"A School in the Interior" African Studies: Engagement and Interdisciplinarity

Charles Ambler

Editors' note: The following article is a slightly revised version of the Presidential Address delivered at the fifty-third Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in San Francisco in 2010.

Abstract: This article explores the intellectual traditions of African studies, focusing on the central principles of interdisciplinarity and commitment to social and racial justice. Tracing the origins of the field to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Africanist intellectuals such as Edward Blyden, it investigates these traditions historically and in the context of contemporary practice. Against the backdrop of concerns for the future of area studies, the author finds a vibrant field—both inside and beyond its traditional boundaries.

Résumé: Cet article explore les tradtions intellectuelles du domaine des Études Africaines, en se concentrant sur les principes clés de l'interdicsciplinarité et de l'engagement sur les principes de justice sociale et raciale. En retraçant les origines de ce domaine d'études aux intellectuels de la fin du 19ieme siècle et du début du 20ième siècle tels que Edward Blyden, cette étude examine ces traditions d'un point de vue historique et aussi dans la perspective des pratiques contemporaines. Dans le contexte de la mise en question des domaines d'études à identité géographique délimitée, l'auteur découvre un domaine d'étude plein de vitalité, de même à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de ses frontières traditionnelles.

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Charles Ambler was president of the African Studies Association in 2010. He is a professor of history at the University of Texas at El Paso, where he was formerly the dean of the Graduate School. He is the author of *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism* (Yale University Press, 1988) and numerous book chapters and journal articles, most recently on the history of media in Africa. He has also been the recipient of a number of major grants aimed at increasing educational opportunity for minority students. E-mail: cambler@utep.edu

On June 26, 1903, Edward Blyden, the preeminent intellectual of the Black Atlantic, presented an address to the African Society in London titled "West Africa before Europe"(Blyden 1905:127–28). By Blyden's own account this was a momentous occasion. In the third year of the Society's existence, he was the first person of African descent invited to speak to a meeting of the members. At this annual meeting the African Studies Association, which is dedicated to the theme of diaspora, it is particularly appropriate that we should return, after more than a century, to Blyden's words and to the circumstances of his lecture. He was, after all, quintessentially a person of the diaspora. In the introduction to the collection of Blyden's lectures that includes this 1903 address, the Ghanaian barrister and scholar Casely Hayford describes Blyden as almost uniquely "universalist" in the sense that he truly spoke for Africans everywhere and that in contrast to most of the black intellectuals of that era had developed an "African school of thought" in which the measure of progress was derived not from white culture but from African culture (Blyden 1905:ii).[1]

Blyden was at that time a very well-known figure in opinion-making circles. As most Africanists are aware, he was born in the West Indies, and in 1850, at the age of eighteen, in search of advanced education, he immigrated to Liberia. During the course of a remarkable career as a clergyman, teacher, government official, diplomat, journalist, and writer in Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, he traveled widely in West Africa, the Middle East, America, and Europe.[2] Blyden had been among the founders of the African Society and served initially as a vice president.[3] Given that he was also the author of one of the best known studies of African societies, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race,* first published in 1887, as well as numerous articles on a range of African topics, it was therefore predictable that Blyden would be invited to speak.[4] But it was also somewhat surprising. He was, after all, an African man, asserting his intellectual authority during a period of rapid imperial expansion and of intensifying racism. In his remarks he alluded to this contradiction—noting that the Society was very much a part of Britain's imperial impulse while repeatedly invoking his own impressive resume and network of contacts.

The First Africanists

What, then, did Edward Blyden have to say to the African Society in 1903 that would be of interest to us today? He began by positioning himself in subversive terms, promising "unconventional views." At the core of his subversion was an argument that African societies and history must be understood from the inside out and that African experience must be expressed in an African vocabulary—not in relationship to Europe or in terms of European concepts. Yet he was careful to stress that African perspectives need not be inscrutable to non-Africans. In fact, although his talk introduced elements of the racialist philosophy that has dominated most interpretations of Blyden's thought, he was careful to acknowledge the continent's diversity—noting his own position as an outsider in his study of West African Islam.

