

# The ASA at 60: Advocacy in an Age of Tyranny<sup>1</sup>

M. Anne Pitcher

Editor's Note: This article is a revised version of the Presidential Address given at the Sixtieth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, November 2017, Chicago, Illinois.

**Abstract:** Although the sixtieth anniversary of the ASA's founding offers an occasion to celebrate the association's accomplishments, it also coincides with a historical moment of resurgent authoritarianism, growing intolerance, and renascent nativism. Democratic institutions in the United States and abroad are under attack; bigotry, injustice, and incivility have become re-energized. This article reflects on the discourses, spaces, and technologies employed by Africans to contest the multiple expressions of political exclusion on the continent over the last sixty years. It finds inspiration and lessons that might guide us as we develop our own forms of political advocacy in this illiberal age.

**Résumé:** Même si le soixantième anniversaire de la Fondation de l'ASA offre une occasion de célébrer les réalisations de l'association, elle coïncide également avec un moment historique où l'autoritarisme et le nativisme ont resurgit accompagnés d'une intolérance croissante. Les institutions démocratiques aux États-Unis et à l'étranger sont attaquées ; la bigoterie, l'injustice et l'incivilité

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sont redynamisées. Cet article se penche sur les discours, les espaces et les technologies employées par les Africains pour contester les expressions multiples de l'exclusion politique sur le continent au cours des soixante dernières années. Cette étude offre inspiration et des leçons qui pourraient nous guider alors que nous développons nos propres formes d'action politique dans cette ère d'intolérance.

**Keywords:** Contemporary politics; institutions; authoritarianism; social justice; gender; activism; social media; Africa

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## Institutions and their meaning

Let me begin my Presidential address by thanking you for attending the African Studies Association conference, where we are celebrating our sixtieth anniversary. For the past sixty years, the conference has provided the intellectual space for us to produce knowledge, share our ideas, engage in passionate debates, and enhance our friendships.<sup>2</sup> This year, the theme of the conference explores the creativity and resilience of institutions across Africa. Most of us understand institutions to be organizations; they are branches of government, or they are religious groups, literary societies, universities. Belonging to such institutions allows us to build community, or forces us to be accountable. Institutions enable us to share our passions; they can be sites of contestation and struggle, and at times they encourage us to commit to something larger than ourselves.

In my field of political science, institutions are also the rules or values we live by. They may consist of established customs that govern a society, or, at a smaller scale, they may comprise ideals shared by a social movement. The observance of Ramadan, the performance of bride service, the mentoring of emerging scholars—these institutions mold our identities and define our positions in a religious community, a village, or a university. And the values an institution espouses, the virtues it cherishes, may empower those who gather under its umbrella.

My purpose in this address is not only to reflect on the African Studies Association as an institution, but also to dwell on larger and more dangerous institutional shifts in which we and the ASA are situated. What can we do to challenge a political landscape marked by resurgent authoritarianism, rising illiberalism, and democratic disintegration? I use the occasion of the ASA's sixtieth anniversary to explore the ways in which Africans in different contexts have resisted domination and have asserted a politics of belonging over the past six decades. Although the discourses, styles, and spaces of their struggles are historically specific, they offer principles and practices that can shape our responses to the contemporary challenges we face.

## The ASA@60: Institutional Stability in a World of Democratic Decline

For many members, belonging to the ASA has fostered greater understanding of the history, politics, arts, and culture of the African continent and the diaspora. Its explicit multi-disciplinary focus has allowed us to explore alternative methodological and philosophical canons beyond those of our respective disciplines. Keynote addresses at its annual meetings and special issues in its journals have assessed the practice of the social sciences and the barriers to higher education reform in Africa (Mkwandawire 1997; Aina 2010). They have denounced extra-judicial killings and human rights abuses in Angola and Chad, or called for “African-centered approaches to African Studies” (Ampofo 2016).

