



# BULLETIN

Winter 1996

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## *The Ghettoization Debate: Africa, Africans and African Studies*

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## Letter from ACAS Co-Chairs

By Merle Bowen and Bill Martin

This issue of the ACAS *Bulletin* is comprised of materials relating to the current debate over the "Ghettoization of African Studies." The debate was triggered by Professor Philip Curtin's opinion page article in the March 3, 1995 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Curtin's public airing of privately-discussed sentiments triggered a series of vigorous public responses, including: letters to *The Chronicle*, an African Studies Association (ASA) statement, a tempestuous Roundtable at the 1995 Orlando meetings of the ASA, and numerous private and internet discussions. Not since 1969, when Black scholars interrupted the 1969 Montreal ASA meetings and launched their own organization, the African Heritage Studies Association, has the Africanist community witnessed such an uproar.

While focused upon racial hierarchies and power in the Africanist community, these discussions are interwoven with parallel national and global debates. At issue is not only the meaning and representation of Africa within the academy, but the place of Africa and African peoples in the national political arena. The publication of these materials in the *Bulletin*, as agreed at the 1995 ACAS membership meeting, thus represents the continuation of a long ACAS tradition: to provide a political forum for scholar activists, something not possible within the non-political constraints of the African Studies Association. We thank ACAS Board member Michael West for compiling these materials and obtaining the necessary copyright permissions from the original copyright holders of the printed materials republished here, including Professor Curtin for his original article, *The Chronicle of Higher*

*Education* for the letters to the editor and the article by Denise K. Magner, and ASA for the ASA Board statement.

We trust our colleagues within the larger community of scholar activists, as well as our members, will find this compilation useful as we struggle to move forward into the post-Cold War, post-civil rights epoch.

We encourage members to contribute materials for future publication in the *Bulletin* that would advance this discussion.

This bulletin also reports a moment of great sadness: the death of past ACAS Co-Chair Jean Sindab. A tireless fighter against racism at home and abroad, Jean will be deeply missed. We thank Christine Root and David Wiley for their tribute. We must also relate the death of Harold Wolpe, who had in past years worked with ACAS. While in Cape Town this past summer we met with Harold, and watched with amazement at the exuberant energy he brought, as usual, to the task of constructing a research community dedicated to the formation of a new educational system. As with Jean, he leaves a legacy of inspiration for us all.

In closing we urge you to return your membership renewal forms and payments which all members should have recently received. If you have lost or did not receive the renewal forms, you may find copies on the ACAS homepage on the world-wide-web:

<http://www.prairienet.org/acas/>

The web page also contains continuously updated information on ACAS activities and campaigns, such as the campaign for sanctions on the Nigerian regime (e.g. the most recent ACAS letter included in this issue), as well as those of sister organizations.

## **In Memoriam: Co-Chairperson Jean Sindab, Former ACAS Co-Chair**

**By Christine Root and David Wiley**

ACAS lost a valuable long-term worker for Africa and changes in U.S. policy toward Africa in the death on January 7 of Dr. Jean Sindab. In 1992 and 1993, Jean served as ACAS Co-Chairperson. She had a special concern for linking the racial and economic justice struggles in Southern Africa with those in the United States, especially in the African American community.

Jean died of the cancer with which she had struggled these past 12-18 months. She was 51. The funeral service was held at Riverside Church in New York on January 12.

The ACAS community has lost a compassionate, caring, and militant worker in the struggle for racial and economic justice around the world. National Council of Churches General Secretary Joan Campbell said, "A brilliant woman, she gave her life for freedom and justice. She brought a joy of life and an optimism rooter in her Christian faith to every setting. She believed people would learn to live together and to love one another. Just days before she died, Jean said to me, 'There are worse things than dying - life filled with pain and poverty.'"

Jean served as Executive Director of the Washington Office on Africa 1980-86, where she helped organize many of the key legislative and publicity campaigns in support of sanctions on South Africa and freedom throughout Southern Africa from WOA. She completed her Ph.D. on Southern Africa in Political Science at Yale in 1984, having received two master's degrees in international relations and political science there and her B.A. (cum laude) from Hunter College.

Then 1986-91, she was the Executive Secretary of the Programme to Combat Racism at the World Council of Churches in Geneva - focusing on Southern Africa. She also led campaigns there on women in untouchable castes, women facing racism and sexism as a double burden, and on the needs of indigenous peoples worldwide.

From 1992, she had served as Director for Environmental and Economic Justice/Hunger Concerns at the National Council of Churches in New York. In 1988, she worked briefly as Senior Africa Advisor to the Jesse Jackson Presidential Campaign.

Recently, she had been appointed to a Task Force of the President's Council on Sustainable Development. During her very active career, she also had worked with the King Center for Non-Violence, Rainbow Coalition, UN Council for Namibia, UN Center against Apartheid, UN Institute for Namibia, the Peace Development Fund, the Third World Women's Project of the Institute for Policy Studies.