He lauded the African Society's commitment to the scientific study of Africa and encouraged investigations that incorporated various disciplinary and thematic perspectives. Predictably, Blyden invoked the memory of Mary Kingsley, in whose name the Society had been founded, and applauded her commitment to cultural relativism and her determination to observe African societies first hand. Yet he took issue with Kingsley's determination to "think black." Blyden countered: "We do not want to think black. We want to *utilize* black." Blyden, like Africanists today, was frustrated by Africa's seeming marginality to the rest of the world and troubled by the concomitant tendency to define Africa from an external position in terms of a series of problems requiring external solution. At the same time, he was impatient with theoretical knowledge. Even if some of his own claims may have rested on rather limited evidence, he advocated a research agenda on Africa that would marshal resources wherever they could be found to promote progress for African people and societies—as they defined it themselves. Strikingly, elements of this perspective of interdisciplinarity and engagement were reflected in the audience that Blyden addressed—the members of the African Society. They were practitioners, many of them, in the sense that their engagement with Africa derived from their careers—in government, in business, in missionary work, even in what we might today refer to as human rights.[5]

Blyden intruded into my intellectual world only relatively recently. I had been vaguely familiar with his career as a historical character, but it was only as I began to explore debates around ideas of race and difference in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West Africa that I was forced to confront his truly remarkable writing—and that of a number of his contemporaries such as Africanus Horton and James "Holy" Johnson.[6] How was it, I wondered (like my predecessors Pearl Robinson and Joseph Miller in their 2007 and 2008 presidential addresses) that this body of work did not form the basis of the intellectual foundation of our discipline—African studies? Instead, in what was I suppose a predictable process, these men had somehow found themselves transformed from thinkers into actors and then marginalized as Westernized elites—in the process giving way to a narrative that linked the founding of African studies to the efforts of professional scholars at European and North American universities.[7] As a graduate student in African history in the 1970s, I encountered Blyden and his contemporaries almost exclusively as historical figures and their writings as original documents from which history might be written—rather than as predecessors who could help me learn how to be a scholar of African societies. Even at that, these texts held declining interest since they appeared to document the histories of people whose experience was foreign to the masses of Africans. This would have been unfortunate enough if it were merely an act of historical erasure and their work had had little influence on subsequent generations. Lost in the grand narrative of the rise of imperial racism is the fact that intellectuals like Edward Blyden were influential and respected participants in the debates that linked people in Europe, America, and Africa in an effort to document and interpret African societies—which in turn created a body of knowledge, practice, and values that insinuated itself, largely unacknowledged, into African studies as it emerged as an academic field. Yet as recently as 1995 the prominent historian John Fage, in his short list of late nineteenth-century pioneering Africanists, would reflect this erasure by listing only Winwood Reade, T. E. Bowditch, and Mary Kingsley—all three Europeans. Fortunately, thanks to the work of Philip Zachernuk (2000), Toyin Falola (Lindfors, Falola, & Harlow 2002), Anthony Appiah (1992), and others, figures like Blyden are being dragged out of the archive and reinserted into intellectual history, where they belong.