For many of us, then, the ASA is our intellectual heartland, our community. Over the course of its sixty-year history, it has developed into a robust organization—sometimes because of controversy, not in spite of it.<sup>3</sup> From the attendance of thirty-five scholars at an initial gathering in 1957 to “decide whether or not an organization should be formed to promote the serious study of Africa” (Carter 1983:5), today we have approximately twenty-two hundred attendees at this meeting. Among them are many people not only from African countries but also from the African diaspora. The vibrancy of our annual meeting is complemented by our growing visibility on the African continent. Cross-institutional collaborations with other professional associations such as Codesria, the West African Research Association, and the American Anthropological Association are producing more opportunities for scholarly exchanges in Dakar, Kampala, and Johannesburg. Much of this activity is supported by the ASA’s healthy financial position and a responsible, and responsive, secretariat.

Whereas the ASA’s sixtieth anniversary offers an occasion to celebrate the organization’s accomplishments, unfortunately, the ASA and its members cannot be detached from the larger political and economic contexts in which they are situated. The current historical moment is deeply troubled. Democratic institutions from Mozambique to Mali seem fragile and flawed. Equally distressing, authoritarian governments in Egypt and Zimbabwe have resisted efforts by civil society to bring about their demise. Likewise, in Angola, autocratic rule has survived a civil war, economic breakdown, growing calls for change, even the departure of a leader who had ruled continuously since 1979.

The United States, too, is threatened by the authoritarian impulses that plague other countries. Over the past year, it has become clear that our new administration abhors internationalization, cross-cultural exchange, immigration, and global understanding. President Trump and many of his supporters tolerate and even encourage bigotry and racism, attacks against minorities, Islamophobia, and xenophobia (Younge 2017; Wang 2017; Farrington & Sprunt 2017). Regrettably, we only briefly realized the “Brave New World,” imagined by Bethwell Ogot on the election of Barack Obama in 2008, “which at once recognizes the diversity of humanity but which also

rejects the categorization of peoples of the world into thinking and non-thinking human beings” (Ogot 2009:20).

A politics of white supremacy and nativism is not new, of course; it is embedded in our history. Its legacy stares down at us from the backs of bronze horses in city parks, and its effects have influenced the color of our neighborhoods, the availability of public services, and the nature of our interactions with the police. Yet, the election of President Trump in November 2016 has re-energized it. Local “militias” dedicated to white supremacy are gaining adherents on the internet and mobilizing new recruits for marches, like the one in Charlottesville.<sup>4</sup> Just as troubling are decisions by the Justice Department to investigate so-called “discrimination” against whites in college and university admissions policies, and to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. That program, otherwise known as DACA, grants two-year renewable deferments from deportation and work permits for foreign-born children who were brought without documents to the United States prior to their sixteenth birthdays, and who have lived continuously in the U.S. since 2007. DACA affects the lives of approximately 700,000 people, principally migrants from Mexico and Central America, but approximately 1 percent of DACA-eligible migrant youth are also from African countries (Savage 2017; Department of Justice 2017; Department of Homeland Security 2017). Less sensational, perhaps, but with a substantial impact on knowledge production about Africa in the U.S. are periodic threats to eliminate or reduce funding for Fulbright-Hays, Title VI centers, vital library services, the humanities, the arts, and the interpretive social sciences (Office of Management and Budget 2017; National Humanities Alliance 2017). These threats all augur institutional challenges to what we do as scholars, artists, advocates, and practitioners.

Furthermore, the current U.S. administration lacks a coherent foreign policy with respect to African countries and displays a visceral contempt for Africa and the diaspora. The meagre provision of humanitarian aid following the mudslides in Sierra Leone, the mischaracterization of Nigeria as one of the countries affected by a “horrificing Ebola outbreak,” and the silence regarding the terrible bombing in Mogadishu are some examples of the current administration’s irresponsible and dangerous conduct (United States Embassy in Sierra Leone 2017; Blake, Scott & Borchers 2017; Haltiwanger 2017). The President’s base and derogatory depictions of African countries and Haiti are unworthy and unbecoming of a democratically elected leader. Taken together, evolving policies and statements demonstrate that the U.S. government has forfeited its global humanitarian obligations in favor of naked, narrow geopolitical pursuits and sheer prejudice towards Africa and the diaspora.

