
GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the journal is devoted primarily to the state of African Studies in the United States. African Studies, many of its practitioners agree, is currently undergoing a crisis, or at least a rethinking and restructuring. The interests, paradigms and assumptions on which the field was founded within and outside the U.S. academy in the period following the end of the Second World War, the argument goes, no longer hold. The decades-long partnership, wittingly or unwittingly, between scholars (most of them academics), private foundations and government agencies concerned with Africa, "national security," "development," and educational issues has lost much of its *raison d'être*. The end of the Cold War and the concomitant emergence of a "new world order," in which most of the African continent is at best peripheral, both economically and strategically, is undoubtedly the most poignant illustration of changing times for African Studies. Indeed, the consequences of the latest search for a new world order could, in many ways, be as far reaching as the earlier one that played such a crucial role in the end of colonial rule in Africa and was the determining factor in the birth of African Studies in the United States.

Structural adjustment, imposed with such ferocity and disregard for human need on numerous African countries over the past decade and a half, is now also being visited on U.S. African Studies. And while academics and others concerned with the study of Africa in this country have a much wider girth than African peasants and workers, the belt-tightening that is being increasingly dictated by declining government, private and, indeed, academic institutional support has serious implications for Africanists and their craft.

Furthermore, African Studies, like the African continent itself, is undergoing numerous challenges all at once. As if the problems of structural adjustment were not enough, Africanists increasingly are faced with what for many of them is the unpleasant task of having to defend the integrity of the field from attacks by insurgents of various intellectual, methodological and ideological stripes. Dispensing with sacred cows and received wisdom, these insurgents are wont to contest every aspect of African Studies. This includes, among other things, the distribution of power and resources among a cadre of practitioners which in recent times has become increasingly diverse in terms of scholarly approach, gender, race and national origin, as well as the character of and strategies pursued in reproducing scholars of Africa. Even the issue of the relevance of U.S. African Studies to Africa and Africans, long a question on the minds of Africa-based scholars, who have pointed to the widening gap in content and method between the production of knowledge on the continent and in the North, is now being debated more and more in this country, and not always in the predictable circles.

These, then, are among the questions addressed by the contributors to this issue. By design as well as by personal predilection, the views and concerns of the contributors vary widely. This is, of course, as it should be. Perspectives of the state of U.S. African Studies are probably not much less numerous than practitioners of the craft. Some, with varying degrees of concern, are of the opinion that the current crisis will result in the end of African Studies as presently constituted. Others deny the existence of a crisis and see no need for alarm, taking comfort in the belief that there is nothing new under the African, and certainly not under the U.S. African Studies sun. The momentary rough spots, they reason, are no more than any seasoned Africa traveler can reasonably expect to encounter. The road will likely get smoother farther along. Regardless, the sturdy machinery that is African Studies, perhaps after routine maintenance to tighten up or change a few rattling parts, will continue on its way. Still other practitioners, perhaps even a huddled majority, find safety in the median strip. Maneuvering carefully between what they may well consider the Scylla of the "Afro pessimists" of U.S. African Studies and the Charybdis of the eternally-optimistic Africanist triumphalists, these Solomonic centrists are apprehensive yet hopeful, keeping their eyes on the road while scanning for a sign indicating the existence of an oasis up ahead.

Our collection begins with two acceptance speeches. The first is from the the winner of the 1994 Herskovits Prize, awarded annually by the Association to the author of what is deemed the best book in African Studies published the previous year. A moving personal statement of the humiliation and racism encountered by an individual woman from the projects of Chicago in her quest for higher education, the speech is also a collective testament of the triumph of the indomitable spirit of people of African descent over adversity in the United States of America. The second is by the winner of the 1994 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. It too is a testimony, charting the difficult struggles on the part of the author, African scholars and publishers in relation to the construction of the African intellectual community.

Grouped under the heading of "African Studies: Past, Present and Future" and "Problematics of Africanist Practice" are essays which focus directly and explicitly on the state and practice of U.S. African Studies. Two additional contributions are included in the section on "Pan-African and Trans-Continental Perspectives," these tackle questions which, though necessarily

related to the above-mentioned ones, approach the subject from a different angle. A celebrated African scholar revisits the issue of continental political unity in the context of ongoing crises in Africa and the evolution of the "new world order," while a philosopher offers a searching critique of an emerging trend in the study of Africa and the diaspora.

Finally, as guest editors we offer this special edition of *Issue* in the spirit of critical inquiry which, as scholars, we all claim as a hallmark of our vocation. If, in the end, the views and commentaries here presented help to increase discussion and promote debate among practitioners of African Studies in the United States, we would have achieved our objective.

Michael West and William G. Martin
Guest Editors

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

For the past seven years, *ISSUE* has benefitted from the support of a person whose name does not appear on the masthead, Dr. Edna Bay. The respect for *ISSUE* among scholars and activists is a consequence of her contribution. Her meticulous attention to content, as well as to form, has insured accuracy and uniformity of style. Her breadth of knowledge in the field of African Studies makes her a resource the editor and readers shall miss. As she ends her tenure as Executive Director of the African Studies Association, I thank her for her years of service to the membership and to *ISSUE*.

Beverly Hawk
Editor