Principles

If we are, in fact, as I have argued, the inheritors of a powerful legacy derived from these African studies founders, what is it that these long-dead black (and white) men (and a few women) are saying to us today—either directly through their writings or indirectly in the ways that they influenced those who have influenced us? I turn again to Edward Blyden, both because his writings were so widely read and debated and also because he so explicitly sought, as a "universalist," in Casely Hayford's words, to establish principles or perspectives through and from which African societies should be studied. In 1881 in his inaugural address as president of Liberia College, Blyden (1994 [1887]) outlined "The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans." He first of all sharply criticized the practice of uncritically adopting European models of educational organization and curricula in African countries. He proposed eventually to move Liberia College to "an interior site, where health of body... can be secured; where the students may devote a portion of their time to manual labor... and thus assist in procuring the means from the soil for meeting a large part of necessary expenses; and where access to the institution will be convenient" to the masses of people—hence the title of this lecture. This proposal was part of a larger agenda to promote learning not only for "intellectual ends but for social purposes" (1994 [1887]:84,83) With the goal, then, of closely linking education and the production of knowledge to social and economic progress, Blyden went on to stress the importance of defining knowledge in relationship to African perspectives and needs. With his comment that most of the books that African students read "have been such as to force them from the groove which is natural to them," Blyden revealed a prescient grasp of the linkages between knowledge and power that have been the subject of much work in the field in recent decades.[8] In his argument that African students should be permitted only very limited exposure to the histories of recent epochs (in favor of the classics), he made a claim for research and learning that he imagined as holistic and culture-free—and in particular, free of association with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the "race-poison" linked to that trade (1994 [1887]:83). He called, in other words, for an education in Africa (and by extension for a conception of knowledge) that is closely linked to the experience of people, that is aimed at the improvement of their condition, that is constructed from an African perspective, and that is comprehensive in its approach. These notions—the interdisciplinarity and engagement of my title—have seemed to me to be the recurrent themes of African studies—themes that distinguish it from many other fields, even in area studies.

I began to think in new ways about the importance of Edward Blyden and his contemporaries in the seemingly unlikely context of research into the history of the so-called native liquor traffic controversy, which was among the most prominent and bitterly fought out humanitarian issues of the era.[9] With the rapid expansion of gin exports to West Africa in the 1880s, a transnational debate erupted regarding the impact of the liquor trade that led ultimately to a series of international agreements limiting the commerce. During a period of more than twenty-five years, and from their bases in Britain, West Africa, America, and elsewhere, the combatants argued their cases for and against various forms of regulation and restriction. Although rabid temperance tracts can make tedious reading, amid the mountain of anti-drink rhetoric there turned out to be a wealth of revealing and sometimes thoughtful material in which men and women (including, famously, Mary Kingsley) from West Africa, Europe, and America argued the merits of restricting African access to alcohol.

Blyden himself drew attention to the liquor traffic in the powerful essays he published in the 1870s and 1880s, emphasizing that abstinent Muslim societies represented an "almost impenetrable barrier to the desolating flood of ardent spirit with which traders from Europe and America inundate the coast" (1994 [1887]:201) Although Blyden allied himself with the opponents of the gin trade, he was careful to distance himself from the highly racialized claims that characterized much of the discourse on African drinking and instead located what he saw as problems of alcohol abuse in the context of European economic and political imperialism. Influenced by Blyden's writing, the Rev. James "Holy" Johnson, a Nigerian Anglican clergyman (and later Bishop), became perhaps the most eloquent and persuasive critic of the liquor traffic of his time, and much to the discomfort of his employer, the Church Missionary Society, challenged the gin trade within a broad and bitter critique of imperial economic expansion from the point of view of an economic nationalist. In effect he defined the trade in cheap liquor as an instrument of underdevelopment, an argument not so very different from the one advanced many decades later by the historian

Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1981). What is striking in terms of my current purposes, however, is that men like Blyden and Johnson were at the very center of this transnational controversy. Moreover, they attempted to move analysis away from stereotypical assumptions about Africans and African societies to a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the issue—from the African perspective. Once again, they made the case for an engaged scholarship rooted in African priorities.

This same perspective led other Africanists, both African and European (including Mary Kingsley) to the opposite conclusion—that *restrictions* on the alcohol trade impeded local economic development and that the claims made regarding the dangers of alcohol on local societies were based on prejudice, incomplete evidence, and misunderstandings of the nature of African societies. In the controversy that surrounded the 1909 Southern Nigeria Liquor Commission, an assorted alliance of practitioner-scholars (and many others) made the case, in fact, for analyzing the trade in gin and its consumption within a fuller understanding of African, in this case southern Nigerian, institutions and practices—concluding persuasively that there was no real evidence that alcohol was wreaking havoc in the region.[10]

