

**59th Annual Meeting
of the African Studies Association**

**Imagining Africa at the Center: Bridging Scholarship,
Policy, and Representation in African Studies**

December 1-3, 2016
Washington Marriott Wardman Park,
Washington, D.C.

The African Studies Association annual meeting is the largest gathering of Africanist scholars in the world. With an attendance of about 2,000 scholars and professionals, the conference offers the following:

- More than 300 panels and roundtables
- Plenary events featuring keynote speakers
- Awards ceremony and dance party
- Institutional and organizational receptions and meetings
- An international exhibit hall
- Screenings of award-winning movies from Africa, and/or by African producers

2016 Theme Statement

Pervasive popular perceptions of Africa in news, advertising, humanitarianism, development discourse, and political rhetoric frequently collapse the continent's diversity, history, and complexity. This may happen at the global scale, wherein Africa is just another development landscape; but also it operates across regions when, for example, the peoples of Mali, Kenya and Angola are conflated as one. From its inception in Chicago more than half a century ago, the African Studies Association has relentlessly confronted, engaged, and resisted tropes of Africa and Africans. While media portrayals rarely reflect a nuanced understanding of the region, policymakers and practitioners appear to be increasingly aware of the need for the greater involvement of Area Studies experts in foreign policy discussions. This "progress" has been aided and abetted by Africanist social media. Public intellectuals, artists, and writers critique simplistic assumptions and unpack and disassemble continent-as-a-nation representations.

Today we again see Africa wielded as a unit for research and policy just as much as it becomes a framework synonymous with troubles and dangers. The Ebola epidemic, arriving swiftly on the heels of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, has provided ample ammunition to those all too eager to reassert the continent as a vector of disease and pestilence. Study abroad programs were canceled in Ghana and Senegal, but also distant Botswana. The eruption of violent extremist organizations, from Boko Haram to Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab, provides a framework whereby Africa is recast as the new crucible of terrorism and insecurity. US AFRICOM's programs now operate in more than 38 African nations. Just as news media as well as the development and humanitarian industries reify Africa as a theater for problem-solving, African states embrace the collapsing rhetoric to decry interference in "African values," promising "African solutions" to "African problems." The African Union denounces the fledgling International Criminal Court's aggressive pursuit of sitting African leaders. Protecting and preserving "African culture" has become a rallying cry for conservative political and religious leaders seeking to hold back artistic, literary, cultural, and political movements for gender equality and sexual diversity.

African historical scholarship provided some of the earliest accounts of how the continent serves as a canvas for experimentation. Historians documented how the largest forced migration in human history involved centuries of trial and error with methods and technologies of labor coercion, mass transportation, and disease mitigation. The ending of the transatlantic trade ushered in models for emancipation, abolition, commerce, exploration and "discovery." The inception of formal colonial rule, first in the south and north of the continent, but ultimately encompassing its entirety, involved the transplantation of European hierarchies and orders. Anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists have described the invention of traditions and new forms of authority, gender, medicine, labor coercion, resource extraction, and environmental degradation. But the creative arts and scholarship also actively resist Africa-wide tropes and memes. Throughout the continent and beyond, museums and other artistic representations strive to evidence regional variety, ethnic difference, linguistic diversity, and cultural distinction.

How do we build on this record? What new perspectives might literatures and performance cultures offer, were they no longer tagged as post-colonial or framed as "the voice" of Africa? What might economic or agricultural development goals look like in Africa if European or North American experiences were not held up as the gold standard? Can we imagine policy and representation informed by a deep interdisciplinary understanding of the African context? What might it be like to have health, education, human rights, security, or environmental policies based on a significant understanding of the places they order, regulate and govern? So much policy making is based on models and practices developed in one part of the world and then imported to another without sufficient regard for the new context. Seemingly placeless and ahistorical approaches are in fact Eurocentric vernaculars dressed up as global universals. Experimentation with neoliberal economic reform in Latin America in the 1970s was transplanted to African nations in the 1980s as a finished product. Today we are witnessing the commercialization of African agriculture at a breakneck pace with an emphasis on "scaling up," code for Fordist reproduction without respect for locale.

While models, theories and generalizations are needed to make sense of the world, the African context in which these are implemented is too often secondary. We need to move beyond the simple recognition that international norms are routinely based on Anglo-American standards or how policy developed elsewhere is deposited on Africa. In the past few years, we have witnessed the birth of the African Studies Association of Africa, testament to the increasing academic capacity and dynamism on the continent. Increasingly, writers, actors, and musicians spurn recognition beyond the continent in favor of African venues and festivals. African musicians, writers, and artists continue to comment on African and international issues from their distinct vantage points and challenge representation of Africa and Africans. African Studies scholars must also learn how to better engage bureaucrats and legislators on the issues of the day. Western politicians eschew international scholarship, yet still feel the need to periodically engage in 'bull in the china shop' interventions in the African context. The need to interweave academy, policy, and practice is arguably now more pressing than ever as funding for Area Studies research declines precipitously.

Source: <http://www.africanstudies.org/annual-meetings> [retrieved June 17, 2016, 11:58 PM]