### **Confronting Institutional Decay: Looking to Africa for Guidance**

These developments remind us that institutions can be used to suppress and censor, that the decline of democratic institutions can be debilitating.

To maintain a commitment to the dissemination of knowledge about Africa, to protect the rights of members, to retain intellectual integrity, of course, we must continue to produce our scholarship and to engage in critical pedagogy. But I want to suggest that as scholars of Africa, as teachers, policy-makers, artists, and activists, we might engage in more politically meaningful and more risky forms of dissent in order to advocate for a broader set of interests such as social justice, economic equality, and greater political participation.<sup>5</sup>

What political repertoires, what lessons from the continent of Africa might guide us in this struggle? The ASA's sixtieth anniversary provides an opportunity to highlight instructive examples from the past six decades that offer signposts for this journey. From the efforts by Kwame Nkrumah and others to build a Pan-African movement in the 1950s and 60s to the collective protests currently mobilized through social media across the continent today, lessons from the insurgent south can embolden us to contest the abuse of power and to re-imagine a more inclusive democracy. These narratives are not meant to serve as templates for us to reproduce; rather they are meant to instruct or inspire us as we develop our own political agendas to navigate this illiberal age.

### *Transnational Connectedness*

Since the ASA was founded the same year that Ghana became independent, we begin with Ghana. As so many works have recognized, Ghana's independence inspired subsequent liberation efforts across the African continent, empowered the Pan-Africanist movement, and emboldened many civil rights activists in the United States to continue their struggle against white supremacy. But in referencing the moment of Ghana's independence, I particularly want to stress the value of transnational connectedness.

In 1935, the year that the U.S. government granted a student visa to Kwame Nkrumah to attend university in the States, global conditions were perilous. Ghana was still a British colony, fascism was growing across Europe, and at least twelve African Americans were lynched that year (Monroe Work Today 2017). Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, which Nkrumah attended, was the first degree-granting Historically Black College in the U.S., and it had made an early commitment to recruit students from the African continent (Lincoln University 2017).

At Lincoln, Nkrumah devoured the works of many Western writers in theology, philosophy, and economics, including Hegel, Marx, and Lenin (Nkrumah 1957a). Thus one could say the education Nkrumah received was "Eurocentric," a criticism that Peter Ekeh made of many post-independent African leaders and ruling classes that in his view had unwittingly absorbed Western values and were reproducing them in the post-colonial period (1975).<sup>6</sup> But Nkrumah also encountered Eurocentrism on full display in the brutal racism and blatant bigotry

espoused by whites. He witnessed, and experienced, the oppressive conditions that African Americans who worked on the docks of Philadelphia faced. He saw the effects of poor housing and discriminatory zoning laws that African Americans battled in their neighborhoods. On the other hand, he discovered the ideas of Marcus Garvey, and he forged bonds with Shirley Graham and W.E.B. Dubois, George Padmore, and other civil rights activists in the U.S. and in the U.K. These contradictory encounters and personal relationships served as the foundation for his lifelong commitment to Pan-Africanism (Nkrumah 1957a; Gaines 2006; UPenn archives 2017).

Nkrumah's immersion in a Western scholarly environment with all of its paradoxes, his exposure to colonialism and racial segregation, and his political exchanges with African Americans and Africans drove him to imagine a different trajectory for Africa. As the first elected president of the newly-formed African Students' Association of the United States and Canada, he wrote in the association's journal: "We must rise and join hands together, for in unity alone we can find our strength and future. This is the time to remember Mother Africa and build for her a glorious and independent futuer (sic)" (Nkrumah, cited in Poe 2003:30). Following his return home to Ghana in 1947, he joined the struggle for independence. And when he finally shouted on March 6, 1957, "Ghana your beloved country is free forever," Nkrumah's declaration not only repudiated imperial overrule, it also served as a rebuke to the land of Jim Crow for failing to live up to its ideals. His affirmation that "the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent" was the clarion call for other movements to seek liberation, be they in the U.S. or elsewhere in Africa (Nkrumah 1957b).

