concern for the equal treatment of knowledge sources. Treating the scholarship on discourses of/around Obama as a case study, I show that while rhetorical explanations of the psyche, politics, and rhetoric of the 44th president have drawn on an expansive catalogue of cultural practices, many of these accounts favor logics grounded in Euro-American understandings of rhetoric. Barack Obama’s cosmopolitan biography, however, compels interest in myriad rhetorical practices and knowledges from both within and beyond the Euro-American rhetorical traditions. Demarcating my limits of what is worth knowing slightly differently, I consider what and how Kikuyu culture, the Bantu cosmology of sub-Saharan Africa, and an “African worldview” more generally can contribute to our understandings of President Obama’s rhetorical practice. My inquiry is informed by the broader discourse on Africa in American society that Toni Morrison labeled “American Africanism.” I simultaneously seek after how popular ideas of Africa writ large influenced Americans’ understandings of Obama, and, in turn, what Obama’s popularity did for and to ideas of Africa in American public life.