



Editors' Introduction: "The Future of the African Past"

Lorelle Semley^{1*} , Teresa Barnes², Bayo Holsey³, and Egodi Uchendu⁴ 

¹Department of History, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA 01610, USA

²Department of History, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Urbana IL 61801, USA

³Department of Anthropology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA

⁴Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nsukka, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author: lsemley@holycross.edu

We signed on as the new editorial team of *History in Africa (HIA)* without knowing that we all sat on the precipice of tumultuous times. After over a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global unrest calling for a reckoning on racial justice, and events that exposed the limits and fragility of democratic institutions, we are reminded of the importance of how people experience, remember, and chronicle the past. It is a weighty and fortuitous time to think about our craft as historians and how we develop methods for analyzing and revisiting sources. How do we want to highlight our unique approaches as historians of Africa, and how do we want to push our field of African history and our discipline of history, more broadly, in new directions? We salute and thank the previous team of *HIA* editors – Jan Jansen, Michel Doortmont, John Hanson, and Dmitri van den Bersselaar – for their excellent stewardship of the journal over many years.

Given increasing calls for the decolonization of knowledge about Africa, in particular, we are reminded not only of the origins of African history and African Studies in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States but also of the pan-Africanist and interdisciplinary vision of those origins.¹ Beyond an acknowledgement of the past, scholars have proposed ways forward for the future. Both Akosua Adomako Ampofo and Paul Tiyambe

History in Africa, Volume 48 (2021), pp. 1–8

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

doi:[10.1017/hia.2021.21](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2021.21)

¹ James Pritchett, "Reflections on the State of African Studies," paper presented at the 57th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Indianapolis, IN, 20–23 November 2014.

Zeleza project the past of African history forward by highlighting the importance of better collaboration between African and African diaspora scholars and communities to rejuvenate the field. In calling for “epistemic inclusion and equality,” Zeleza also imagines increased interconnectedness between African and African diaspora communities and other groups facing similar challenges.² Our three overarching goals for the Journal are related to diversity and outreach and find resonance in these recent discussions.

Our first priority is to have *HIA* reflect the international diversity of the field of African history in terms of both the professors and researchers and the range of universities and colleges in Africa, Europe, and the Americas (meaning North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America). Our second goal is to expand *HIA*’s reach within African history and among historians, in general. As *HIA*’s strength lies in its focus on historical debate and methods, our third aim is to share these questions across disciplines and potentially within a wider public striving for information about representations of the past to understand the present.

With these objectives in mind, the composition of the editorial team and the new editorial board reflects our agenda. As the new four-person editorial team – Lorelle Semley as Managing Editor and Teresa Barnes, Bayo Holsey, and Egodi Uchendu as Associate Editors – we represent expertise in different fields and regions of the continent and African diaspora and different types of institutions in different regions of the US and Nigeria. While three of the four of us specialize in West African history, our reach is more expansive than that. Semley’s research and writing centers on Francophone West Africa as well as the African diaspora in the Caribbean and Europe. Holsey is a PhD in Anthropology and concentrates on questions of collective memory and public history. Based in Nigeria, Uchendu interrogates gender and religion in Anglophone West Africa and across the continent. Barnes’ research covers southern Africa more broadly and has focused on Zimbabwean history as well as the historical dynamics of gender and institutional life in South Africa.

It also matters that our home institutions include a liberal arts college in the northeast United States (Semley), a private university in the southern US (Holsey), a state university in the Midwest (Barnes), and one of the premier public universities on the African continent (Uchendu). Our new Editorial Review Board (ERB) of eighteen builds on this commitment to diversity with

² Akosua Adomako Ampofo, “Re-Viewing Studies on Africa, #Black Lives Matter, and Envisioning the Future of African Studies,” *African Studies Review* 59–2 (2016), 7–29. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Enhancing African Knowledge Production and Decentering the Global North,” paper presented at the Closing Plenary, “The Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies Colloquium,” organized by the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, AHP, and the Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Cape Town, 1 October 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/enhancing-african-knowledge-production-decentering-global-zeleza>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

experts with varied affiliations and based in a range of institutions with nine members based in Africa, Americas, or Europe, including Brazil, Canada, France, Jamaica, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe. Nine of our ERB members are women and we have a majority of people of color serving on the Board.

