

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Africa and the Diversity Turn

The killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 led to social protests against anti-Black violence that reverberated around the world, including in academia. Since then, various universities have released statements affirming their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many of these institutions in the United States have accompanied solidarity statements with actionable projects, including hiring faculty of color, establishing centers and institutes devoted to Blackness and race, and initiating curricular reforms aimed at a decolonized pedagogy. Institutions continue to rename buildings that until recently honored slaveholders. And the English department at Cornell was renamed the Department of Literatures in English to affirm the heterogeneity of the literary traditions housed in the unit, including the literatures and cultures of Africa. Grantmaking is not left out in the transformative quest for racial justice. The Mellon Foundation, for instance, in January 2021 awarded 72 million dollars to fifteen universities for humanities projects targeting racial justice under its Just Future grants. These efforts to grapple with a problematic past and complicated present are important, but it is crucial that the renewed commitment to Blackness does not ignore the African continent. In other words, the overdue serious attention to the historical experiences and knowledges produced by people of African descent must contend with the complex facts of Blackness that stretch from the continent to the multivalent Black diasporas. What does this mean for African Studies?

There is an opportunity to expand curricular offerings on Africa in order to arrest the unwarranted ignorance of the continent in Euro-America. A recent survey on the teaching of African literature, for example, indicated the overrepresentation of a few African countries and select authors in the syllabi submitted for the study (<https://africasacountry.com/2020/08/african-literature-is-a-country>). It is heartening that American students are exposed to African texts, but don't we risk reifying monolithic or distorted views of the continent if its heterogeneity is not adequately represented in the classroom

African Studies Review, Volume 64, Number 2 (June 2021), pp. 271–275

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.53

experience? The lesson here holds for other disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas as well. We won't be able to appreciate the complexities of the Black experience except and until Africa becomes central to pedagogies and epistemologies produced in and out of the classroom. The plea here is not for the inclusion of a smattering of African material or tokenism, but rather for a sustained dedication to a comprehensive engagement with the continent's multiplicities in our teaching and learning. Part of the work of educators here is to help students unlearn their misconceptions and to foster the critical attitude to appreciate the various epistemological payoffs and socio-political valences that Africa yields.

Students and scholars alike have much to learn from Africa at this historical moment. Every few weeks since the global pandemic started, an article or two in the mainstream media have attempted to rationalize why Africa defied the doomsday predictions at the onset of the COVID crisis. The colonial framing of these news items is not hard to miss, but what is most regrettable in these unthinking think pieces is the missed opportunity to learn from Africa. What would it take to develop the humility to properly understand what has worked on the continent, to recognize the shortcomings of our current approach, and to better prepare for future pandemics? What do we lose when the continent's insights are ignored or misidentified? Current pursuits of diversity, equity, and inclusion present a prime opportunity to recalibrate the relationship toward Africa.

It is not only in disease control, however, that the so-called dark continent has much to offer us. It is worth noting that the current moves to decolonize the university and the curriculum are not new. In 1968, the African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, then a young academic in Nairobi, co-authored a memo titled "On the Abolition of the English Department," which demanded the dismantling of the English curriculum because of its colonial underpinning. This effort resulted in the renaming of the department and the recognition of plurality in the revised curriculum's reflection of the field of literature. Central to this revision was the emphasis placed on African literature as cultural artifact deserving study equally with the European canonical materials that hitherto had dominated the curriculum. The memo authors considered it important that the curriculum should reflect not only the diversity of imaginative thought but also writings that spoke to the students' experiences of cultural transition in the face of colonial modernity. Present calls for curricular diversity and representation certainly echo some of the demands of the Nairobi memo. It is no coincidence that the writer and scholar Mukoma wa Ngugi, the son of the elder Ngugi, was at the forefront of the effort that resulted in renaming the English Department at Cornell University. Other institutions, too, can look to the Nairobi example and recent efforts in universities across South Africa to reform the educational system to better meet the demands of a plural and diverse world.

The Nairobi decolonizers wanted to see themselves and their worlds depicted in their readings, which is not altogether different from current demands for heterogeneity in curricular and research practices. Remarkably,

Ngugi's work remains applicable to the current agitation for decolonization. In a lecture that he delivered to the Yale community in March 2021, for instance, Ngugi affirmed the value of the 1968 experiment for current decolonization efforts, while insisting that the languages and cultures of Native American peoples, owners of the land on which the New Haven campus is located, must become integral to the curriculum and other university practices for true decolonization to occur. His book *Decolonizing the Mind* is a valuable resource for understanding and overturning cultural imperialism.

From the Nairobi and South African examples, we can see that young people were and are at the forefront of these decolonial interventions on the continent just as they have joined their counterparts across the world from Lagos, Nigeria, to Dakar, Senegal to protest police brutality and economic stagnation in recent times. As we study Africa for illuminating insights into problems plaguing the world, it is important not to lose sight of the creative energy and agencies being enacted by the continent's young people in various sectors. The challenge for African Studies going forward is to reinvigorate its tried and tired research agenda with a careful and systematic consideration of African youth as a locus of extraordinary insights. The continent's youthful demographic offers a vantage point from which to explore the problems of the present and a paradigmatic site from which to mount the projects of futurity.