To be sure, the work of this commission—notwithstanding its veneer of objectivity—was highly politicized, and larger issues colored much of the evidence presented and certainly its interpretation. Debates about race swirled around the proceedings, and official, missionary, and commercial interests pressed their cases. Yet despite the commission's manifest theatrical elements, much of the formal evidence, and even more so the commentaries that appeared contemporaneously in the press and various journals, drew this enterprise into the larger effort that had emerged during the previous several decades to pursue "African studies," as opposed simply to the study of peoples and places that happened to be in Africa. Once again, and to a notable extent, Africans participated in the discussions and asserted authority for themselves not only as "informants" but as experts as well. Outsiders, whether African or European, were certainly conspicuous contributors, but evidence or testimony that was regarded as abstract or theoretical rather than empirical often met very aggressive challenges—particularly in cases when it was seen to derive essentially from European assumptions about African societies rather than internal understandings of them. Although most of the research and discussion that went on in conjunction with the liquor trade question certainly was located within the confines of the imperial project, it was aimed nevertheless at addressing critical social and economic problems, and economic development in particular. Although there were relatively few people who we would today label "scholars" who were involved in this formative period of African studies, it is nevertheless the case that they were closely engaged with the practitioners who dominated the process. In contrast to what is today a sharper divide between research and policy, individuals with official or traditional positions or involvement in what we now would call NGOs, missionary organizations, or business concerns not only advanced particular interests, but also engaged themselves as students of the issue.

From the Past to the Present

When I joined the Board of the African Studies Association two years ago, I had given relatively little thought to these questions—to the nature of African studies as a field. I was trained mostly in a single discipline, and I have for the most part worked at an institution where African studies does not exist as an identified field and where I am thus largely confined to my specific discipline of history. I was quite content, however, that the annual meeting of the ASA provided me with an escape and refuge each year to present papers, to build a career beyond my home institution, to interact with fellow scholars—largely historians. Thus it seemed to me appropriate that during my term on the Board, and in particular during the time I had the privilege to serve as president, I would reflect on the concept of African studies. And in any case, as the Board undertook the task of recruiting a new executive director and initiated a process of strategic planning, I was forced to confront this question.

But as I began that reflection, in dialogue with other Africanists, on what we regarded as the defining characteristics of African studies (and the role of the ASA itself), I found myself drawn back to the eloquent West African pioneers of African Studies. Amid a rhetoric that asserted change and threat, I found some strong and persistent continuities: commitment to scholarship and learning that approaches questions from the perspective of African societies and communities; exploration of those questions from diverse points of view (integrating multiple disciplines); and an approach that, as Allen Isaacman pointed out in his 2002 Presidential Address, takes an activist stance that is deeply (if often indirectly) engaged in the work of making or supporting economic, social, and political change. Intellectuals like Africanus Horton, Edward Blyden, and James Johnson researched and wrote as imperial powers invaded and seized control of African societies, and they were each prominent critics of imperial policies (if not imperialism itself). Africanists have remained committed to that tradition of advocacy, notwithstanding the experience of disappointment and frustration that is its inevitable compatriot. Like many of you, I am sure, I have often envied the detachment of my Americanist colleagues. As disastrous war gives way to catastrophic economic collapse and rising poverty rates; as the evidence of a failed educational system piles up daily on our desks; and as the political system lurches from deadlock to reaction, these fellow faculty down the corridor never acknowledge even the slightest bit of responsibility. I cannot recall one occasion on which one of them was backed up against the wall and asked to explain, "why is it that America is such a mess?" "Africa in crisis" is certainly a stereotype that Africanists criticize and seek to combat, but the concern for contemporary issues and commitment to study and research related to those issues is also a mark of the field and in fact a source of its dynamism. Perhaps too often, however, "Africa in crisis," has been translated as "African studies in crisis."

