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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Africa Review: Thoughts about Intellectual Production

By Wendy Wilson-Fall, Chair, Africana Studies Program Oeschle Center for International Education, Lafayette College

Introduction

Few would disagree that the fate of Africa and its peoples depends on more than simply cash flow. For example, the destiny of Africans also depends on the uses perceived for money; the priorities that states set for national development, the success or failure of young regional institutions to mature into dependable, stable structures that assist infrastructure and economic growth, and the safeguarding of intellectual spaces and opportunities that promote robust conversations about diverse visions of an African future. Such conversations also depend on communication networks and the quality of public and private discourse about the meanings of what is past, what is happening now, and what can happen in the future.

This editorial discusses intellectual production by Africanist scholars from the continent, and about the broader community of African and other scholars in the U.S. writing about Africa or some region of Africa. The aim is to highlight some of the salient points that characterize how Africa is faring as a site of intellectual production, and how the subject of Africa (and/or its many sub-sets) is represented in intellectual production. This essay argues that, in fact, intellectual production by Africans or about Africa is booming, but an important challenge remains. That challenge is to multiply impact; to increase the number and quality of public responses to this swell of creativity and enlightened discourse. The 2018 African Studies Association Presidential Lecture by Professor Jean Allman (https://africanstudies.org/annual-meetings/asa-annual-meeting-videos/) inspires us to think again about the production of knowledge about Africa from diverse sources, and how that knowledge is used. We might reflect on how scholars based in the United States can play a role in increasing the visibility of African scholars and the plight of African educational institutions. How successful have we been in promoting new visions of Africa for populations in the West and on the continent? How is intellectual production related or not to supportive lobbying efforts in international institutions and among a broad base of stakeholders? Such work requires forays out of the "Ivory Tower" of academe, and networking beyond the university.

Research Africa is an example of collected efforts to extend the conversation beyond national or even continental borders. It provides a forum for new authors and seasoned scholars and a space for exposure for new publications that otherwise might not be known. This online publication is one of a new generation of projects that seek to build networks that are not defined by exclusive purposes or geographic position.

Location, location, location:

Research Centers in Africa and funds for scholarly activity and exchange, including national, bilateral and multilateral support, are to be found in all regions of the continent but still depend largely on external funding. Notwithstanding this fact, the rise of the digital world has rendered intellectual, scholarly contributions to public discourse useful and significant on local and transnational scales. Websites and listserves function as virtual gathering places that are linked to, but are not governed by, public or private universities. Such networks are increasingly important for young scholars on the continent as they seek diversity in information and strategies for developing and sustaining an intellectually vibrant life. It is worthwhile to consider that though university studies in Africa are often a mixed experience of trauma and elation with challenges of infrastructure, equipment, and other problems, young people in Africa still turn to the university with youthful optimism as a place where new futures can be imagined and planned. Despite problems of national governance and political stability, insufficient employment opportunities and pressing personal needs, young Africans still (by and large) think that education and training can lead to a better future for themselves and their communities. We can define this as a kind of social capital that should not, must not, be squandered.

Funding support from the post-industrial north, whether through national aid programs such as CREPOS (Germany), European Union, or partnerships between European and/or American and African universities is robust though uneven both geographically and in terms of the quality and consistency of support. Frustratingly, the state of universities in Africa has not improved dramatically over the past ten years in spite of sizeable increase in local demand, and most governments are still reeling from the effects of structural adjustment and the consequent reduction of public funds for higher education. International donors such as George Soros (Ashoka), the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation have, since the last decade, decided to focus on capacity building for higher education institutions and post-graduate research.

