

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Envisioning African Presences at ASA and Beyond

The African Studies Association's capacity to convene its members is one of its greatest assets. In an age defined by rapidly advancing technology and increased pressure on academic institutions both nationally and internationally, the Annual Meeting's assembly of over 1,600 interdisciplinary scholars stands as a testament to the enduring power of collaboration and the profound importance of sharing knowledge across disciplines. As the world grows increasingly interconnected, the challenges we face transcend traditional academic boundaries and demand fresh perspectives and innovative solutions. Gathering to present research or to debate ideas is not merely an intellectual exercise but a strategic imperative for addressing the complex issues of our time through the art of community building. Annual Meetings, and other sizeable interdisciplinary convenings, provide space and time to recast the future of African Studies in its broadest definition.

The thematic essay for the ASA's 2023 Annual Meeting, *African Presences: Envisioning Africa in Text and Deed*, was co-authored by anthropologist and ASR editor Claudia Gastrow and historian Shobana Shankar. Their exposition embraces an inclusive and intersectional definition of African Studies, inspired by the Sixth International Congress of Africa and African Diaspora Studies (ICAADS). ICAADS' transnational collaboration—between the African Studies Association (ASA), the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD), and Africa is a Country (AIAC)—was detailed in several sessions and in a brightly colored installation in the San Francisco Exhibit Hall. The exhibit narrative, authored by Jean Allman, helpfully contextualized ICAADS' 2023 programming as the sixth iteration since 1962, while creating space to reframe the Congress as a twenty-first century project. Both the Sixth International Congress and the *African Presences* essays advocate dismantling disciplinary silos in favor of an African Studies that explores intersections with

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Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, African American Studies, and Africana Studies. In Gastrow and Shankar's words: "by embracing a broad, diasporic perspective on African Studies we aim to carry forward the spirit of ICAADS into the contemporary era."

While the idea of interdisciplinarity is nothing new, the practice of thoughtful collaboration and co-organization across different organizational cultures, structures, and histories is revolutionary. More than fifty sessions across three association meetings (in Accra, Lubumbashi, and San Francisco) generated a holistic vision of a better future that scholars are translating into reflective policy recommendations. ASA's contribution to the ICAADS program included discussions on media misrepresentation, marginalization, and food sovereignty as well as explorations of "Made-in-Africa" solutions to climate change and the complexities of the international student experience at American universities. These ICAADS sessions provided an important forum to generate ideas for transformative change, drawing on the interdisciplinary expertise and multigenerational wisdom in the room. Participants leaving these sessions submitted notes and policy recommendations for review and further analysis. Once the data from all three Congresses are collated, the ICAADS Steering Committee plans to publish its findings and highlight global commonalities for future dialogue.

The ASA program for San Francisco was not the first to include diasporic intersections. While program sub-themes ebb and flow with trends in the field, the call for research on Africa's diasporas was formally introduced in 2021 and continues to grow annually. In addition to more established content on transatlantic slavery and international Pan-Africanism, the 2023 program included perspectives heretofore underrepresented at the ASA. Alan Cobley (University of the West Indies) chaired a dynamic panel on diasporic Caribbean connections, which featured Nadja Fuster's linguistics research on Jamaica and Ewart Skinner's work on calypso. Adekeye Adebajo (University of Pretoria) hosted a multidisciplinary roundtable assessing the continued legacies of slavery and colonialism and consequent calls for reparations. Although not an official ICAADS session, the roundtable discussion directly responded to the call put forth in both the ICAADS and *African Presences* essays for a broad and diverse diasporic perspective on the subject.

The San Francisco Local Arrangements Committee hosted two panels that highlighted regional diversity and complicated community diasporic narratives. This is particularly true of the session *Black & Immigrant in the Bay Area—Not a Single Story*, organized by Martha Saavedra. The session convened representatives from several Bay Area organizations that serve, support, and advocate for the local neo-African diaspora. The discussion underscored the idiosyncrasy of diasporic communities in California due to their distance from the continent and proximity to other global diasporas. The inclusion of these and other practitioners throughout the meeting was also a welcome reminder of the opportunities for collaboration outside academia. Similarly, the emerging scholar panel, organized by Local Arrangements Committee member Christian Alvarado, engaged ideas around inter-regional

collaboration, particularly in contextualizing West Coast scholarship in terms of the historical relationships between Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific world.