The Area Studies Lament

That language of crisis that has figured so largely in discussions about African studies and in more than a few of these presidential lectures also has its historical antecedent in the thought of our turn-of-the-century ancestors.[11] Blyden himself signaled the critical themes of our discontent when he wrote about Africa's marginality in global discourse and at the same time the need for Africans to break away from the Western institutions and values that would, he argued, prevent Africans and African societies from realizing their full potential. When Blyden imagined aloud the possibility of creating a "school in the interior," he was already pointing to the importance of educational and research institutions within the continent that would be centers not only for advanced education but also for what today we refer to as "knowledge production" rooted in an African perspective. As documented in report after report, the historic absence of such institutions, and in more recent decades their chronic underfunding and decline in the face of economic and political upheaval, has remained a persistent source of frustration. Yet as Tade Akin Aina so persuasively argued in his Abiola Lecture at our 2009 annual meeting (Aina 2010), African universities and research institutions, however underfunded, have proved remarkably resilient precisely because of their capacity to demonstrate their importance, even necessity, in the promotion of social and economic change. Notwithstanding sharply increased competition from private institutions, and pressure (which is hardly unique to Africa) to focus on vocational education, the humanities and social sciences have not only survived but also have thrived in many universities—with distinctive curricular and research approaches that situate local approaches in a global context.[12]

The crisis rhetoric has returned again and again to evoke the supposed decline of interest in Africa in the post–Cold War era—almost to the point of evoking a certain degree of nostalgia for the era of superpower conflict and competition. Of course, the themes of marginalization and external objectification are hardly new—as evidenced once again by Edward Blyden's lament about the lack of interest in Africa and African issues in Europe and North America. The resurgence of strategic interest in the continent following 9/11 reminds us that the margins may have their advantages. But certainly they do also have their disadvantages, in particular the decline in funding for research—although it is unclear whether African studies has felt the impact any more than other social science and humanities fields. Linked to this decline in financial resources has been a broader threat to area studies, which our colleague, William Moseley from Macalester College, explored in a thoughtful article in 2009 in the *Chronicle of*

Higher Education (in itself an act to lay claim to the mainstream). At the annual meeting in San Francisco he chaired a panel, sponsored by the ASA Board, extending the discussion that he launched with his article, where he avoided the language of crisis in favor of a dispassionate analysis of the changed circumstances in which area studies fields, and in particular African studies, find themselves in 2010. In short, a number of disciplines have moved away from their former geographical configurations, which in turn reinforces a shift toward global approaches—approaches that many Africanists have embraced; yet as Moseley pointed out, old arguments for the critical value of understanding issues from the perspective of particular societies and regions remain persuasive—a point that I will return to.

What Moseley did not address is whether these developments have had much impact on the actual practice of African studies—as a field that was meant to be interdisciplinary and comprehensive.[13] A review and analysis of a selection of ASA annual meeting programs over the last twenty years (which I conducted with my research assistant, Cullen Haskens) suggested no particular trend (although it did have the inadvertent effect of revealing that our association has no archives to speak of). Generally speaking, the panels were evenly divided between those that were not interdisciplinary and those that could be categorized as "somewhat" interdisciplinary, which meant they included one presenter who belonged to a discipline different from that of all of the other presenters. In most years, there were very few panels that we could label "very interdisciplinary," although interestingly, these have been more common in recent years than they were in the 1990s. This is particularly notable since the evidence for increased interdisciplinarity confounds the anecdotal claims that in the past the ASA (and African studies as well) more commonly brought together scholars and professionals from diverse backgrounds and in particular gave more prominent place to scholars and scholarship on policy and economic development.

Fieldwork: Among the Africanists

The minutes of the Board meetings of the ASA, reinforced in the actual experience of the discussions they document, reveal a remarkably consistent vision of African studies on the part of the Association's leadership: that African studies should be engaged with African issues and reflect African perspectives and that it should have a broad embrace, including a wide range of disciplines as well as applied fields of practice. As I began my term as president of the ASA, I decided to see what a broader constituency of Africanists thought. In short, I decided to conduct some fieldwork—a signal characteristic of African studies.[14] Like much fieldwork, this particular exercise was driven as much by opportunity, time limitations, and above all financial constraint as by any systematic project. In a context of global economic recession, in conjunction with some of those trends I have already outlined, African studies plainly faces very serious difficulties. Funding from government and nongovernment sources in the U.S., Europe, and Africa has been reduced; and pressure has increased to direct support to applied research in an increasingly restricted set of priority areas. This has had a direct impact on the African Studies Association itself. Although the organization is financially stable, membership and participation in the annual meeting have declined in recent years, as they have in other professional organizations. Yet the data I collected suggest a vibrant field, marked by exciting new research initiatives—even if these are not always in evidence at our own annual meeting.

