The Perpetual Solitudes and Crises of African Studies in the United States

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In November 1995 I went to my first annual meeting of the African Studies Association on U.S. soil.1 It was the largest academic gathering I had ever attended. But what left an indelible impression on my mind was not the crowded and constrained camaraderie in the seminar rooms and bars; rather, it was the heated plenary session on “Ghettoizing African Studies? The Question of Representation in the Study of Africa,” which was prompted by Philip D. Curtin’s piece, “Ghettoizing African History,” which appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education in early March 1995.2 In the article, Curtin decries the growing numbers of Africans and African Americans teaching African history in U.S. universities and the consequent “lowering” of scholarly standards. The piece ignited furor and vigorous rebuttals, in private and print, in the Chronicle itself and in African scholarly periodicals such as the Harare-based Southern African Political and Economic Monthly and the Dakar-based CODESRIA Bulletin.3 The hall where the session was held was packed to capacity. There was palpable anger, anguish, and anxiety. The speeches, interventions, and exchanges were sharp, sardonic, and spiteful. The ghosts of Montreal 1969 hovered over the assembly. It was clear that all was not well in the Africanist kingdom.

Several months later, in September 1996, I participated, in my capacity as director of an Area Studies center, in a “Conference on International Activities in Changing Global and Regional Contexts: The CIC Agenda.” It was a serious, sedate gathering of provosts, deans, and International and Area Studies directors from twelve U.S. universities (including the “Big Ten” midwestern universities) that was organized to discuss and develop institutional responses to meet the challenges posed by the transition and transformation in international activities and studies. Opening the conference were key representatives from the public and private sectors, including Senator Paul Simon; Donald Fites, the chairman and chief executive officer of Caterpillar, Inc.; and Kenneth Prewitt, president of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). They...
outlined their visions of the “new world order” and how U.S. universities should restructure and revitalize their international programs. Much was heard in the plenary sessions and the working groups about how globalization rendered the old structures of organizing and producing knowledge in bounded regions increasingly obsolete. The thick webs of integration across the world required intellectual orientations that were thematic and internationalist and the intimate involvement of the disciplines. The Area Studies model was a relic of the past.

The two conferences poignantly captured the challenges, internal and external, intellectual and institutional, facing African Studies in the United States. Recent publications reinforce the view that the field, together with other Area Studies programs, is undergoing an unprecedented crisis spawned by the ideological ramifications of the end of the Cold War and the intellectual ravages of globalization.4

Although it cannot be denied that the political and paradigmatic contexts of the Africanist scholarly enterprise in the 1990s have changed from their earlier incarnations, in this article I argue that African Studies in the United States has been in a perpetual state of crisis since its institutionalization in the 1950s. The crisis is rooted in the unyielding intellectual, institutional, and ideological solitudes and bitter contestations among the producers and consumers of Africanist knowledge who are divided by the inscriptions and hierarchies of race and nationality, locational and spatial affiliations, epistemological orientations, and ambitions. Particularly destructive is the continuing gulf between African American and European American Africanists and between the latter and African scholars. For African Studies to survive, let alone thrive, these solitudes must be confronted directly and transcended.

Turf Battles in the Africanist Ghetto

Curtin’s 1995 diatribe on the composition of the Africanist community echoes an earlier piece, in which he dismisses charges that African Americans were underrepresented in African Studies and expresses concern about the influx of African scholars.5 An opponent of “racial quotas,” he rests his case on the same quotas: the proportion of African Americans in the field was higher than their percentage in the nation. The much higher involvement of African Americans in African Studies before World War II is ridiculed and repudiated: “The prewar teaching about Africa was a part of the whole pattern of enclavement of black education, cut off from the rest of society.”6 African Studies was pioneered in the historically black universities long before it became fashionable in the historically white universities, but this fact was thrown into a historical ghetto of the U.S. racial imagination. A new genealogy of patrimony was invented and
sanctified in numerous histories of African Studies,® including Guyer's most recent,® which blissfully ignores the role of African American scholars in the development of African Studies in the United States. And so paternity of the field was wrested from W. E. B. Du Bois and given to Melville Herskovits. African American preoccupations with civilizational questions and Pan-African linkages gave way to the prescriptive developmentalisms and objectivist pretensions of Africanist studies.