Jean's family has asked that, in lieu of flowers, donations in remembrance of her be sent to the SISANA FUND, a fund which she established to care for children in need. Donations should be sent to the "Sisana Fund," Ecumenical Development Initiative, National Council of Churches, 9th Floor, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York, 10115.

## Ghettoizing African History

By Philip Curtin

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 1995

I am troubled by increasing evidence of the use of racial criteria in filling faculty posts in the field of African history. Few, if any, university administrators claim that each field of history is subject to an ethnic qualification--that only those of English descent, for example, can teach English history. At the annual meeting late last year of the African Studies Association, it was evident that many administrators nevertheless advertise positions in African history in ways that make it clear that the job will go only to someone either African or of African descent. Colleagues in African-American history tell me that a similar preference for African Americans operates in that field as well.

This strategy ghettoizes African history, by making the field an enclave within the university set aside for black scholars. The flip side of the strategy is the *de facto* requirement that black historians must teach African or African-American history, no matter what their actual field of specialization.

This form of intellectual apartheid has been around for several decades, but it appears to have become much more serious in the past few years, to the extent that white scholars trained in African history now have a hard time finding jobs. I know of at least one university where faculty members teaching the history of Africa discourage applications for graduate study from white students. Most of us with graduate programs in African history accept doctoral candidates regardless of race, but many of us advise our white graduate students to have an alternate field of specialization as a form of security in a ghettoized job market.

African history has long held a peculiar

position in the historical profession in both Europe and the United States. Africa was the last continent to have its history taken seriously elsewhere. Before World War II, the history of North Africa was included with that of the Middle East. The history of tropical Africa was the history of European colonizers, while South African history was limited to the history of the white minority in that country. In the United States, the only universities that taught African history were the then-segregated black colleges, where it was considered a part of "Negro History." It was taught there largely because of the efforts of Carter G. Woodson, founder of the *Journal of Negro History* and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Even so, few Americans of any color carried out historical research in Africa.

After World War II, the serious academic study of Africa had its first real beginnings in England and in France, as those countries began to move away from their colonial relationship with Africa. Study of the continent then began in tropical Africa itself, with the foundation of the first universities there in the 1950's. The United States followed, with the first graduate seminars to train doctoral candidates in African history established at Boston University and the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1957. After that, growth was rapid. By 1970, African history was an established field of historical study, with several hundred faculty positions at American universities. Some were filled by new Ph.D.s specifically trained in that field and some by "retreads" whose doctoral study had been in some other field.

The rise of African history in the United

States paralleled the rise of the civil-rights movement. Most of the early historians of Africa were white, but they were at least on the fringes of the movement and many had a general sympathy for the underdog, whether for disenfranchised African Americans or for the history of a continent that had been neglected because of racism and cultural chauvinism. Yet the field never attracted many African Americans. The founders of the first graduate seminars were white scholars from other fields. At Wisconsin, for example, I helped start the first seminar in African history, coming to the subject from Caribbean history. My colleague at Boston University came from anthropology. For some years, comparatively few black Americans went into academic life in any case; the most able African-American graduates sought careers in fields such as law, medicine, and business. Those who went into history rarely looked to Africa, preferring instead to study the history of their own community. After all, their connection to Africa seemed very distant.

African-born blacks who came to this country for graduate training, however, had a strong interest in African history, and many stayed on here after they finished their graduate work. Thus today the majority of the black faculty members teaching African history in this country were born in Africa.

Starting in the 1980s, two new interests appeared in American universities. Global awareness increased the demand for international studies of all kinds. At the Johns Hopkins University, where I teach, we have international programs within the disciplines of anthropology, political science, history, and economics--along with a minor in "global studies," administered by the interdepartmental Institute of Global Studies.

The second and parallel interest was a growing ethnic consciousness, sometimes identified as the "rising tide of cultural pluralism." This has occurred not only in the

United States but in the rest of the world as well. Students of various ethnic groups are demanding the right to study their own particular heritage.

These two factors have helped create more university posts in African history, but they also have helped create demands from African-American students that courses in African history be tailored to meet the concerns of contemporary African Americans. Students also often demand that courses be taught by African Americans or, when not many African-American candidates are available, by Africans, with whom students want to feel a common heritage. When these demands are put side by side with the laudable efforts by colleges and universities to increase the number of black faculty members, the result is often the ghettoization of African history. If students want someone of African descent to teach African history, after all, that seems a logical place to concentrate on recruiting black faculty members.

Because overt racial requirements for job applicants are illegal, it is hard to know just how many of the current positions in African history have been restricted to African-born or African-American candidates. An informal survey conducted in the 1993-94 academic year by a professor of African history indicated that about half the new openings in African history were reserved for black candidates. A university might start with a preference for an African-American scholar. If such a candidate cannot be found, it might hire an African; failing that, a white person. Or it might drop the search for a year. Sometimes an opening is advertised in a way that makes the racial requirement clear.

In October, for example, Duke University announced an opening in African history, stating: "Funding for the position comes from the President's special fund for minority recruitment." Many other universities make similar announcements. A conversation I had

with a member of the Duke search committee make it clear that "minority" was simply a code word for "black." If the department decides to raid an African university to fill the position, the new staff member will only become a minority when he or she arrives on the Duke campus. This kind of raid has been occurring too often in recent years. It produces affirmative action that does little to help disadvantaged African Americans, while at the same time creating a "brain drain" from Africa.