The cross-cultural connections, pan-national affiliations, and supraterritorial encounters that informed Nkrumah's cry for unity and solidarity remain vital today. Here and in Africa, our struggles are intertwined. Now, as then, our goals must be to build a movement of ideas and praxis that transcends national borders, that rejects resurgent blood and soil narratives in favor of meaningful, inclusive, and transnational social change, a discourse of civility, a collaborative vision of what it means to live in ethical, just, and truly democratic polities. And we cannot wait. As Nkrumah stated, "It is the hour of decision" (Nkrumah 1963).

### *Quotidian Politics*

Moments of independence in Africa not only highlight the value of supranational networks, but also they offer important lessons about the effectiveness and power of everyday politics, or as Marissa Moorman describes in the context of late colonial Angola, the "politics of the quotidian" (2004:98). Ten years after Ghana's independence and by the time of the ASA's tenth anniversary, many countries, from Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa

to Kenya and Madagascar in the east, had attained independence. The peoples of the Belgian Congo too had rejected the *Bula Matari*, the crusher of rocks, only to find a new logic of oppression reimposed under Mobutu Sese Seko (Young 1994).

Elsewhere on the continent, white minority rule persisted. By 1967, for example, no Portuguese colony was yet free. Armed liberation movements faced the Portuguese military in the rural areas of Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, and Cape Verde. As these movements gathered pace and their influence spread, the colonial regime responded not only by intensifying repression and surveillance of ordinary people, but also by coopting them in the cities and in the countryside. In Angola, colonial officials introduced limited reforms that intended to promote “ties of solidarity or neighborliness between the different classes or social or ethnic groups, particularly through athletic, folkloric or generally cultural means as well as through youth work camps, building one’s home, etc.” (quoted in Moorman 2008:90).

As Moorman’s compelling political and cultural history of Luanda shows, Africans living in the *musseques* or informal neighborhoods of the Angolan capital took advantage of the financial incentives that accompanied the so-called reforms to create dance halls and music clubs or to host music festivals (2008:88–93). Because the Portuguese secret police ignored them, local dance halls and clubs became opportunities to create a “politics of the quotidian” (2004:98). Similar to the role that African American churches played in the U.S. during the civil rights movement, clubs and dance halls offered safe spaces for urban residents to imagine a nation free from Portuguese authority. They provided venues for fashioning a collective identity as Angolans rather than as colonial subjects. Musicians sang songs in vernacular languages with themes ranging from romance to rural life to colonial hardship. Only a fraction of these songs were explicitly political, but they inspired listeners and club-goers to embrace Angolan culture and to produce, as well as imagine, the nation even before formal independence (Moorman 2004; 2008).

We do not yet suffer the same restrictions on our civil liberties as Angolans. But like them, we should recognize the power of social spaces for the practice of quotidian politics. Concerts, sporting events, high school graduations, and even the ASA dance party serve as collective occasions to stand up or kneel down for social justice, to build community, to defend democracy, to assert a politics of accountability. If our national politics is increasingly exclusionary, then our local practices must embrace diversity and inclusivity.

### *Women, Activism, and Leadership*

From the international and local geographies of liberation struggles in the 1950s and 1960s, we turn to those activists whose individual and collective efforts shaped politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The ASA’s third

decade coincided with the high point of the struggle against apartheid, when ordinary men and women made extraordinary sacrifices to end racial segregation in South Africa. They defied the pass laws, participated in strikes, supported banned organizations, and distributed petitions. They confronted the police and the army in the townships. They led a plethora of civic groups and social movements that burgeoned during that period.

Alongside the racial violence inflicted on them by the state, many women in the movement also experienced the misogyny of men who were their husbands, brothers, and fellow workers. For these women, becoming leaders in predominately male institutions or forming their own organizations where they worked collaboratively together proved essential to combating sexism and gender inequality in their private and public lives. Particularly in the period of heightened militancy surrounding the 1976 Soweto uprising, Mamphela Ramphele, Lydia Kompe-Ngwenya, Nikiwe Deborah Mashoba, Gertrude Fester, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Helen Joseph, Ruth First, Lilian Ngoyi and other courageous women helped to forge and strengthen organizations such as the Black Consciousness Movement, the Black Women's Federation, the South African Students Organization, the United Women's Organization in the Western Cape, and the Natal Organization of Women. Equally, they captured positions of leadership in existing trade or teachers' unions, where they struggled to gain both the power and the confidence to confront patriarchy (Russell 2003; South Africa History Online 2017; see also Grant 2017).