The stage was set for bitter "paternity suits" over African Studies from the 1950s as the field entered the segregated corridors of the historically white universities, and the research and reputational rewards rose, bankrolled by the foundations and the federal government, and as the tantalizing possibilities for professional advancement and policy intervention beckoned under Camelot. Born out of the United States' enduring racial divide and in the context of the Cold War, African Studies was imbricated, perhaps more than other Area Studies, in the explosive tensions of racial politics at home and imperialism abroad. It was dogged by the crisis of legitimacy from the very beginning, by the unresolved questions of its audience, mission, and relevance and by the perennial contestations and cravings for scholarly authority and respectability. Always latent and lacerating, the asymmetries of power in the production and consumption of Africanist knowledge and the contestations over content and canon would periodically erupt into open confrontation. The cast of characters would change, as would the specific contexts, but the underlying structural conditions, the fundamental text, always remained the same.

Unanchored from its intellectual and cultural moorings in the African American communities, scholarly and popular, and detached by distance and disposition from African societies and social thought, African Studies in the United States drifted unsteadily between the treacherous anchors of competing and sometimes complementary "formulas," as Martin Staniland calls them.® The Washingtonian formula demanded that African Studies contribute to the definition, defense, and deployment of U.S. interests and intentions in Africa. The cultural brokerage formula called upon Africanists to act as impartial cultural diplomats, interpreting and mediating representations and encounters between Africa and the United States. The disciplinary formula promoted Africa as a tropical laboratory to test and refine the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the disciplines. The development formula championed the cause of developmental policy formulation and intervention. Finally, the solidarity formula implored Africanists to show commitment to African social movements and struggles.

It was an enterprise in which the aspirations for professionalism, policy relevance, and political advocacy jostled for intellectual and moral supremacy, which was, of course, not peculiar to African Studies. Other
Area Studies, indeed, all disciplines, are always negotiating their epistemological identities and social utility. Nevertheless, the potential for convulsion was always greater in the marginalized and isolated Africanist ghetto, where the privileges and pathologies of the wider U.S. social and intellectual order were refracted and reproduced with a ferocious investment of patronage, passions, and pain. The conjuncture of the civil rights movement and growing opposition to the Vietnam War in the United States, together with the intensifying liberation struggles in settler Africa and the discontents of misguided developmentalism in independent Africa, prized open the simmering crisis of Africanist scholarship into the confrontation of Montreal in 1969, where a group of African American and African scholars and activists took on the lords of the ghettoized manor and demanded “pluralism and parity.”

The Montreal confrontation marked a crucial moment for what it revealed of the institutional and intellectual solitudes in African Studies and the legacies it left behind. With regard to organization, the insurgents, led by the Black Caucus, demanded increased black membership and participation in all phases and operations of the African Studies Association (ASA). Regarding intellectual concerns, they called for the inclusion of a Pan-Africanist perspective in research themes and the assumption of scholarly authority by Africans and African Americans. On political matters they insisted on collective commitment to struggles for emancipation in Africa and the United States from the ravages of imperialist and racist oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Many of the affronted “gatekeepers” reacted angrily, charging their opponents with reverse “racialism,” or made unabashed defense of professional neutrality and scholarly objectivity for the “untrammeled pursuit of scholarship and truth,” in Benjamin Nimer’s words. Others advocated reformist concessions in the name of liberal tolerance or a strategic leftist compromise. Later, some white “radicals” accused the Africanist community of being lackeys of imperialism by spying for the U.S. government, pursuing research agendas and themes, for example, on “modernization,” that benefited U.S. business and imperial needs.

The lines of debate drawn by Montreal continued in subsequent years, but the contexts changed. The African Heritage Studies Association (AHSA), formed by the Black Caucus, went its way; and perhaps fewer African Americans entered African Studies, opting for African American Studies instead. The institutionalization of the domestic racial solitudes was almost complete. There was no resolution of the fundamental institutional, ideological, and intellectual contradictions and constraints facing African Studies within and outside the U.S. academy. Rid of the perennial challenges and criticisms from vocal African Americans, the gatekeepers made minor reforms in the structural organization of
ASA, and the Africanist establishment hoped to return to the charmed clubbiness of the past.