It is interesting to note that over 30 percent of Annual Meeting attendees were emerging scholars (defined as currently pursuing a terminal degree or within five years of completion). Their participation reflects ASA's commitment to network development and its expansion of targeted programs and mentorship since the revitalization of the Emerging Scholars Network (ESN) in 2021. The multidisciplinary, multinational ESN Executive Council convened two topical sessions showcasing incipient research on Black migration, globalized media, and intergenerational traumas. The breadth of emerging scholar research presented in San Francisco was an impressive window onto the future of the field. Across four panels supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, approximately twenty scholars from the continent presented their groundbreaking research on unique topical panels, including two centered on science and technology. This year's science and technology call brought the complicated realities of the contemporary academic landscape to the fore. The Carnegie fellows' research on the applications, ethics, and aesthetics of AI and other burgeoning technologies was undeniably inspired and made a concise case for further collaboration between the arts, humanities, and sciences. This came just weeks after Heman Bekele, an Ethiopian-born teenager in Fairfax County, Virginia, was named America's Top Young Scientist for his invention of melanoma-treating soaps. Inspired by his birthplace and his desire to improve the daily lives (and survival rates) of equatorial residents disproportionately impacted by skin cancer and its cost-prohibitive treatments, Bekele's youthful success further illustrates why STEM fields and data science require humanistic approaches to problem solving at all ages. This is in sharp contrast to the tense political debates, academic freedom infringements, and austerity cuts that have humanities, social sciences, and even some humanistic sciences fighting for continued existence. While scholarly societies are impacted by the circumstances and cultures of higher education, their missions are less vulnerable to job training myopia and excessive pragmatism, making the Annual Meeting an ideal location for forging creative alliances and crafting balanced approaches.

Under current political and economic circumstances, some will argue that, as a vestige of Cold War funding, the field of African Studies can be expected to atrophy indefinitely. *African Presences* and ICAADS remind us, however, that the project of redefining the field is not a concession made for survival but rather an opportunity to welcome and collaborate with colleagues in departments which have yet to consider themselves a part of our community. The commitment of African studies to the deeper work of building an intersectional, inclusive, and vibrant global community is already making this twenty-first century project more visibly enriching for all.

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African presences underwrite the December 2023 issue of ASR. The issue opens with an article by Jia Hui Lee, Laura A. Meek, and Jacob Katumusiime, titled “Contested Truths Over COVID-19 in East Africa: Examining Opposition to Public Health Measures in Tanzania and Uganda.” In this article, the authors examine challenges to (and subversions of) state and global health responses to the pandemic. They problematize “disqualifying terms” such as “misinformation,” “fake news,” and “conspiracy theory,” arguing that such terms perpetuate socioeconomic and political inequities by silencing the well-founded distrust of governments and global institutions felt by marginalized populations. For Lee, Meek, and Katumusiime, “contestations of state public health directives became sites through which disenfranchised East Africans could challenge the hegemony and hypocrisy of authoritarian state power” and interrogate the persistent coloniality of global health imperatives.

The issue’s second article, “‘More than Disease’: Uncovering the Economic, Social, and Political Consequences of Sierra Leone’s COVID-19 Pandemic,” also regards the pandemic. The authors, Kristen E. McLean and Liza J. Malcolm, turn to West Africa, specifically Sierra Leone, where they examine the ramifications of the government’s strict containment measures for ordinary citizens. Drawing on data from interviews and on-the-ground observation in the country’s Kono District, the authors demonstrate the intense socioeconomic suffering caused by disruptions of economic activities and familial and social bonds following the state’s imposition of drastic restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. McLean and Malcolm conclude by calling for community-sensitive measures (rather than globally standardized pandemic control efforts), as well as a feminist approach to global health security, which “reorients the protection of vulnerable individuals in relation to the state and to epidemiological outcomes.”