Several new initiatives also support these goals including CFPs for thematic special sections and a new feature on "History from Africa." The CFPs for special sections allow us to highlight important methodological questions that apply widely to African specialists and historians, more generally, and colleagues in other disciplines as well. The calls also may attract scholars less familiar with the Journal to submit their work and engage with the Journal's other features. Similarly, our new section on "History from Africa" invites readers to learn about the long traditions and legacies of history departments in African universities. These departments have labored for decades and have produced literally thousands of graduates. However, they have generally not had the visibility or attention that their records of achievement in teaching, research, and service deserve. We plan to introduce our first installation of this section via a special online feature in early 2022.

We are pleased that our first volume features authors based in Africa, Europe, and the Americas who contributed articles from all regions of the continent and from the African diaspora in northeastern Brazil. While none directly address North Africa, we plan to do so in next year's volume as part of our commitment to highlighting the continent in its broad complexity and global connections.

This issue's first section on the Digital Humanities is the result of a CFP we issued in November 2019 on "Digital Humanities and the Future of Chronicling the African Past." Building on special features on the digitization of archives and on digital history in African Studies in the 2020 volume of *HIA*, we sought to expand that conversation to the Digital Humanities more broadly. In their 2021 volume on *The Digital Black Atlantic*, editors Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam emphasize a broad methodological framework for the study of connections between African and African diaspora communities and technology. They find the following components throughout the scholarship in the field: recognizing the forces of enslavement, racism, and colonialism across time and space; decentering whiteness to highlight the perspective and experiences of communities of color; challenging the perceived "universality" of white, Western assumption in digital humanities; and highlighting interdisciplinarity.³

Each of the seven articles in our special section takes up all of these themes to some degree. The contributors analyze the transatlantic slave trade, and examine documents and photographs produced during the colonial period or

³ Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam, "Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic," in Josephs, Kelly Baker and Risam, Roopika (eds.), *The Digital Black Atlantic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/projects/the-digital-black-atlantic>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

in colonial and postcolonial spaces. All of them powerfully decenter whiteness by renaming regions of the slave trade and naming the enslaved, chronicling sources created by mineworkers, foregrounding information from interviews in local African communities, citing on-line archives created by ordinary South Asians living in South Africa, or collecting and comparing word lists or art objects produced or commented upon by Africans themselves. Consequently, they each highlight alternative epistemologies at the design-level of their projects. The core interdisciplinarity comes through their use of technology and attention to historical method as well as photography, environmental approaches, linguistic analysis, anthropological methods, and art history. Since Josephs and Risam eschew an effort to be programmatic and instead highlight “openness” and “avenues of exploration and debate,” it is compelling that these articles – deeply focused on African history and questions of methods – map so well onto their findings about theoretical framing.⁴

While the first two articles in the section are concerned with the transatlantic slave trade, each addresses core critiques of the field by revisiting the naming of African places and foregrounding enslaved and free African-born people as individuals and in communities. In “Defining Regions of Pre-Colonial Africa: A Controlled Vocabulary for Linking Open-Source Data in Digital History Projects,” Henry Lovejoy et al. offer a rejoinder to their initial publication in the 2019 volume of *HIA*. The authors endeavor to rename African regions in ways that avoid terminologies derived from European slave traders, colonialism, and modern-day countries.

Moving from place to the person, in “Freedom Narratives: The West African Person as the Central Focus for a Digital Humanities Database,” Érika Melek Delgado describes the work behind the Freedom Narratives Database, demonstrating the importance of recording individual lives, beyond names, and designing public-facing digital humanities projects. Whereas many other digital resources are often concerned with the African diaspora, this project focuses on tracing the lives of enslaved and free African-born women, children, and men swept up in the forces of the transatlantic slave trade. In the context of enslaved peoples whom historians have often been reduced to statistics, this task is particularly difficult yet all the more pressing.