Within this environment it is disheartening to observe the poor physical condition of many African universities, the dearth of investment in library support, and ongoing problems with classroom size and availability, poor management of university budgets, inconsistent salaries for faculty, continuing strikes, and lack of planning with regard to the growing demand for higher education opportunities among youth. On the other hand, private universities and for-profit professional schools for business, tourism, computer and digital sciences have understood this gap as an opportunity. Such schools, profit and non-profit, have appeared in cities like Dakar, Senegal and elsewhere. These new institutions proliferate in African urban settings, but the quality of their programs is extremely uneven and mechanisms for monitoring their performance do not yet exist. They remain attractive due to lower matriculation costs and fewer strikes of either students or faculty, and their high registration numbers signal public response to continued colonial era national policies regarding university admittance requirements and human resource planning. Some African governments have bravely invested in regional technical schools and even universities, but the financial sustainability of these institutions remains questionable. In other cases, including South Africa and other countries in West and East Africa, intellectuals at African universities are singled out for

their views and sometimes punished in various direct and indirect ways so as to silence their voices.

In view of these problems, digital networks allow for greater exchange of ideas and methods among African scholars and scholars of other regions who are working in Africa. They do not constitute a parallel universe of the university experience, but they do provide outlets for those who have made it through some form of higher education. The representation of such networks online is not negligible, and include AfricaWrites.org, the African Book collective, and Apnet (The African Publishers' Network), which was founded in 1992 in Harare. Other important online resources are the very popular music and social network web sites such as OK Africa and africaisacountry.com that have become important mediators of cultural consumption. Although the internet has brought great information access, we should also note the gap between access to national higher education experiences and access to digital information and networks. This is, of course, not confined to Africa and it is a growing problem, for instance, in the United States. Those concerned with intellectual production are therefore called upon to seriously reflect on how the utility of education and critical thinking can be represented for the public good, in Africa as elsewhere.

On the other hand, the trans-national nature of the flow of information has done much to demystify the north to many young people in Africa, even though economic hardship and undeveloped economies continue to challenge the newly acquired wisdom African youth have acquired about the actual feasibility of living successfully in Europe or the Americas. According to conversations I have had with African youth on the continent and in the United States, immigration policy and racism are seen as the cause for reduced security in living in these locales, whether France, Italy, Spain, or the United States. This nuanced understanding of societies of the north has grown dramatically due to migration, access to the internet and low-cost telephone communications. Youth aspire to move north to complete university studies and to gain employment, but their views of the West have changed. It is no longer the ideal that it once was, although the north remains the site of producing income, if not ideas. These perceptions affect the questions young African academics eventually ask as scholars as well as their plans for the future. They remain invested in the political debates of their home countries.

In contrast, some tension is observable between the growing class of educated youth at home and national government ability to tolerate a larger educated public, whether that be in the context of relations with the press or in the exercise and pursuit of democratic governance. Scholars of migration have therefore identified economic hardship, lack of jobs, and related quality of life issues (for intellectuals) as major drivers of out-migration from African urban spaces.

African Brain Drain: Fears and Realities

The challenges of increasingly antagonistic immigration policies reveal a dynamic and evolving state of affairs that is in some cases creating a "boomerang effect" wherein there is a slow migration of African intellectuals back to their countries of origin or to other nations on the continent. As well, university-educated Africans tend to invest in their home communities and return sporadically to contribute to national debates and discourse on governance, educational policy, and politics. In today's setting the exchange of ideas across the continent and within African regions is unprecedented, as is the

current mobility of scholars and African students in general, who remain the most mobile student community globally, followed by the Chinese. The rise of black South Africa and its increasing impact on the black world in general and in Africa in particular is significant and promises to have long-term reverberations. Though representing a lamentable loss of direct participation at home, the geographically wide networks of African students, and the encounter of African scholars from diverse origins in American and European locales and institutions, still generates a much needed continental view of African challenges and possibilities, (coupled with availability of extensive statistical data) that has never before existed. It remains to be seen whether the mobile and instant nature of information flows of today will be enough to 'kick start' new ways of using knowledge for the public good. There is no doubt that the emergence of institutions such as CODESRIA, the Africa Fund, Africa Rising and other continent-wide organizations has made an important contribution to the way transnational intellectual discourse has evolved over the last several years. Scholars have access to ways of communicating and planning, which were not available just twenty years ago. At the same time, African scholars are now in dialogue with counterparts in Chinese, Arab, Latin American and Indian scholarly networks.