But it was not to be. "Natives" from Africa itself increasingly demanded to be heard about their continent and cultures, societies and states, pasts and futures. Mlahleni Njisane drew attention "to the strong parallel found between academic meetings of apartheid South Africa on the one hand, and those of the African Studies Association on the other." He noted the propensity of researchers to rely on anecdotal evidence and use demeaning vocabulary when referring to African phenomena, despite the fetish made of field research and scientific terminology. "For the study of Europeans," he stressed, "we have to defer to them as the arbiters of their situation; and so, too, must Africans be regarded as arbiters of their own situation. Even Darkest Africa demands that simple courtesy." This point was echoed by Maxwell Owusu: "As long as western scholars, however liberal-minded and well meaning, dominate the study of African societies and cultures, the results of their research will continue to be disputed by educated Africans—if not on scientific grounds, then on the basis of sentiment and ideology." Guy C. Z. Mhone elaborated:

It is necessary to recognize that there are two levels at which Africanists can be attacked. The primary or first level of attack is based on the argument that scientific inquiry is not wholly value-free and that it has limits and constraints which ought to be openly accepted by any investigator. . . . The second level of attack is ideological. At this level, Africanists can be attacked either for perpetuating a certain ideology or excluding from the realm of concern particular ideologies. Africanists as a group can be considered guilty at this level without accusing each one of the conscious perpetuation or exclusion of a specific ideology.

In the repertoire of the Africanists’ biases, he singled out their morbid fascination with "tribalism," the contrived "distinction between Africa south of the Sahara and North Africa," their support for "one-party states" in the name of integration, their propensity for deductive theorization and generalization from Western rather than African intellectual traditions, and their cynicism and indifference to African concerns and concepts such as Pan-Africanism.

African Studies in the United States, Victor Uchendu admonished several years later, suffered from "a terminal colonial order." Africanists were implicated, whether by choice or circumstance, in the asymmetrical relations of dependence and domination between Africa and the West, and so their work was treated with suspicion by African scholars. Many continued to view Africa as a research laboratory, to analyze and assess the continent through the prism of constantly shifting Euro-
centric concepts and theories, and to avoid taking principled political positions by hiding behind the immoral fiction of academic neutrality. Uchendu listed a number of crucial professional questions that needed to be asked:

What role should the non-African scholar continue to play in African Studies; who should decide priority areas of research in African studies; what are the practical interests of foreign governments and private foundations that provide funds for Africanist research; how much “intelligence mining” results from research activities done by foreigners in Africa; what kind of commitments must Africanists make to Africa’s problems; how different is the “insider’s” view of Africa from the “outsider’s” view of Africa by non-Africans?22

“African studies,” he concluded, “is nothing if it provides no service to Africa. It served the interests of colonial governments; it has a responsibility to serve independent Africa, a major consumer and audience of its studies.”23

It was, of course, no secret to the Africanist gatekeepers that their African colleagues were increasingly dissatisfied and frustrated by the asymmetrical relationship between them. As early as 1965, Robert D. Baum observed:

Europeans and Americans face increasing African annoyance and suspicion. Africans are disturbed at being regarded as guinea pigs and their countries as laboratories to test scientific hypotheses. They are wearying of visits by team after team of specialists, asking many of the same questions, probing many of the same people, with very little, Africans feel, being received in return for what some of them consider exploitation.24

A year later, after a visit sponsored by the African Studies Association to seek closer ties with African scholars, William Hance and Philip Curtin discovered

things we had not known about the African academic scene, even though both of us have been in Africa at quite frequent intervals during the past decade or so. Previously, however, we had gone to Africa with our own research objectives, had talked to scholars in Africa mainly about that research, and had found most of our contacts within the narrower circle of our own disciplines. In the summer of 1965 we asked scholars in Africa about their work, their reactions to American research in Africa, and their views concerning the possibility of more extensive international cooperation. . . . They see new generations of unformed scholars arriving in ever-increasing numbers. Even the most pro-American among them are bound to have some questions about the future.25
Audrey C. Smock saw that future and it looked ugly. Many American researchers, she charged, pursued research that had little relevance for Africa and only served to further their own careers. They often displayed insufferable arrogance and unethical behavior:

How many American political scientists expect ready access to the President, Secretary of State, or Chief Justice, along with freedom to examine confidential government documents, in their studies of the American political system? Yet many American scholars believe they have an inherent right to any data required to complete their research in Africa. Inevitably, this intellectual aggressiveness often results in abuse of research privileges. For example, Ghanaian academics and journalists have recently decried the removal of books, documents, and whole files from archives and research libraries by expatriate academics. Researchers also sometimes betray the confidence of sources by revealing identities which embarrass or compromise their informants’ position. . . . As a result, many are now resentful of this form of intellectual imperialism.26