The two articles that concern digitization of archives address key questions about the implication and ethics of access while offering insight into some unique challenges and opportunities. In “Rebalancing the Historical Narrative or Perpetuating Bias?: Digitizing the Archives of the Mineworkers’ Union of Zambia,” Duncan Money discusses the archives of the Mineworkers Union of Zambia as one of the few comprehensive repositories of labor records on the continent maintained and controlled by workers, rather than capital or the state. Money describes efforts to digitize the union’s deteriorating records and explores whether such efforts will reify or transcend the

⁴ Josephs and Risam, “Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic.”

conventional focus on formally employed male workers as the main vehicles of Zambia's narratives of colonialism and anti-colonialism.

Christopher Conte's article, "The Usambara Knowledge Project: Place as Archive in a Tanzanian Mountain Range," provides another perspective on a recent public history digitization project on place and landscape in a mountain range in northeastern Tanzania. The project aims to create a digital archive produced in Tanzania and maintained by Utah State University Library's Special Collections and Archives. Using repeat photography and collecting oral histories to allow for community participation and greater collaboration, the project also raises questions about the politics of knowledge production.

The article "Leza, Sungu, and Samba: Digital Humanities and Early Bantu History" by Catherine Cymone Fourshey, Rhonda M. Gonzales, and Christine Saidi takes the question of database creation and open access in a new direction with a focus on word roots from over sixty different Bantu languages which they have compiled into the Bantu Ancestral Roots Database (BARD). They discovered syntactic networks extending across Africa and into the diaspora. The article also describes how the authors worked through the complexities of weaving together social history and digitally powered linguistic research.

By contrast, in "Remembering Durban's 'Grey Street Casbah and Surrounds': Creating Urban History through Digital Spaces," Cacee Hoyer starts with a digital source produced in the present and asks questions about how we define and use such sources. For example, how do memories recorded on a private but almost public-utility-type platform like Facebook compare to individual memoirs or conventionally recorded interviews? Hoyer's dive into an online group with thousands of members who share nostalgic memories of the "Grey Street Casbah" in Durban, South Africa, argues that newer genres of archives are not necessarily lesser archives. The public's participation in such groups may indeed presage a paradoxically more curated but simultaneously more inclusive window on the past.

Finally, in "*Mapping Senufo*: Reframing Questions, Reevaluating Sources, and Reimagining a Digital Monograph," Susan Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis offer a unique perspective as art historians engaging with a single corpus of art—West African "Senufo"—and knowledge about it. Their project also addresses the fundamental concern of how people evaluate evidence, whether verbal or visual, and present findings. By assessing the nature of evidence for making certain claims, the authors appeal to readers to think about *what* they know and *how* they know it.

In our next section, on "Critical Historiography of Ethnicity in Africa and the African Diaspora," two articles challenge standard understandings of African ethnicities as bounded by places and names associated with them. In "Naming the Baga: Problems in the Identity of a Guinean Cultural Amalgamation," Fred Lamp reevaluates the etymology of the ethnonym "Baga" in the Republic of Guinea. Challenging earlier interpretations of this ethnonym, he ties it to histories of migration in the region and complex social logics which, he argues, have been previously overlooked.

In “The ‘Ketu Nation’ of Brazilian Candomblé in Historical Context,” Lisa Earl Castillo takes on the image of the classic Candomblé temples in Salvador, Brazil, that describe themselves as “Ketu.” While scholars have doubted a straightforward ancestral link to the Yorùbá kingdom by that name, she provides new evidence on the women and men involved in the founding of the temples and argues that “Ketu” temples emerged in the nineteenth century to reflect Bahia’s heterogeneous ethnic milieu. This argument points to the important connection between naming and identity formation in African diasporic communities.

Our final section of research articles on “Rethinking Africa’s Local and Colonial Archives” engages both Muslim sources and colonial sources to ask questions about the politics of knowledge about the past. Charles C. Stewart provides a detailed account of the contents of the world-renowned Timbuktu Manuscripts in “What’s In the Manuscripts of Timbuktu? A Survey of the Contents of 31 Private Libraries.” The comparison of these manuscripts locates this literature in the broader, regional, Islamic intellectual world.