The African brain drain that so many wrote about in the 1980s and 1990s still exists but is mitigated by digital networks that provide publishing opportunities, forums for specialized discussions and debates, and information access through online reports, blogs, and vlogs. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to present an inventory of these resources, it is important to signal their role in the exchange of ideas, facilitating research and intellectual production. Perhaps more critical now is the role of African public and private agencies in the engagement of African talent.

Constraints and Bad News:

Higher education support suffers from decreased or diffused funding from most Europe partners as well as institutions such as the World Bank, diminished visibility and importance of Africa in U.S. and other Western foreign policy strategies; and the attack on foreign aid for secondary and post-secondary institutions that reflects Western priorities for African development. The rise of populism in Europe and the United States, along with Islamophobia, has affected and will continue to affect foreign support for the academy in Africa. In addition, the loss of freedom of travel affects the plans of researchers needing to consult archives in the West. The potential negative impact of public health issues on the productivity of the younger generation of scholars in Africa must also be accounted for, whether in terms of insufficient medical infrastructure or the spread of infectious diseases. All of these issues should be factored into discussions about the future of intellectual production on the continent.

It is clear that civil strife and militarism create unstable environments that prevent the growth of local networks and institutions that support intellectual life, even while the solutions depend on committed, creative, and engaged thinkers. To date, African intellectuals are only beginning to be seen by national governments as important resources in strategic planning. Scholars are often not perceived as people who can bring important knowledge and skills to national problem-solving. At the same time, private think tanks in Africa have few funding possibilities, and can also be perceived by government as antagonistic and potential targets. In this context, the role of foundations

such as Ashoka and Rockefeller has been critical in funding the work of upcoming African leaders and thinkers, and in demonstrating the kinds of roles intellectual workers might play in Africa's development. Nevertheless, the imagining of successful African futures remains the work of the African intellectual and his or her affiliate counterparts, and depends on their ability to remain beyond the control of special interests. Here again is another opportunity for collaborative steps towards constructing spaces for the exchange of ideas and the furthering of robust public discourse.

Journals:
Today there are a variety of journals produced in and outside of Africa that cover an extensive array of topics. In terms of the hard sciences, there is *African Journal of Emergency Medicine,* the *Journal of African Earth Sciences*, *Scientific African* and many other journals in social sciences and liberal arts.

Scientific African is owned by the Next Einstein Forum (NEF) and operated by the NEF. On the Community of Scientists' website, the journal is described as follows:

> *Scientific African* is a peer reviewed, open access, inter- and multidisciplinary scientific journal that is dedicated to expanding access to African research, increasing intra-African scientific collaboration, and building academic research capacity in Africa. The journal aims to provide a modern, highly-visible platform for publishing pan-African research and welcomes submissions from all scientific disciplines in… broad categories, including but not limited to Chemistry, Economics and Business, Information Technology and Engineering, Environmental and Geosciences, Life and Health Sciences, Conservation and Sustainability Studies, and Mathematics.

The Editor-in-Chief of this journal is Benji Gyampo, who is at the Department of Fisheries and Watershed Management, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, at Kumasi, Ghana. According to their website at https://www.journals.elsevier.com/scientific-african/editorial-board, more than half of the editorial board members are African scholars, representing a wide geographic and disciplinary scope. Among them are African scientists from Ghana, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, as well as scholars of African birth who are currently working in China, Canada, and other locations in the south. The journal's editorial board welcomes submissions of full text research articles, reviews but also publishes invited perspectives and critical policy papers.