The operations of power and control—concerns which underlie the first two articles’ examinations of the COVID-19 pandemic—are central to the issue’s next article, which is also about Sierra Leone. Kars de Bruijne’s “Chief or Big-Man Politics in Post-War Sierra Leone?” takes on Marshall Sahlins’ distinction between “chiefs” (who obtain authority through formalized, depersonalized institutions) and “big-men” (who derive control from personal influence and networks). Analyzing a database of nationally significant “big-men” in post-war Sierra Leone, de Bruijne questions the adequacy of the “big-man” frame for the country’s politics, suggesting that it impedes a rigorous appreciation of the role of formal institutions in the accrual of power and influence in the country.

“Gendering Counter-Terrorism: *Kunya* and the Silencing of Male Victims of CRSV in Northeastern Nigeria,” by Emeka Thaddues Njoku and Isaac Dery, is similarly concerned with expanding epistemological frames. The authors interrogate the silence of male victims of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in northern Nigeria and argue that, beyond much-discussed factors such as gender norms and a lack of agency, community-specific precepts (such as *kunya* in northern Nigeria) can further our understanding of the “invisibility” of male CRSV victims.

Humphrey Asamoah Agyekum returns us to the topics of power and control in “‘We Are not into Politics, but Politics Is into Us’: The Politicization of the Ghana Armed Forces Through Patronage Exchanges between Political Elites and Military Leaders.” Agyekum examines different strategies—including patronage exchanges, biased recruitment practices, and promises of improved infrastructure and service conditions—with which Ghana’s major political parties have attempted to compromise the military and weaken or appropriate its influence. The author further shows the detrimental effects of such politicization on dynamics within the barracks and on military morale in general.


The next article is Alison Okuda’s “Black Power, Raw Soul, and Race in Ghana.” Okuda discusses the influence of Black Power in Ghana and shows how it became, for young Ghanaians, not only about the African American fight for civil rights, but also a way to challenge colonialism and imperialism as well as to forge pan-African connections. “The importance of Black Power politics,” Okuda surmises, “lies in how Ghanaians voiced pride in their blackness, even while politically Ghana felt sometimes as if it were falling apart.”

The Ghanaian and African literary community fell apart on May 31, 2023, with the passing of the celebrated writer Ama Ata Aidoo. Her death predated the passing of her friend and colleague, the Kenyan Micere Mugo, who died on June 30, 2023. Like Mugo, whose contributions to African studies were extolled in the September issue of *ASR*, Aidoo was a trailblazer who theorized women’s issues as political issues in her literary oeuvre spanning poetry, drama, prose, and nonfiction. Whether it is in *No Sweetness Here and other Stories*, or *Anowa*, or any of the other texts she produced over her distinguished writing career, Aidoo pressed female equality as central to African development. To posit her feminism is to appreciate only one aspect of the lifework of Aidoo, who was also critical of colonialism and the failures of post-independence politics and challenged Africans to grapple with their involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. A chronicler of African cultural dislocation in the diaspora, she traveled widely and left an indelible mark in the global cultural sphere. The December issue of *ASR* includes a dossier of tributes by leading scholars and critics of Aidoo’s work, many of whom became her friends.

The issue ends with a review essay and book and film reviews on recent works in African studies. In the review essay by Julia Ross Cummiskey, she examines a selection of texts from various disciplines, all focused on health

and healthcare in Africa, reflecting “the wide range of authors and audiences engaging in questions about what constitutes health, how it is achieved or undermined, and how the past has contributed to present conditions on the continent.”

As we close out the year following a successful annual meeting in San Francisco, the *African Studies Review* team invites article submissions and proposals for special forums (four to six papers on one theme or subject) to appear in future issues of the journal. We are also actively seeking book and film reviewers. Please contact the editorial team at managingeditor@africanstudiesreview.org with questions about submissions and reviewing for the journal. Happy Holidays and best wishes for 2024.

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