Although the broader anti-apartheid struggle restricted the development of a more overt "indigenous feminism" or autonomous women's organizations that could address the particularities of women's oppression in South Africa (Hassim 2006:76–77), nevertheless, many of the women who engaged in political mobilization during this period developed consultative and collaborative leadership styles that built solidarity among women and empowered members of the organizations they ran. For example, one of the lasting impacts of the Black Consciousness Movement's community development programs—many of which benefitted women—was the emphasis they placed on participatory and consultative decision-making. These practices subsequently influenced the character of other initiatives undertaken by Black Consciousness activists, such as Mamphela Ramphele, both before and after democratic transition. (Hadfield 2016:157–63).

Shifting our focus now to the current political landscape in the U.S., a geography of identity politics that is complex, polyvocal, fluid, and syncretic calls into question the usefulness of the binary between men and women evident in the South African struggle (Friedman 1998). Yet the fight for equalit(ies) is far from over. At the risk of foregrounding the category "woman," we are seeing the reappearance of myriad forms of misogyny in the U.S. today. The gender pay gap is widening



again. Moreover, although the number of women who occupy leadership positions has grown since the 1950s, it is nowhere near parity with men and it is in danger of being reversed, owing to resurgent patriarchy.

Consider the field of education. Of the approximately forty-six hundred colleges and institutions in this country, 30 percent are headed by women, and only 5 percent of college presidents are women of color (American Council on Education 2017). One explanation for this low percentage suggests that white males continue to dominate most boards of trustees and hiring committees. They are “uncomfortable” with women and minorities, or they find female leaders too “masculine.” Women also question themselves and at times doubt their abilities (Jackson & Harris 2007; American Association of University Women 2016). Yet a structural explanation for the continued dominance of men in a field that has historically employed many women is just as convincing as these explanations. Hierarchical institutions with a single leader at the apex are unappealing. To many of us, they are historical anachronisms that belong to an earlier period when leaders were male and had a spouse who cleaned the home and took care of the children. For this historical moment, therefore, two lessons from women’s activism in South Africa can inform our own advocacy. First, we need to revisit and expose “the linkages between gender oppression in the private sphere and race and class oppression” (Hassim 2006:83) as many female activists in South Africa did, and continue to do. Second, the contemporary age requires a more collaborative leadership style like those that many South African women embraced—one that privileges collective decision-making and shared responsibility. Black Lives Matter is organized this way, and so is the ASA (Ransby 2017). This model needs to migrate to other organizations.

### *Staying Silent is out of Style*

By the time of our fortieth anniversary in the 1990s, broad-based activism was forcing transitions to democracy across the continent of Africa. At a national convention in 1990, political activists in Benin demanded and achieved democratic reforms, catalyzing a decade of transitions across the African continent. Peace accords, protests, rallies, and conflict brought about regime change in Mozambique, Madagascar, Mali, South Africa, and many other countries.

For this decade, I want to stress the symbolic power of the naked body and its antipode, the clothed body. As an illustration, I highlight the battle for democracy in Kenya, especially by those women who congregated at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park in Nairobi in the early 1990s. In 1992, around a dozen poor rural women engaged in a hunger strike to free political prisoners being held by the authoritarian regime of Daniel Arap Moi for participating in prodemocracy activities. These women had not previously taken part directly in political activity

themselves, but many of the political prisoners were their sons. The motivation for the strike was that since section 2a of the constitution mandating a one-party state had been repealed, the legal basis for imprisonment no longer existed. Four days into the strike—which had attracted a crowd of thousands and was joined by the well-known environmental activist Wangari Maathai—President Moi sent in the police. Three of the women responded by disrobing and running naked toward the police officers, effectively thwarting their advance (Tibbetts 1994; Presley 2002).