Sites of knowledge production and dissemination such as *African Studies Review* will do well to support exciting new work that taps into youth cultures on the continent in order to generate novel ideas and possibilities for our precarious world. Among the teeming young people in Africa are budding researchers requiring support for the development and global circulation of their ideas. How do we make and hold space for them? How do we ensure that their perspectives are not ignored or elided as the complex experience of Blackness comes under scrutiny in the present? The answers to these questions necessitate both individual and collective efforts that should concern all Africanists and scholars of the Black diaspora in western/privileged venues of intellection. As we ruminate on these questions and take appropriate action, we must not lose sight of one overarching point: African Studies must not be left out of the ongoing moves to demarginalize Blackness and improve societal knowledge of people of African descent in the United States and other parts of the world.

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The June issue of the *African Studies Review* contains a wealth of creative empirical and theoretical scholarship encompassing new research from Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Uganda. We are pleased to feature disciplinary and interdisciplinary work drawing on a number of

scholarly traditions, including history, literature, agricultural studies, legal studies, anthropology, and political science.

We begin this issue with a commentary about women's empowerment in Africa, with a focus on the Abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.33>]. The authors, Lincoln Addison, Matthew Schnurr, Chris Gore, Sylvia Bawa, and Sarah Mujabi-Mujuzi, examine how a flawed understanding of empowerment emerges from a reliance on categories and codes that are often distorting and misleading, and that fail to reflect the lived experiences of the women involved.

The first three essays examine various dimensions of the decolonial and postcolonial condition. In "Decolonizing Diplomacy: Senghor, Kennedy, and the Practice of Ideological Resistance" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.91>], Yohann Ripert reads recently declassified correspondence between the U.S. and Senegalese presidents to reveal how Senghor's first state visit to the U.S. and Kennedy's support for the First World Festival of Negro Arts contributed to policymaking transformation in the context of decolonization.

Michael Walker's essay, "Protecting Smallholder Land Rights in Mozambique, 1997–2017: Unfinished Business?" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.55>], reevaluates the operation and legacy of Mozambique's land reform. Postcolonial law offered a new path to balancing the recognition and protection of smallholder land use rights while also attracting foreign and domestic investment to rural areas. Yet, as state actors and local elites circumvented the law for private gain, new problems arose.

In "Ghana's Bui Dam and the Contestation over Hydro Power in Africa" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.41>], historian Roger Gocking offers a reappraisal of the environmental and social legacies of hydroelectricity modernization projects via an exploration of the contested construction and externalities of Ghana's newest megaproject, the Bui Dam, which was built with Chinese government loans.

The next pair of essays consider postconflict societies. Juste Codjo's article, "Confronting Rebellion in Weak States: Government Response to Military Mutiny in Benin" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.60>], takes a critical view of the recurring threat of military mutiny in Africa. But rather than rehashing the causes of military revolts, Codjo's interviews and archival survey reveal how presidential leadership style and elite consensus on governance rules play a lasting role in resolving insurrection.

Catherine Bolten and Richard Marcantonio are interested in the post-war Sierra Leone population boom. In "The Paradox of Planning: Agriculture, Schooling, and the Unresolvable Uncertainty of Ideal Family Size in Rural Sierra Leone" [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.96>], the authors reexamine the relationship between family size and poverty, highlighting the persistence of uncertainty around the ideal number of children. The ability to send children to school is predicated on increasing agricultural outputs, but outputs decline when population pressures reduce soil fertility.

The final three essays consider resource extraction. In “Gnawing Away at the City: Narratives of Domestic Precarity in a Congolese Mining Town” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.65>], Kristien Geenen considers incautious urbanization in Kolwezi, in southeastern DR Congo. Artisanal miners dig ore in their own backyards to draw their subsistence, self-generating their livelihoods and writing an alternative narrative of contemporary extractive capitalism.

Kristin Doughty, Dieudonné Uwizeye, and Elyseé Uwimana draw our attention to the explosive potential of extractive postcoloniality in Rwanda. In “Methane Extraction on Lake Kivu: Green Extractive Humanitarianism” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.69>], the authors explore Rwanda’s innovative project designed to reduce the risk of a deadly spontaneous gas release and provide clean and renewable power to an energy-strapped region. An imagined “green extractive humanitarianism” attempts to balance urgent electrification needs with responsible energy policies that respond to environmental risks.

Building on the launch of the new African Studies Keyword (ASK) in our March 2021 issue [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.10>], the second ASK essay, John Heilbrunn’s “Oil” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.30>], appears in this issue. Oil is a metonym in diverse disciplines in African studies. Oil can be a causal agent that thrusts formerly low-income countries into the highly competitive neoliberal global economy, but these countries also straddle the curse/blessing binary. Heilbrunn explores environmental degradation, oil theft, community-company relations, post-conflict reconstruction, local content in contracts, and corruption.

As usual, we are pleased to feature a variety of book and film reviews. In our first featured book review, Bernth Lindfors reviews Tyrone August’s biography, *Dennis Brutus: The South African Years* (2020) [<https://www.doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.18>].

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