Also, increasingly galling for African scholars was the fact that Africanists did not seriously and systematically engage or dialogue with their work. In reading Africanist publications, John H. Clarke pointed out, “None of the new books on African history are reviewed, and in looking at the books and magazine articles by ASA members, it is rare that the work is even referred to or quoted, positively or negatively.”27 In the 1960s, the indifference to African scholarship was often justified on the grounds that, to quote Baum, the Africans “in most cases are not yet ready to perform the kinds of research we feel are necessary. They need time to build up their own resources.”28 In the 1980s, the African university crisis provided an excuse for not consulting African scholarship. In the words of Timothy Shaw, “in such unconducive conditions, there is every prospect that external authors will have superior opportunities both to research and to publish, local book and journal publishers and markets being what they are.”29

By the 1990s, little had changed in the structures of Africanist knowledge production, dissemination, and authority. Research I conducted on five leading Africanist social science and humanities journals published in Britain, Canada, and the United States showed that between 1982 and 1992 only 15 percent of the articles and 10 percent of the book reviews were by Africans based in Africa. African authors based in the West accounted for a further 9 percent of the articles and 5 percent of the reviews.30 African scholars were also troubled by the analytical and prescriptive collusion between many Africanists and the international financial institutions over structural adjustment programs. They winced at the growing tendency to use epithets, anecdotes, and caricature in definitions
and descriptions of African states and societies. This "scholarship by insult," or the "new Africanist political sociology," as Dickson Eyoh calls it, betrayed, in the view of many Africans, deep-seated Africanist contempt for their object of study and it played the discursive role of clearing space for the resurgent and rapacious "free-market" capitalism of structural adjustment.

The growing gulf between Africanist and African scholarship in research themes, analytical languages, and moods, whereby Africanists wallowed glibly in unrelieved Afro-pessimism and African scholars maintained sober commitment to the future, was an indictment of the Africanist enterprise. In a bold, passionate, and lucid Abiola Lecture presented at the 39th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in November 1996 on African struggles for intellectual empowerment at home and internationally, Thandika Mkandawire, former executive secretary of the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the continent’s premier social science organization, outlined seven sources of African discontent against Africanist scholarship. The tragic part is that there were hardly any that had not been heard before.

Africans were dissatisfied with the Africanists, he stated, first, for their gatekeeping functions; second, the continued, indeed, increasing primacy given to the deductive method and the use of Africa as a testing ground; third, the patronizing and exploitative use of local research communities; fourth, the international division of labor in which Africanists did most of the "conceptual work" and Africans performed fieldwork; fifth, the failure to establish mutually beneficial and respectful intellectual bridges between the two research communities and the invisibility of African scholarship in Africanist publications; sixth, the preachy and prescriptive approach of most writing about contemporary Africa; and seventh, the disdain for Africa as shown by the accretion of epithets and contemptuous metaphors in describing African conditions, economies, polities, and social classes. Because of these reasons, the respect and tolerance for non-African writing in Africa was waning, reinforced by the growing inaccessibility of Africanists’ work because of high import costs and the rapidly increasing volume of local publications and cross-referencing among African scholars.

In his conclusion, Mkandawire revisited the question of African American involvement in African studies:

In many ways, how American social sciences view Africa has had a lot to do with the politics of race relations in this continent. A racially sanitized encounter between Africans and non-Africans in the current situation involves a large dose of self-deception. There is also growing interest among Africans not only on the common heritage
and the painful past but also on the political fortunes of a group that through thick and thin has championed the African cause. . . . [There] is [a] need to create structures that facilitate or accommodate the deeply felt emotional and intellectual need for encounters between Africans and African Americans. . . . It will be clear from my remarks that the relationship between Africans and Africanists is not as close as what we would want it to be. There is a distinct danger that if we continue along the current paths we will become totally mutually unintelligible.33

Africans, he suggested, were increasingly interested in forging contacts, unmediated by the Africanists, with the disciplines and other world regions. He received a standing ovation from the audience, at least half of which was black, although the majority of the participants to the conference were white. Was there a message in that?