In this instance, public disrobing constituted a symbolic and locally meaningful repudiation of illegitimate state authority. The nurturing power of motherhood embodied in the display of the naked female form contrasted with the potential for state violence represented by the uniformed police and their weapons. For the nude, it was a bold statement of commitment to a cause. For the police, it forced a reckoning with their own moral sensibilities regarding nakedness and motherhood. Precisely because disrobing entailed a strategic and principled confrontation with the female body, this singular act was disruptive, unsettling, powerful, political. It contributed to the release of fifty-one political prisoners and, eventually, to the end of dictatorship in Kenya (Tibbetts 1994; Kwayera 2017).

Like the unclothed body, the purposely clothed body also articulates powerful messages. In Charlottesville this past summer, we observed a deeply reactionary expression of political messaging through the wearing of clothes. We saw pointed hats and white sheets that we recognize as symbols of white supremacy and reminders of the terror spread by the Ku Klux Klan. We also witnessed attempts to make white power respectable with the wearing of “ordinary” polo shirts and khaki pants. Regarding the new look, one white supremacist stated, “The core of marketing is aesthetic. We need to look appealing. We have to be hip and we have to be sexy” (cited in Moore 2017).

If white polo shirts now reflect the sexy aesthetic of white power, then I would say that we as Africanists are well placed to respond with an aesthetic of our own. As the contributors to Jean Allman’s edited volume *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* illustrate, dress and also non-dress have been forms of empowerment, subversion, and political praxis across Africa for decades. *Kangas*, *panos*, *capulanas*, *agbadas*, *babban rigas*, *kofias*, and *diracs* have played their part in expressing the political preferences and the local subjectivities of those who wear them (Allman ed. 2004). My own contribution would be this: to make internationalism fashionable by adorning the pussy hats that were worn at the many women’s marches all over the world last January with a diamond shaped pattern, which is a female signifier in Zulu basketry (African Art Centre 2017). Alternatively, we ought to make those hats with prints inspired or created by artists and weavers from Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Congo, and Mozambique.

**Anne Pitcher, Re-fashioning the pussy hat with Zulu symbols to make a statement about gender and diversity. Photo by Alida Pitcher-Murray.**



### *Litigation as Participation*

Just as activists crafted extensive networks and employed innovative tactics to end apartheid in South Africa or to defeat authoritarianism in Kenya, more recently, they have devised new legal frameworks or looked to the courts to pursue their objectives. The interplay between individual or collective participation and the legal system is particularly evident with respect to struggles for social transformation, human rights, and political freedoms on the African continent. From grass roots justice to the use of the formal

court system, “litigation as participation” has escalated since the late 1990s and early 2000s, which corresponds to our fiftieth anniversary.<sup>7</sup> In Burkina Faso, the murder of Norbert Zongo in 1997 was the main catalyst behind this change. Zongo founded an independent newspaper, *L’indépendant*, in 1993, and used his pen to critique the corruption and the malfeasance of the longstanding Blaise Compaoré regime. He exposed land grabs by elites, shady business deals involving the president and his family, widespread embezzlement, and politically motivated assassinations. In 1997, when the parliament overturned a two-term limit for the Presidency and allowed Compaoré to run again in upcoming elections, Zongo assailed the decision. He also launched a blistering attack on the brutality of the President and his brother with respect to the death of David Ouédraogo. Zongo alleged that the security forces tortured and killed Ouédraogo for having stolen money from the President’s brother (Hagberg 2002; Soré 2008).

A year later, Zongo’s bullet-riddled body along with those of three others, including his brother, were found by passersby on the side of the road. All four bodies were burnt nearly beyond recognition. Following their deaths, Zongo’s wife, family, and friends, human rights activists, lawyers, and citizen advocates made repeated calls for justice. After years of litigation, they eventually secured a ruling against the Burkinabe government by the African Court on Human and People’s Rights in 2014 (African Union nd; Odinkalu & Kane 2014). That same year, women took to the streets with spatulas and brooms to protest and ultimately topple Compaoré’s administration (Moshenberg 2014).