The remaining articles address rereading of oral and colonial sources in some unexpected ways. It may not be surprising that colonial sources omit the role of African women leaders, especially in the period before formal colonial rule. In “The *Lingeeer’s* Jihad: Challenging a Male-Normative Reading of African History,” Douglas Thomas examines that process of erasure and then situates Yacine Bubu as a key actor in the Kajoor jihad during the eighteenth century when existing sources have ignored or misunderstood her role.

Two articles on early twentieth-century Nigeria attempt to reread typical colonial documents produced by and addressed to the colonial state. In “Minutes and the Man: J. E. W. Flood and British Imperial Economic Policy at the Colonial Office in the Interwar Years,” Ayodeji Olukoju argues that the correspondence between metropolitan and colonial officials reveal formative debates in imperial policy.

By contrast, Tunde Decker is concerned with the persona of petition writers in “Handwritten in Lagos: Selfhood and Textuality in Colonial Petitions.” In turn, the petitions can serve as a window into the experiences of the authors. Taken together, the authors raise questions about how scholars might continue to use and rethink colonial sources.

Finally, we have three archival reports that treat written and visual materials produced during periods of upheaval and brutality. Devin Leigh describes a new collection of papers acquired by the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at the Firestone Memorial Library, Princeton University, of a British enslaver who operated in the region of Sierra Leone during the late-eighteenth century. While the journals of traders are a fairly common resource for eighteenth-century African history, one potential topic for researchers is the history of the region immediately preceding the

settlement of Freetown, including color versions of images of Sierra Leone reproduced here for the first time.

By contrast, records created during South Africa's apartheid era are notoriously hard to locate. Many were destroyed by state institutional actors as the country moved into a hard-won democracy in the early 1990s. Brown Maaba's contribution to this volume describes how records of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) were discovered in the basement of a building in Pretoria, and are now being properly catalogued. The HSRC was tasked with sponsoring, promoting, and tracking academic research of all kinds during the apartheid period and now into South Africa's fledgling democracy. The rediscovery of its records will provide scholars of African higher education with a rich trove on the intersections of shifting politics and higher education in South Africa.

The Idi Amin era in Uganda is universally used as a shorthand for brutality, corruption, and presidential egomania. Edgar C. Taylor, Nelson A. Abiti, Derek R. Peterson, and Richard Vokes describe how Amin's state tried to memorialize itself through its own corps of photographers. Sixty thousand photographic negatives have been digitized and are now available for historical study and analysis. Here is Amin's Uganda through the lenses of its own documentarians.

Based on the robust array of articles in this volume and those that we have in the pipeline for upcoming volumes, as a new editorial team, we are reassured that the field of African history is not only alive and well, but its tillers are fearlessly venturing into new technologies and new disciplinary collaborations. We are also encouraged that these ventures continue to be undertaken with ethical considerations in research and publishing, with the principles of access, respect, and reciprocity uppermost in the minds of authors. We thank our authors for trusting us with their work, and we look forward to guiding *History in Africa's* upcoming journeys.

References

- Ampofo, Akosua Adomako, "Re-Viewing Studies on Africa, #Black Lives Matter, and Envisioning the Future of African Studies," *African Studies Review* 59–2 (2016), 7–29.
- Josephs, Kelly Baker and Roopika Risam. "Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic," in Josephs, Kelly Baker and Risam, Roopika (eds.), *The Digital Black Atlantic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/projects/the-digital-black-atlantic>, (accessed 27 November 2021).
- Pritchett, James, "Reflections on the State of African Studies," paper presented at the 57th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Indianapolis, IN, 20–23 November 2014.
- Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe, "Enhancing African Knowledge Production and Decentering the Global North," paper presented at the Closing Plenary, "The Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies Colloquium," organized by the Centre

8 History in Africa

for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, AHP, and the Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Cape Town, 1 October 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/enhancing-african-knowledge-production-decentering-global-zeleza>, (accessed 27 November 2021).