



African Studies Initiative

Inaugural Public Symposium: Rethinking African Studies

**April 7–8, 2016
University of Minnesota**

The African Studies Initiative (ASI), a University of Minnesota Title VI African Studies National Resource Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, will convene a public symposium on Rethinking African Studies April 7–8, 2016, at the University’s Twin Cities campus. The Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change (ICGC) will cosponsor the symposium.

Our intent in this symposium is to deconstruct and to pluralize the idea of “Africa” that subtends both African Studies as such and Africanist scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, as these fields are conceived in the U.S. academy today. Equally important, we seek to deconstruct and to pluralize the notion of “study” that informs African Studies in the United States: that is, to consider how we might decolonize the intellectual geography of Africa in the U.S. university by shifting away from constructions of knowledge *about* Africa, transacted largely through the epistemological eye of the global North, toward more dynamic co-creations of knowledge *with* African scholars and African scholarship.

Our focus will be on Africa in two dimensions: time and space. We ask: *When* is “Africa”? Can we imagine new periodizations of the continent and its diasporas? Should we do away with these altogether? Why Africa now? Do the continent and its diasporas make particular claims on our attention at the present cultural, economic, historical, and political moment? And we ask: *Where* is “Africa”? Should we understand specific forms of knowledge as “African”? How does the term “Africa” resonate elsewhere? To whom is it useful? To these dimensions we might add a third, no less vital: language. Indeed, central to our efforts to reimagine reigning conceptions of Africa is a focus on the perilous yet promising task of translation.

We seek a critical engagement with the epistemological and methodological implications of disciplinary reason for the production of knowledge on and in Africa. How do we account for the complicity of many academic disciplines with the regimes of truth and modes of evidence that underwrote slavery, colonialism, and other forms of rule, power, and exploitation whose racialized and gendered legacies haunt the present? Does the continent that supposedly had no history, according to Hegel and other European philosophers, call into question our assumptions about history and its epistemologies? We also seek new modes of inter/disciplinarity. Can a critical humanities that re-envision the world from African perspectives, for example, enable a better understanding of what it means to be human in the face of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, the implications of rapid technological change and the challenges of globalization, the pervasiveness of neoliberal economics, and the devastating impact of modern human activity on the environment?

This event will bring together faculty across disciplines—within and beyond African Studies, the ASI and ICGC communities, the University of Minnesota and other institutions—to explore these and other vital questions. Building on the 2015 ASI conversation “What Was ‘Africa’ Then, What Is ‘Africa’ Now?”, we will engage the force fields within which U.S. study of Africa has emerged and continues to unfold. We stand at an important crossroads between the heterogeneous pasts and the many possible futures of African Studies, in the U.S.

academy and beyond. While the institutionalization of African Studies at many U.S. universities from the 1950s onward was tied to the establishment of area studies centers, scholarship on Africa and on other world regions at the University of Minnesota has tended to color outside the lines of area studies, even when the University has been the beneficiary of Title VI awards for the study of those regions. Like its Title VI-funded predecessors, the ASI pushes the boundaries of “Africa” even as it makes the continent and its diaspora a focal point of analysis across the disciplines. We recognize that the history of African Studies exceeds and challenges its institutionalization in the U.S. academy. Indeed, the field has long been both area- and anti-area studies. At Northwestern University, the anthropologist Melville Herskovits organized a faculty seminar in African Studies as early as 1927, and two decades later, in 1948, the first African Studies program in the United States. Yet, as the historian James C. McCann has suggested, the contributions of African American intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois to new understandings of Africa in the United States—contributions that spanned 1900 through his death in 1963—predate or parallel those of Herskovits and other Euro-American scholars who constituted the academic discipline. Moreover, as McCann notes, even as African Studies in the U.S. university—funded first by the Ford Foundation, then under Title VI by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA)—assumed the economically and politically strategic form of “area studies” in the Cold War 1950s and 1960s, the African continent continued to buck area studies paradigms, as many African peoples had yet to wrest their independence from European empires. In 1980 the U.S. Department of Education absorbed NDEA-funded area studies centers, including those in African Studies, and funded these as National Resource Centers under the Title VI program we know today. Contestation of African Studies paradigms, however, has never ended. To cite one vital example, the post-1960s emergence of Black Studies, African American Studies, and African Diaspora Studies programs in the United States further unsettled the conceptual and geographic parameters of both “Africa” and the field of African Studies itself, whether by reopening “Africa” to diasporic as well as continental definition, thereby reaffirming the global conceptions of “Africa” at play in pan-Africanisms since the late nineteenth century; by challenging the complicity of African Studies programs with neocolonial and neoimperial regimes; or by questioning the marginalization of Black scholars in the field.

“Africa” now is less and less taken for granted by thinkers and writers in Africa itself. As the Africanists Edward A. Alpers and Allen F. Roberts have noted, African-born intellectuals such as Paulin Hountondji have questioned whether one should speak of “African philosophy.” To that example, we might add novelist Taiye Selasi’s recent provocative rejection of the term “African literature” and call for its integration into various world genres—without the qualifier “African,” which perpetuates a sense of difference and hierarchy (as the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty has underscored). On the politics of “African languages,” intellectuals have been divided: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o upholds their distinction from those of non-African provenance, while Chinua Achebe famously included languages such as English in the African fold. In the face of such wavering designations of so many academic disciplines and even languages as “African,” should we continue to speak of African Studies? Does “Africa” risk erasure, as a specific geographic and above all conceptual space, if we don’t invoke it? How does the term “African Studies” enable or disable us?

Alongside the idea of “Africa,” scholars are questioning the forms that knowledge production on Africa assumes and interrogating the institutional contexts that forge African history and memory. Writing from South Africa, for example, Brenda Cooper has argued that reigning Euro-U.S. genres of scholarship place limits on *who* can be heard in African Studies, and *how*. How are questions of form and method entangled with the subjectivities and the power positions of scholars of Africa, both on the continent and in the United States? Can new forms or methods redefine African Studies today? Are there lessons to be drawn from the ways in which, for example, tensions between South Africa’s historically Black and historically white universities echo or mirror differences between the academy in the global South and the academy in the global North?

We will consider the challenges posed to African Studies by such questions of form and context, by the critique of history and of other forms of disciplinary reason, by postcolonial approaches, and by theory from the South.