Although securing justice for Norbert Zongo and his colleagues took nearly twenty years, the process had unintended consequences—it convinced ordinary citizens of their political power and mobilized them to resume the struggle against a dictatorial regime, and it strengthened legal guarantees regarding freedom of expression in Burkina Faso. The recent conviction of Hissène Habré, former dictator of Chad, for crimes against humanity is another example of victims successfully using the courts to secure justice (Brody 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Here in the United States, the use of “litigation as political participation” is intensifying. Courts are serving as domains to reject police violence, address environmental injustices, and challenge the President’s so-called “Muslim ban” on immigrants from selected countries where Islam is the dominant religion. Especially in the last year, courts have become critical spaces for deciding the fate of immigrants to this country. The backlog of immigration cases has grown by 20 percent. As of July 2017, there were about 600,000 pending cases, including applicants from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola, and Cameroon who were seeking residency in the U.S. Some of the longest cases, often taking three to four years to resolve, involve immigrants from countries where political persecution is rampant (TraImmigration 2017).

ASA members can play an important role testifying on behalf of people who have fled violence or persecution. In fact, Benjamin N. Lawrance, the new editor-in-chief of *African Studies Review*, has served as an expert

witness for over four hundred petitions by West Africans seeking refuge and humanitarian protection in the U.S., U.K., Netherlands, and other countries (Lawrance 2017). He has written extensively on the status and rights of refugee and asylum seekers, birthright citizenship, human trafficking, slavery, and activism on behalf of asylum seekers (Lawrance & Roberts eds. 2012; Berger, Hepner, Lawrance, Tague, & Terretta eds. 2015; Lawrance & Ruffer eds. 2016). Beyond the potential to aid individual migrants, our participation is a political act. Expert testimony can force our government to be accountable, and it can expose injustice here and abroad as it did in Burkina Faso or Chad.

### *Social Media and Civil Action*

Finally, as we celebrate our sixtieth anniversary in 2017, it is imperative to highlight social media as a technology of resistance. We have read that it brought down regimes during the Arab Spring, and the ASA's sixtieth anniversary conference has hosted an investigative journalist who has single-handedly challenged the ruling party in Angola with his courageous website, *Maka Angola*. In the tradition of Carlos Cardoso in Mozambique and Norbert Zongo in Burkina Faso, Rafael Marques de Morais has employed his writing to expose the criminality of regime elites, the lack of democracy, and the abuse of human rights by the military (Marques de Morais 2009–present).

One of social media's greatest contributions is that it has re-invigorated broad-based, popular mobilization. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and websites facilitated the demonstrations by students over fees at the University of the Witwatersrand and University of Kwazulu-Natal, and the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue in Cape Town (#RhodesMustFall 2017; #FeesMustFall 2017). Critics also took to social media to analyze the fault lines and weaknesses of these same movements (Webb 2015; Pithouse 2016). Such social media-driven protests are not only happening in South Africa. In the last ten years, there have been 105 documented popular protests in urban areas of Angola, Gabon, Guinea, Algeria, and other African countries (Branch & Mampilly 2015:68–69). In many cases, the use of social media was essential to bringing them about (Jacobs 2015).

Protests have not always toppled oppressive regimes, secured jobs, or enhanced democracy in Africa. But as Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly illustrate in *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (2015), protests help us to build networks. They cultivate a sense of belonging, and they allow us to imagine alternative public arenas. The celebrated historian Tiya Miles asserts that, "When protesters insert their bodies into forbidden places or adopt poses unsanctioned for their station, they are engaging in blatant acts of refusal" (2017:3). With the existence of social media, the act of refusal occurs first as an individual political statement and second as a show of collective defiance when it is posted on Instagram.

To refuse and to do so publicly for a just cause re-valorizes democracy from the grassroots. Sheldon Wolin, whose prescient work on inverted

totalitarianism was largely ignored by the academy, wisely observed, “To become a democrat is to change one’s self, to learn how to act collectively, as a *demos*. It requires that the individual go ‘public’ and thereby help to constitute a ‘public’ and an ‘open politics,’ in principle accessible for all to take part in it, and visible so that all might see or learn about the deliberations and decision making occurring in public agencies and institutions” (Wolin 2017:289).