The annual Africa Conference at the University of Texas at Austin is the creation of our dynamic colleague, Toyin Falola, who has, with minimal resources and working with a team of graduate students, for ten years organized a thematic conference, generally resulting in an edited volume.[15] Like the others I have been to, the one that I attended in the spring of 2010—titled "Women, Gender, and Sexualities in Africa" and coordinated by Saheed Aderinto—was decidedly modest, unbureaucratic, and democratic in spirit. Participants were, by their own accounts, attracted by the timely theme and also by the reputation that the conference has acquired as an open and exciting forum. It is certainly notable that each year substantial numbers of participants travel from the continent, especially Nigeria, notwithstanding the challenges of finding funding and acquiring visas. Presenters came from a very wide range of academic disciplines (although in many cases papers transcended disciplinary boundaries and identities), and a number were professionals working outside academe—often reporting evidence from their professional activities in panels alongside scholars working on similar topics. As a scholar of media audiences, I was struck repeatedly by the passionate engagement of people attending the panels and by their determination to hold presenters accountable and demand that they support their claims. Like my own talk today, presentations often linked personal experience to research and scholarship, notably in sessions on marriage and polygyny. Many papers, in contrast to those presented at ASA meetings, included explicitly stated policy recommendations. At a panel including a paper that criticized the stereotypes of mothers-in-law in contemporary Nigerian films, I found myself engaged in a fascinating debate that expanded into the larger question of the obligation of popular culture to project appropriate values—however these are defined.

A few weeks later I traveled north to Vermont for the conference of the Northeast Workshop on Southern Africa (NEWSA). Created in the mid-1990s as a regional group descending from the Yale Southern Africa Research Project, NEWSA now attracts participants from around the U.S. with a few from Europe and southern Africa. Run by a collective on a shoestring, it's a small, self-funded meeting devoted to intense discussion across disciplines. Papers are precirculated with the expectation (generally realized) that they will be read in advance. Thus presenters did not attempt to summarize papers, but to foreground key issues. Discussants sought out common themes among papers to focus debate on larger questions. Questions typically attempted to engage more than one presenter. As in Austin, an unembarrassed and unapologetic intellectual excitement was in the air and spilling out of sessions. In contrast to the Austin conference, there was no governing theme; most papers focused on South Africa and for the most part participants came from humanities disciplines. It was reassuring to hear from a number of the participants who are at the beginning of their careers how important an "African studies" approach is to them and how important the ASA has been to the development of their careers. Although this was a very different kind of meeting from the one in Austin, it was similar in its focus on crossing and mixing disciplines. One of the organization's leaders told me that he had planned several panels of closely linked papers, only to have the program chairs split them up and rearrange them in ways that he admitted created more stimulating juxtapositions. The professionals who were in evidence in Austin were missing from NEWSA, but on a panel on mental illness a former missionary introduced the question of how scholars accommodate the miraculous and how our beliefs shape who we are as researchers—a parallel subject, in its way, to those that emerged in the encounters between social service practitioners and scholars that occurred at Austin.