It is well known that journals focusing on Africa are produced in almost every European capital, as well as the United States, and many of these can be accessed through JSTOR. It is also clear that those working in the hard sciences face different issues than those in the liberal arts; speaking against environmental policies, water management strategies and marketing of critical resources can bring an uncomfortable spotlight at home and internationally. However, in both the hard sciences, the social sciences and

other liberal arts areas, African intellectuals have found allies from around the globe. The problem is that in our current era, increasing economic inequities and populism have put all intellectual discourse in danger on some level, including among scholars in Europe and America. As mentioned above, this includes the problematic perceptions of the inherent value of intellectual pursuits.

Indicators of evolving continental conversations about Africa's future, the question of "African modernity," and the role of the intellectual are abundant. Leading thinkers include Felwyn Sarr, Abdourahmane Idrissa, Achilles Mbembe, Toyin Falola, and Paul Zeleza; each of whom have had significant impact on public and academic discourse concerning African futures, Afropolitanism, and Afrofuturism. They have also engaged debates that concern people in Africa and the diverse community of the African diaspora new and old, including Afropessimism, the questions of gender and sexuality, and the utility of European models of development.

Others have specifically engaged human rights such as Fatou Kine Camara and Ismail Rachid. These thinkers were preceded by many others known to those familiar with African intellectual history, such as KiZerbo, Mudimbe, Mazrui, and Tambo, to name a few. My point here is that in spite of innumerable challenges and erratic support, African intellectual life has continued to address new approaches to old and emerging problems. I admit to an optimistic perspective in this, but I argue that optimism, coupled with pragmatism (if one can imagine the two co-existing) are necessary to imagine solutions and new ways of being.

Support in the United States:

American universities, such as Michigan State, have active African Studies Centers and contribute significantly to scholarly work on Africa. Michigan State manages an African language website and an Islam in Africa online resource, as well as Matrix hosted H-Net Africa, H-Net West Africa, H-Net Slavery and other listserves. There are twelve African Studies Centers, supported by Title VI (U.S. Department of Education Area Studies programs) funding, but this funding has been reduced in the last ten years. Outstanding programs include but are not limited to those at the University of Texas, Austin; Duke University, Howard University, Boston University, UCLA, and the University of Florida. In Canada, York University in Toronto, University of Toronto and McGill University have produced many scholars of Africa.

Each of these programs has also provided critical mentorship to up-and-coming scholars. As well, many schools not associated with Title VI provide vital programs for the study of Africa and its diasporas. Within the United States the tension between African and African Diaspora Studies, especially Black Studies as a subset of this category, continues to be a problem. It is interesting to note that the research itself has pushed the package, as it were, in terms of the inter-relatedness of these fields of study. The tensions that continue to exist can be understood as manifestations of the larger political environment in the United States rather than as a contradiction in the findings of current research in these fields. Nevertheless, the antagonisms that do persist are also representative of the larger problem that has been noted earlier regarding scholar ability to *critically* affect the larger public understanding of Africa and its history. Providing credible online sources of information that are accessible and open to everyone remains an important factor in making this possible.

Before bringing this editorial to a close, RART continues to encourage emerging and established scholars to write reviews, review essays, obituaries, and reports for this platform. For this issue, twelve contributions were secured and they appear in English, French, and Arabic. Apart from the editorial, there is one obituary and seven reviews; all of these are in English. In addition to these, there is one French review and two Arabic reviews. RART hopes that these reviews and other contributions will continue to stimulate an interest in what its reviewers are able to share and the team looks forward to other inputs later in the year.

Acknowledgment

The Editor-in-Chief once again wishes to express his appreciation to each and every RART member for their inputs at different stages of the process. He wants to register his heartfelt gratitude to both professor Wendy Wilson-Fall who wrote this issue's editorial and for professor Mbaye Lo who had been involved at various stages editorially. And he also desires to record his thanks to RA's team that includes the assistance of Madison Cullinan who assisted in editing this particular issue. And RART also wishes to record its thanks to the African Books Collective for its unrestricted collaboration with RAR reviewers.