Although we have witnessed the ways in which social media can be used to undermine the integrity of elections or distort the truth, we are also able to find examples from South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria, or our own country to demonstrate that it can cultivate or sustain the practice of open, critical, public, and participatory politics. This is not a plea for all of us to engage in a barrage of tweets. Rather, it is a recognition of the power of websites or twitter handles such as *Africa Is A Country* or #Rhodesmustfall to democratize global knowledge production, to mock stereotypes, to build community across social and geographical barriers, to change the status quo.<sup>9</sup>

### *A Conclusion and a Call*

In this moment of despotic ascendancy, it is reassuring to remember what the great satirist and poet Bate Besong quipped about President Biya and his band of tyrants in Cameroon: “their champagne party will end” (Besong 1998:22). In the meantime, we must not only defend our interests as scholars of Africa but also fortify something larger than ourselves: the institutions and ideals of participatory democracy. The versatile and creative forms of contestation employed by the people of the insurgent South can guide and teach us as we develop our own strategies in the face of tyranny. Transnational linkages, ordinary spaces, styles of clothing or of leadership, uses of the courts or of technology are some of the many instruments we can exploit in the service of our cause, just as activists across the African continent have done over the last six decades.

Our roles as teachers and writers, as poets and comedians, as members of an association demand that we use our resources to challenge authoritarianism and racial violence, to fight for a politics of inclusivity and social justice. Finally, at a time when institutions that were meant to empower or protect us have failed to live up to their ideals, we should remind ourselves that, like the peoples of Africa, we are surrounded by other institutions devoted to religion, scholarship, creative practice, and activism, which can nurture and sustain us. Where one set of institutions fails us, there are others that may offer us a new sense of belonging. The ASA for me is that kind of institution.

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## Notes

1. This article was originally given as the Presidential Lecture at the Sixtieth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association. I have revised the text to correct errors and omissions or to develop a point. To preserve the cadence and "feel" of the lecture but to provide readers with further information on sources, I have generally located references and notes at the end of paragraphs. I would like especially to thank Marissa Moorman, Derek Peterson, Martin Murray, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions on the style and organization of the text. I'm grateful to Mary Moran for her encouraging response when I initially shared my ideas on the talk with her, and I appreciate Jean Allman's feedback on the Nkrumah years. Above all, I value my family's love and support.
2. I am especially grateful to the ASA secretariat, the Executive Director, the board of directors and its officers, the program chairs, and the section chairs for their contributions to the exciting panels, speakers, films and forums at the ASA's sixtieth annual meeting. I also appreciate the efforts by the local arrangements committee to honor the Africanist influences in Chicago and to provide a rich menu of area attractions for attendees to enjoy.
3. For insights into some of the controversies that have shaped, and continue to shape, the ASA and African Studies, see Zezeza (1997); Greene (1999); Mama (2007); Ogot (2009); Ampofo (2016).
4. Southern Poverty Law Center (2018) provides a "Hate Map," an interactive site that identifies the nature of these hate groups by state.
5. My theme engages with, and indeed is inspired by, some of the concerns raised by Sandra Greene (1999) and Allen Isaacman (2003) in their Presidential lectures regarding the need for African Studies to be more inclusive, more engaged in policy debates, and more politically active. I complement their approaches by examining the discourses, spaces, styles, and technologies of activism employed by Africans to derive lessons for contemporary politics in the U.S.
6. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) anticipated and likely influenced Ekeh's critique of the corrosive influence of European thought on Africans.
7. See Dor and Hofnung (2006) for the phrase.
8. Dokhot Clément Abaïfouta, President, Association of Victims of Hissène Habré and Reed Brody, the lawyer who represented the victims, explained the details and the challenges of the twenty-six-year case in a board-sponsored session at the ASA's sixtieth anniversary meeting.
9. The history of social media in Africa is clearly summarized by Sean Jacobs, founder of *Africa is a Country* in an interview with Butler Beat (2014); see also Jacobs (2015).