

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

## The Global Dynamism of African Studies

African studies, globally, is an expanding and dynamic research field. New programs are cropping up throughout the African continent, as well as in South America, Asia, and Europe. And the excitement of this energetic growth is palpable. The *African Studies Review* (ASR) recently (June 2019) had the pleasure of co-convening with *African Affairs* a series of plenary sessions on journals and scholarly publication at the 9<sup>th</sup> European Conference of African Studies (ECAS) in Edinburgh, Scotland. In July, four editors attended the Ghana Studies Association [<http://ghanastudies.com/announcements/gsa-triennial-conferences/>] triennial conference in Accra, Ghana. In October, we will be actively participating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> biennial conference of the African Studies Association of Africa [<http://www.as-aa.org/index.php>] in Nairobi, Kenya. By many accounts, African studies appears to be a varied, vibrant, and diversifying discipline and interdisciplinary space.

At the same time, the ECAS meeting highlighted some of the persistent structural inequalities of African studies. In a 2018 essay entitled “the Gentrification of African Studies,” [<https://africasacountry.com/2018/12/the-gentrification-of-african-studies>] the Tunisian commentator Haythem Guesmi took umbrage with the current state of the field. His provocative exposition inspired some in-depth thought about our struggles and limitations as a scholarly collective. It is certainly the case that a great many major African studies conferences take place outside Africa, and this creates structural inequalities with lasting impact. Although every year countless large (>400 participants) as well as smaller conferences take place in different countries in Africa, from Nigeria to Senegal, Kenya to Angola, and everywhere in between, the restrictions on attending conferences outside Africa are considerable. On the other hand, the trend appears to be toward organizing conferences on the continent because African institutions are increasingly cognizant of the numerous benefits of hosting larger meetings and are developing the capacity and relationships necessary for these enterprises. In 2019–20, several academic bodies have planned their first conferences in Ethiopia, Togo, Botswana, Morocco, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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Others are in the pipeline. And for the past decade, the African Studies Association of Africa has worked tirelessly to link African studies scholars across the continent and stimulate new collaborations. You can join the ASAA and contribute to its impact. Associations are empowered by their members.

Major meetings, such as the African Studies Association (ASA) and African Literature Association (ALA), are indeed important fixtures on the Africanist calendar. Considerable significance is attached to presenting a research paper at these gatherings. Notwithstanding the fact that the ASA and the ALA are both *North American* conferences, founded in North America in the 1950s and 1960s by scholars based primarily in U.S. institutions and borne of fraught exclusionary struggles, different scholars attribute importance to a variety of divergent scholarly goals, hence the proliferation of numerous coordinate and affiliate organizations [<https://africanstudies.org/about-the-asa/coordinate-affiliate-organizations/>]. And yet, importance is a relative term: why and what about a particular meeting is important depends on innumerable and mutable factors. How can we reasonably weigh a national meeting of a national association against, for example, a smaller targeted colloquium that results in an original or pathbreaking anthology? African studies is vastly larger than the ASA and ALA: consider the newest national caucus, the Associação Brasileira de Estudos Africanos, founded in 2018. Moreover, the ASR, one of two journals of the ASA, participated in no fewer than seven conferences in Africa in 2018 and 2019, and each of these meetings has proved to be very important, and in vastly different ways, for the diverse participants. At every conference, new networks are born, new collaborations instantiated, and friendships renewed. Among the most important reasons for hosting conferences in Africa is to increase participation, exchange, and engagement between and among Africa-based scholars.

Accessibility in African studies is foremost in the minds of African studies scholars the world over, but attempts to mediate access do not exist in a vacuum. The hurdles to access are not inconsiderable, and journals, journal consortia, and publishing houses are regularly exploring new ways to increase accessibility and equity, often with a view to decolonizing the production of knowledge about Africa [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.97>]. It is incumbent on us all to vigorously debate the relative efficacy of the many and conflicting invocations of decolonial rhetoric. The restrictions on travel to conferences, the cost of hotels and registration, and the expenses of particular cities are all considerable hurdles to equitable scholarly engagement. To be sure, conference organizers have no control over immigration policies, visa fees, or visa grants, but stronger associations empowered by their members and leaders can strategize and lobby to facilitate African participation in meetings outside the African continent and respond forcefully when visa denials create obstacles. The regrettable difficulties in attending conferences outside one's country of origin or citizenship are not insurmountable, but as they are unavoidable and inevitable, they must be engaged head-on.

The UK African Studies Association, the Canadian African Studies Association, the ASA, and others are acutely aware of these obstacles, and how they appear to have increased in recent years as the Global North prioritizes immigration enforcement. Assertive and robust engagement with visa obstacles is mandatory for all African studies organizations. At the recent ECAS meeting, the organizing committee took a two-pronged approach. They first raised an extraordinary sum from the Scottish Funding Council's Global Challenge Research Fund and the University of Edinburgh to fully fund the travel and accommodations for 167 Africa-based Catalyst Fellows. They then encouraged awardees to apply for visas immediately and offered to assist directly with appeals against all visa denials by contacting members of parliament, UK embassies, and high commissions, and the UK Home Office. And yet, at the same time, African editorial participation in the three publishing plenaries was woefully inadequate. It cannot be overlooked that when African scholars attend conferences outside the continent, they enrich lives in powerful ways [<https://www.thenational.scot/news/17678819-scotland-will-benefit-from-learning-of-complexity-of-african-cultures/?ref=twtrrec>].