The American Villagization of the Globe

Mkandawire’s last point underscores a key distinction between studying Africa in Africa and in the United States: in Africa it is as central to the disciplines as studying the United States is central to the disciplines there. In other words, much as we do not talk of American Studies in the United States, there are hardly African Studies programs in Africa. African Studies are lodged in the disciplines within Africa, as are American Studies in the United States. To be sure, there are crucial differences: Given the imperialist nature of the United States, conceptual propositions driven from American experiences are deemed to possess universal theoretical significance, whereas in Africa’s dependent and underdeveloped intellectual formations “theory” continues to be imported. In the United States, the American village is seen as the globe, whereas in Africa the continental village is seen as a part of the globe. The debate between Area Studies and the disciplines is a peculiarly American one and a marker, not of America’s globalization but its imperial provincialism, reflecting a relentless drive for the American villagization of the globe now that history has apparently ended,34 and a channel-surfing intellectualism in which the temptation to reinvent newness is always great.

The tension between Area Studies and the disciplines is as old as the Area Studies programs. Area Studies were established in part to counter the excessive parochialism of U.S. education, which, it was felt, was not befitting a superpower—one, moreover, engaged in global mortal combat with the Soviet “evil empire.” The Area Studies approach had a special benefit to the burgeoning corps of Africanists because, except for anthropology, there were very few African specialists in the social sci-
ences and humanities in the historically white universities. But from the very beginning it was understood, to quote Lyman H. Legters, that:

The area approach was not an alternative to disciplinary modes of university organization, but rather a means of both focusing and reinforcing disciplinary competence with reference to a particular world region. The device helped to strengthen departments by reminding them of neglected fields and opportunities, and its corollary of multidisciplinary emphasis helped to enable the social sciences and humanities to address themselves more effectively to the many contemporary problems lying on the periphery of individual disciplines. … African studies, could, in the usual fashion of latecomers, avoid some of the pitfalls of the earlier area programs, e.g., needless tension between disciplinary and area interest or loyalty.35

Thus, conceived as a response to a perceived crisis in U.S. higher education, the role of Area Studies was to “nourish” the disciplines with empirical data while remaining subordinate to the epistemological and managerial authority of the disciplines.36 Consequently, Area Studies programs provided little of their own independent instruction, nor did they make faculty appointments. Their primary function became that of coordinating and campaigning for the inclusion and integration of area-based knowledge and specialists in the disciplines.

The incorporation of Area Studies on the margins of universities recalled the organization of studies of U.S. minorities, and the two were in fact linked. Area Studies were established when the civil rights movement was raging and scoring victories, spurring liberal anxieties over desegregation. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which brought in federal funding for Area Studies, “was held up by a number of Southern congressmen who feared that it would intensify federal intervention on all levels of schooling and thus further hasten desegregation. Only because of the generalized hysteria over the putative technological advances of the Soviets, as represented by the launching of the Sputnik satellites, did liberal Cold War ideology manage to contain southern racist fears and allow for the enactment and subsequent extensions of the NDEA.”37 Area Studies inherited the discourse that depicted African Americans and other minoritized populations as “problems” external to the mainstream but amenable to social science fixes: the newly independent nations became the equivalent of “problematic” U.S. minorities for the Area Studies project. To the foundations, the objectives and rationale of funding Area Studies were not always distinguishable from funding social engineering projects among U.S. minorities.38

Like all people with dual loyalties, Africanists suffered from acute tensions. Some, of course, managed them skillfully; others did not.
However they dealt with these conflicts, their standing in the disciplinary pecking order was affected by popular and paradigmatic perceptions of Africa. Hence the zeal, excessive in many cases, to demonstrate the theoretical utility of African data, to use Africa as an empirical lab for testing theories manufactured with faddish regularity in the disciplines. Africa furnished the Africanists with empiricist confidence and theoretical insecurity. Given the greater prestige accorded to “theory” in the academy, the survival of the Africanist scholarly enterprise was always in question, vulnerable to theoretical shifts in the disciplines. There were of course disciplinary variations in these permutations. Some responded by stubbornly burying their heads in their beloved African villages; some took to flying on the clouds of theory and joined in Area Studies bashing; and some feigned surprise at all the commotion, insisting that all was well, that “to a degree unacknowledged by either side in these debates, the study of Africa is already lodged in the core of the modern university,”39 and that “research in Africa has shaped the disciplines and thereby shaped our convictions as to what may be universally true.”40