The focus on applied, or development-oriented, scholarship that was so evident at the Austin meeting, and which has been a strong tradition in African studies, has sometimes been perceived as a threat to "pure" research, in particular in African institutions where resources have been relatively restricted, and notably in the humanities. The Carnegie Corporation–funded African Humanities Fellowship Program, directed by the American Council of Learned Societies, is aimed at exactly that issue. Now entering its third cycle, the program awards fellowships to doctoral and postdoctoral scholars based at institutions on the continent.[16] A series of workshops in the focus countries provide an opportunity for prospective applicants to develop their proposals and to interact with previous fellowship recipients and a number of mainly Africa-based reviewers—one of whom, Dominic Dipio from Makerere University, attended our annual meeting in 2010 as the first ASA Presidential International Scholar.[17] The workshop held at the University of Ghana, Legon, in late June 2010 had that same sense of infectious optimism and creative curiosity that I had already encountered in Austin and Vermont. The projects proposed ranged widely, but they almost invariably reflected personal experience. I was particularly struck by the implicit resistance of these beginning scholars to a categorization of their work exclusively in terms of the standard disciplines and by their refusal to be governed by conventional distinctions between pure research and policy-oriented studies. We reviewers had to stress the importance of research not directly subordinated to policy objectives. Yet it was also exciting to encounter scholars so convinced of the importance of the humanities to "development," remaining true to Edward Blyden's vision of a school in the interior.

Are Africanists Absent from the Table? Redefining African Studies

At the same time that I set about my own unsystematic fieldwork, the field came to me. I have spent most of my career at a regional public university, where I have been the sole Africanist (at least since the well-known political scientist Kathleen Staudt shifted her focus to the U.S.–Mexico border).[18] Then, last year, Sarah Ryan, a new faculty member in the Department of Communication with an interest in Rwanda, set about organizing what turned out to be a sizeable number of faculty and staff with various Africa interests. I draw attention to this development for two reasons: first, it is a reminder that a great deal of teaching and scholarship in African studies in the U.S. goes on at universities that do not have substantial African studies programs; and second, and most important, that a great deal of new African studies work is occurring outside the traditional disciplinary and departmental contexts—in health-related fields, education, communication, business, and even science and engineering—undertaken by scholars who do not have formal African studies training. Thus, at UTEP Sarah Ryan's expanding work on Rwanda includes a funded project that combines the development of a master's program in women's studies with research into how students make graduate education choices.[19] Godwin Udo, a senior professor in Information and Decision Sciences, recently returned from a Fulbright at the University of Calabar and is focusing increasingly on the rapid spread of cell phone usage in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa.[20]

It is in fact quite unusual to see these kinds of topics and these kinds of scholars listed in the ASA annual meeting program—although the research would certainly be of considerable interest to many of us. There are more than a few of these gaps, and if we are going to preserve the comprehensive and engaged perspective pioneered by Edward Blyden and his contemporaries, we need to aggressively expand our reach—particularly into those areas that are of crucial interest to colleagues and institutions based in Africa. Take, for example, a field that I have been working on—the growth of the new Nigerian film industry. In recent years there have been many papers presented at the ASA on Nigerian films, but very few on the industry itself—its organization and financing and the entrepreneurs that have created and sustained it. Unfortunately, this is by no means surprising. My review of annual meeting programs revealed recent sessions on the impact of large international corporations on the continent, but next to nothing on African private enterprise—a critical theme in this neoliberal era.[21] Even more surprising is the apparent lack of attention to the most recent trends in development economics.

A phone call that I received last spring drew my attention to this disconnection. On the other end of the line was my daughter, a Ph.D. student in development economics. "Dad," she asked, "What do you know about the South African pension system?" It turned out that she was preparing a paper in which she would replicate and extend an analysis that had been undertaken by the MIT economist Esther Duflo in a well-known paper (Duflo 2000).[22] Duflo's brilliant work explored gender differences in child weights in African households by linking these to receipt of the newly deracialized South African old-age pensions and in so doing illuminated important questions regarding household decision-making models—extremely important to development policy. It turned out that body weights of female children equaled those of males in homes where grandmothers had received the pensions, but that girls weighed less than boys where this was not the case. In my conversation with my daughter, I dutifully raised complicating issues and directed her to what I regarded as valuable contextual literature—none of which made it into her paper. But this was hardly surprising, since Duflo's own work included few if any references to African studies scholarship related to these issues. The same is true of the highly regarded work that Duflo has done on education in Kenya (Duflo, Dupas, & Kremer, forthcoming). In that study, based on large samples of schools and comparisons between an experimental sample and a control sample, Duflo and her co-authors have shown that modest incentives for teachers substantially improve student performance. Yet the citations from that work would suggest that the particular context—students and schools in western Kenya—are of no real relevance. In an essay that I referred to earlier, William Moseley expressed his frustration—and that of many Africanists—with this phenomenon. It is easy enough to claim a rhetorical higher ground and dismiss such work as superficial—yet clearly it is not. Moreover, this new brand of economics, with its fieldwork elements and the collection of data around experimentally generated situations, reflects some of our core African studies approaches. A few weeks after my conversation with my daughter, a profile of Duflo and her colleagues in the Poverty Action Lab appeared in *The New Yorker* (Parker 2010). This essay revealed not only the passionate engagement of Duflo and other experimental development economists with issues related to poverty and its eradication, but also an extraordinary access to policy-makers and funders. Finally, however, I was struck most by the intellectual excitement surrounding their scholarship and the obvious possibilities for African studies scholars and professionals to extend that work and to collaborate in it.