African Studies has always been for Africans and about Africans and central to African activism and liberation. The editorial collective of the *African Studies Review* embraces new ideas and develops concrete mechanisms to embolden African participation, entrench African ownership, and invigorate African institutionalization of the field through scholarly publication and outreach. As always, we welcome your feedback, thoughtful engagement, and grounded critique. With your continued support and engagement, we will ensure the continuity and growth of the flagship journal of the African Studies Association (USA).

The September 2019 issue of the ASR contains a wealth of new scholarship from Africa-based and North American scholars, featuring new research from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria, as well as continent-wide and global multidisciplinary analyses. We showcase architecture, anthropology, engineering, international development, and political science. This volume opens with a timely and rigorous reflection on the history of the African Studies Association, first delivered in the form of a memorable trenchant public address [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSb\\_N2Ly8VY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSb_N2Ly8VY)] before a capacity crowd in the Atlanta Marriott Marquis ballroom by past ASA president Jean Allman. In “#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.40>] Allman explores the persistent whiteness of African studies generally, and the ASA in particular, revealing how white privilege is hardwired into the very structure and research artifice of U.S.-based African studies research.

The second article, by Melchisedek Chétima, explores the supposedly egalitarian segmentary communities in the Mandara Mountains bordering Cameroon and Nigeria. In “You are where you build: Hierarchy, Inequality,

and Equalitarianism in Mandara Highland Architecture,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.45>] Chétima employs the architectural landscape configuration to reveal the ideology underpinning clan structure and individual relationships. Domestic space is central to his argument, insofar as he seeks to counter the Africanist celebration of egalitarianism by foregrounding narratives about social hierarchies and gendered spatial binaries.

Allard Duursma’s “Mediating Solutions to Territorial Civil Wars in Africa: Norms, Interests, and Major Power Leverage,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.103>] examines “identity interests” as a way to gain traction on another persistent bias in African studies, namely the norm of territorial integrity in African peace processes. Because the territorial integrity norm is supported by continental and international interests, third parties abstain from negotiated settlements. Duursma reviews seven case studies since 1960 to account for the peculiar tenacity of this norm.

In “Homosexuality, Witchcraft, and Power: the Politics of *Ressentiment* in Cameroon,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.44>] Shelagh Roxburgh offers a new account of the common association made between homosexuality, witchcraft, and cultic activity. Taking as a starting point the call to arms offered by Peter Geschiere in his 2016 ASR Distinguished Lecture, published in 2017 as “A ‘Vortex of Identities’: Freemasonry, Witchcraft, and Postcolonial Homophobia,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.52>], Roxburgh offers a closer engagement with rumor and the alleged threat homosexuals pose to Cameroonian morality.

The penultimate article takes us to Ghana, and yet another persistent African issue, namely electricity blackouts. Kobina Aidoo and Ryan Briggs’s essay “Underpowered: Rolling blackouts in Africa disproportionately hurt the poor,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.78>] reveals how Ghana’s massive and growing electricity demands, which routinely exceed supply, often result in the concentration of blackouts on poorer sectors of society. Based on data from Accra neighborhoods compared with figures from thirty-six other African countries, Aidoo and Briggs find that poorer people with a grid connection experience lower electricity supply than richer people.

Our final article in this issue, by Peter Little, brings us full circle, insofar as we revisit yet another persistent problem in African studies, the ongoing use of Africa as a laboratory for scientific experimentation. In his 2018 ASR Distinguished Lecture, “When ‘green’ equals thorny and mean: The politics and costs of an environmental experiment in East Africa,” [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.41>] Little focuses on the highly invasive *prosopis juliflora* to explore wider issues of scientific hegemony, political identity, and land conflict. Drawing on thirty-five years of ethnographic, archival, and visual data, he narrates the injustices embodied in two legal disputes by marginalized pastoralist communities against the Kenyan state, revealing the unremitting violence and impoverishment that emerges from green innovation. You can watch the original lecture online [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVvg9IDS CfI>].

Rounding out the essays in this issue, we are pleased to feature a very timely commentary by distinguished scholars on the very latest iteration of Africa-as-laboratory, namely the release of genetically modified mosquitoes in Burkina Faso [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.45>]. In this compelling contribution, Uli Beisel and John Kuumuori Ganle ask how this astonishing experiment came to pass, and whether the lessons of previous entomological experiments have been adequately considered. This recent update to the Africa as developmental laboratory paradigm, sadly largely neglected by the global media, raises important questions and connects Allman's analysis of the ASA foundations to Little's narration of an ongoing environmental disaster in Kenya.

The remainder of our issue is replete with insightful reviews of new scholarship and film, all free to access. And we are particularly thrilled to bring you a review essay of anthropologist Filip De Boeck's and photographer Sammy Baloji's pathbreaking exhibition and catalogue, "Suturing the City," by the renowned Portuguese scholar Clara Carvalho.