This reassurance was greeted with weary cynicism in some quarters.41 William G. Martin and Michael West declared: “A retreat to the defense of African studies by its contribution to the nineteenth-century European divisioning of knowledge into disciplines seems to us shaky grounds on which to defend African intellectual studies,” and they somberly warned of the “inexorable downward spiral if not the end of African studies as we have known it for two generations.”42 The death of African Studies because of falling funding and assaults by the disciplines had been predicted before. In 1965, Baum argued that “most scholars now agree that the area studies approach cannot exist without the more theoretical comparative approach.”43 In 1970, L. Gray Cowan alerted the Africanist community to the fact that Africanists were entering a decade of dwindling resources for Area Studies,44 while Roger Yeager argued that Area Studies had already served their purpose of ending intellectual ethnocentrism in the American academy and had outlived their usefulness.45 For Brian M. Fagan, Area Studies were beginning to die a natural death because of their narrow focus and were being replaced by a greater emphasis on multidisciplinary studies and comparative international research projects of a problem-oriented nature.46 Donald Wilhelm called for the replacement of Area Studies with a new model based on the trinity of thematic, comparative, and multidisciplinary approaches and the development of cross-disciplinary and cross-national research and teaching methods.47 He also advocated the integration of the natural sciences and technology.

It is clear, therefore, that disciplinary death wishes for Area Studies are hardly new. Gwendolen Carter puts it succinctly:
Attacks on “area studies” as such are spasmodic but perennial. What is puzzling is that “area” seems to be restricted in these attacks to non-western data and interests. What about American studies, Soviet studies, even European studies? Are they any less concerned with “area”? I cannot see why.48

The reason, of course, is simple: firmly rooted in Eurocentric traditions and an imperializing mission, sanitized and idealized European and U.S. conditions—in short, the Western epistemological order—constitutes, in the U.S. academy, universal knowledge, against which the rest of the world must be apprehended and appropriated.

The eternal binary oppositions in Western social thought, which construct the enduring and destructive fictions of the “West” and its numerous “Others” and which are at the root of constructions of American Studies as disciplinary knowledge and the study of other regions as “Area Studies,” find new articulations in current debates and discourses about Area Studies and the disciplines. The dichotomies include traditional Area Studies versus area-based knowledge, global versus local knowledge, area versus thematic programs, U.S.-centric versus international scholarship, and basic versus applied research. The high priests of the new intellectual order argue that it is necessary to create new structures through which to pursue international scholarship because of the very success of Area Studies in deparochializing the U.S. academy. They also cite the demise of the bipolar perspective of the Cold War; the consequent reassessment of priorities and redirection of resources by the private, federal, and state sectors; and the relentless march toward globalization of cultures, capital, and commodities, of individuals, institutions, and ideas, and of movements and migrations, technologies, and transnational labor.49 Lurking in the minds of the intellectual policy establishment is also the concern that although the United States remains the sole superpower, it “does not dictate either the pace or the direction of global change.”50

The Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies are accordingly in the process of creating new structures through which to pursue international scholarship. The Joint Area Studies Committees have been decommissioned. The new structures of the Councils, Prewitt assures us, will ensure “a durable place in intellectual life for area studies” by integrating “area-based epistemologies into discipline-based studies, and vice-versa.”51 For starters, “the Councils see much merit in treating North America as an ‘area’ equally with other areas in its involvement in the globalization trends.”52 The Councils’ new program, he continues, “will more fully acknowledge that there are many forms of knowledge that arise out of different traditions and historical concerns for area studies,”53 a realization buttressed by the fact that “the United States is a diminishing point of reference for many scholars located elsewhere.”54 The internationalization of knowledge production
will be promoted “in terms of partnerships with non-American institutions, in its [the SSRC’s] establishment of collaborative research networks, and in its choice of problem areas to investigate.” All this will help us better understand and manage the stresses and strains of the post–Cold War world, and it is imperative that we “promote a scholarship that is critically engaged with the world. . . . Obviously this includes the policymaking community.” It is an old vision in a new context, articulated in the omniscient “we” of a hegemonic intellectual power that collapses differentiations in the domestic U.S. academy and elides external interests into the local in the grand names of scholarly advancement and the orderly management of the messy realities of the contemporary world.

I do not deny the need for and merits in some of the proposals to restructure Area Studies, make them intellectually more rigorous, and liberate American Studies from insularity by internationalizing research and teaching. I merely caution that if history is anything to go by, this restructuring—even if it “succeeds,” and that is by no means certain given the rigidity and institutional inertia of universities—will not necessarily lead to intellectual and international enlightenment. Has the enormous increase in information on Africa in the United States in the last half century, thanks to the expansion of African Studies programs, led to much improvement in public knowledge and perceptions of Africa, or in the formulation of better foreign policies that mutually benefit African countries and the United States? The sad answer is no.