Returning to that vision of Edward Blyden and to imagining African studies as that school in the interior, it appears to me that we are not in a time of crisis, but a moment of opportunity—to reclaim that very broad perspective and to engage, from our own disciplinary diversity, the African studies initiatives that are emerging beyond our traditional boundaries.

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Notes

1. Hayford had in fact encouraged and financed the publication of this collection of Blyden's lectures. For the notion of the "universalist," see Mbembe (2007:169).
2. See Lynch (1967).
3. See "Jubilee" (1951:177–95); Lynch (1967); Frenkel (1974).
4. I have referred to the 1994 reprint of the more common second edition (London: W.B. Whittingham & Co, 1888). Blyden had also published an article titled "Islam in Western Soudan" in *Journal of the African Society* (1902).
5. See J. D. Fage (1995).
6. For sketches of these men and some of the other main figures, see Robert July's important book (1967). Also see Ayandele (1970); Nicol (1969); Fyfe (1972); Lynch (1971).
7. A viewpoint that has also erased the important African studies tradition in African American institutions of higher learning.
8. The most influential text is Said (1979). See also, Mudimbe (1988), notably chapter 4, "E. W. Blyden's Legacy and Questions."
9. See Van Den Bersselaar (2007).
10. Committee of Inquiry into the Liquor Trade in Southern Nigeria, *Minutes of Evidence*, London, HMSO, 1909 [Cd. 4907]. These debates were carried out as well in the Nigerian, West African, and U.K. press.
11. See Isaacman (2003:2).
12. See, for example, "The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa–UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities" (The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2009); Lewis, Friedman, and Schoneboom (2010); "Perspectives on Developing and Retaining the Next Generation of Academics in African Universities: Report on the Workshop (Africa Grantmakers Affinity Group Conference, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2008); and Olukoju (2007).

13. As noted by Iris Berger (1997).
14. See Ntarangwi (2010).
15. Recent volumes include Falola and Salm, eds. (2005) and Falola and Njoku, eds. (2010).
16. See Barnes and Tymowski (2007). I want to thank Sandra Barnes, Andrzej Tymowski, and Kwesi Yankah, the pro-vice chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon, for facilitating my participation.
17. See Dipio (2007, 2008, 2009).
18. For an example of Staudt's pioneering work on gender in rural Kenya, see Staudt (1979).
19. See also Ryan et al. (2009).
20. See, for example, Bagchi and Udo (2010:162–84); Udo, Bagchi and Kirs (2008).
21. See McDade and Spring (2005). Historians have largely failed to follow up on John Iliffe's important book *The Emergence of African Capitalism* (1984). But note the work of Alusine Jalloh (e.g., Falola and Jalloh, eds. 2002); the important work by Kenda Mutongi (2006, 2011) on the *matatu* business in Nairobi, which in book form(forthcoming) will include substantial attention to the organization of the businesses involved; and Laura Fair's work on cinema in Tanzania (2010), which examines the business of film showing.
22. See also Duflo (2003).