Conclusion: Back to the Future

The end of the Cold War provides an irresistible opportunity to recast global politics and paradigms; for a triumphalist United States to write its economic and sermonic will on the global village; and for the U.S. academy to impose an intellectual order that prioritizes U.S. perceptions, problems, and preoccupations. Bedeviled by their own internal solitudes, which are reinforced and reproduced by their very marginality in the U.S. academy, Africanists may find themselves pawns rather than players in molding this recycled new academic order.

In reading debates about African Studies over the last few decades I am struck by the persistence of the same questions. This is amply borne out by comparing the papers in the Africa Today of 1969 on the Montreal confrontation and the ISSUE of 1995 on contemporary trends in African Studies. The tone may be different and the writers may be from different generations, but the fundamental issues and conflicts are the same, the sense of dissatisfaction and drift is the same, and the consternation that things are falling apart, that the Africanist enterprise is in cri-
sis, pervades both periodicals. A running theme in the latter issue and in Guyer’s prosaic history of African Studies in the United States is the fear that Africa and African Studies risk becoming more marginalized. But marginalized for whom? Certainly not for people within the continent itself, nor for those of us for whom Africa is not merely an academic “problem,” a distant research site that can be abandoned at will, but a permanent and profound existential and intellectual reality. Similarly, the lamentation about dwindling resources needs to be stripped of the deceptive solidarity of impending collective penury that it suggests: who benefited most when the resources were relatively abundant in the 1960s?

It is the Africanists’ Africa that may be falling apart, as Martin and West poignantly argue. Interest in African Studies even within the academy, they observe, is more widespread than ever before. This has little to do with the irresistibility of Africanist academic products. Rather, it is rooted “in the renaissance of Africa interest in Black communities.” The Africanists’ Africa was linked to Cold War Washington, the foundations, and narrow academic networks, and as these wither with the demise of the Cold War, that Africa begins to wilt, unable to secure sustenance from the new resurgent Africas. “It is worth pondering why this has taken place,” Martin and West conclude. “The most obvious answer is based on the social and political realities of race: those who dominate African studies, the major centers, and the national organizations are predominantly white and male.”

African Studies may be going back to the future, reconnecting to and reclaiming its repudiated Pan-Africanist intellectual past. Questions of racial memory, civilizational order, and cultural identity, which are central in Pan-African Studies, are often ignored in Africanist Studies, whereas the developmentalist issues that dominate Africanist Studies tend to be neglected in Pan-African Studies. The road to the future, toward an African Studies that is intellectually more rigorous, socially responsible, and politically engaged, may lie in promoting scholarly dialogue between Pan-African and Africanist Studies, in freeing diasporic studies from the dangers of cultural relativism by incorporating political economy, and in rescuing developmentalist Africanist Studies from the pitfalls of economic reductionism by including issues of race and culture.

We also ought to think more creatively about establishing new mutually beneficial and equitable linkages between African and African American Studies programs, wherever they currently exist separately, and between Africanist scholars in the United States, including migrant African intellectuals, and scholarly communities and networks on the continent. Part of this agenda includes establishing African Diaspora Studies centers in African universities.
If meaningful transatlantic intellectual conversations are to develop that do not replicate the earlier infamous exploitative slave triangle, all of us need to reflect more seriously and self-critically than we are often inclined to do on the integrity and impact of our scholarly production and positions. If the ideas and images we create and circulate only serve to pathologize and disempower the peoples and societies we study, then perhaps it is time to move on to other pursuits. What we do matters. It is about the humanity of an entire people in that most complex and fascinating of continents, Africa, and its diaspora dispersed all over the world, including the United States.

Notes

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1. My thanks to Thandika Mkandawire for a copy of his 1996 Abiola Lecture presented at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association and for discussions over the years on these issues; to Dickson Eyoh for sharing his reflections; and to Maimouna Barro for research assistance.


6. Ibid., p. 363.


18. Ibid., p. 4.


22. Ibid., p. 9.

23. Ibid., p. 10.


31. Oyekan Owomoye, “With Friends Like These . . . a Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodol-


37. Ibid., p. 96.


40. Ibid., p. xiv.


52. Ibid., p. 4.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., p. 5.

57. See *Africa Today* 16, nos. 5–6 (1969).


60. Martin and West, “The Decline of the Africanists’ Africa.”

61. Ibid., p. 25.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.