For Africa, the decline in the quality of its universities over the past two or three decades has been sad to see. A half dozen of the best African historians under 50 years of age are now pursuing their careers in the United States or Canada. The older generation of historians in Africa, the first generation trained in the West, has now largely retired. The absence of others at the peak of their research potential will make it hard to maintain the standards that the leaders of the field have set.

I do not mean that we should discourage able scholars from coming to the United States from Africa. But I believe that we must not automatically favor immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean over white Americans, in the name of affirmative action, if the latter are of greater ability. The lack of a genuinely competitive market for historians specializing in Africa means that the quality of work in the field is likely to decline, as some able white graduate students are pushed into other areas of history.

It is hard to know how to stem this tide. But one way would be for scholars to press administrators to work for more genuine multiculturalism. Doing so could include encouraging African-American graduate students to study all kinds of history, instead of pressing them to study African-American or African history. We could continue by using affirmative action to integrate rather than ghettoize the universities, by re-committing ourselves to recruit black faculty members for

posts outside African and African-American history, and by hiring qualified whites, as well as blacks, to teach those subjects. Above all, we must honestly acknowledge what is happening. We need to guard against the often-unconscious racism that has pushed black scholars into academic ghettos.

Philip D. Curtin is Professor of History at the Johns Hopkins University

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## Letters to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

April 7, 1995

To the Editor:

Philip D. Curtin's editorial "Ghettoizing African History" (*Point of View*, March 3, 1995) is a truly amazing document. Never before have black scholars of Africa, as a group, been singled out and publicly disparaged. Essentially, Curtin argues that academic institutions are using "racial criteria" to hire black historians over more qualified white competitors, and that the consequent "ghettoizing" of African history is leading to a flight of white scholars from the field and an attendant decline in intellectual standards. We reject these claims.

Professor Curtin's intervention is sweeping and all-encompassing; yet it is neither factually nor logically grounded--so much so that it constitutes a departure from elementary professional ethics. Strong statement. Why do we make it? We make it because Philip Curtin is one of the most well-known historians of Africa in the United States, and his cavalier use of gossip and innuendo reflects poorly on our area of specialization. Furthermore, his repeated citation of unnamed colleagues and reference to "most of us" and "many of us" suggest that the editorial is not merely a personal statement, but rather the conclusions of a distinct group of Africanist scholars. We can only assume from the internal evidence that this group must be composed entirely of white scholars of Africa. If this is so, it would be most disturbing.

The editorial inflames an already highly-charged discourse over race with an inverted use of terms such as "ghettoizing" and "apartheid." For Curtin to suggest that black

scholars, of all people, have somehow encouraged or benefited from isolation from the rest of the academic community is ludicrous and irresponsible. At their worst, his claims resonate strongly with a growing national trend that gives license and encouragement to racist, sexist and xenophobic utterances.

Curtin's intimation that whites are being driven out of African history by a horde of black pseudo-scholars with little to offer outside of the politics of racial identity--a spectacle so dramatically portrayed in the illustration accompanying his editorial--would be comical if it were not such a cruel inversion of reality. Surely Curtin, who was present at the post-World War II redrafting of the study of Africa in the United States, could not have had black people in mind, at least not as victimizers, when he wrote that "intellectual apartheid has been around for several decades" in African historical studies.

To be sure, the racial and gender composition of the historical profession in general has changed over the last quarter century. There is, however, no evidence that positions in African history are "reserved" for black candidates, the "informal survey" of Curtin's anonymous colleagues notwithstanding.

Nor has the black presence in African studies unduly disturbed the distribution of power and resources, most of which are still controlled by the men of Curtin's generation and their first set of Ph.D. students. The major professorships in African history at the leading research universities in the country, as well as the directorships of the top African Studies Centers are held largely by individuals fitting this description. Moreover, not a single mainstream Africanist academic journal in

North America (or Europe) has a black scholar as a working editor. Similarly, there are no black editors of the principal Africanist book series, such as the ones at Cambridge University Press and Heinemann. Little wonder, then, that there are so few blacks on the committees of the foundations that fund much of the research done by US-based scholars in Africa; after all, membership on these committees tends to reflect the power dynamics of the field.

If there have been exclusionary practices in African history, therefore, black scholars cannot be blamed for them.

Among the most spurious of Curtin's assertions is the disparaging role he assigns to earlier black scholars who made the study of Africa the object of their research. While acknowledging that African history was taught only in historically black universities prior to World War II, Curtin fails to mention the postwar fate of the intellectual tradition associated with Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois and William Leo Hansberry. These and other black scholars, building on initiatives that had their antecedents in the nineteenth century, reconstructed African history as part of an attempt to demonstrate Africa's contribution to humankind in the midst of a chorus of racist denials of any African involvement in the emergence of world civilizations.

After the war, however, the contributions of black scholars to African history were forgotten or ignored by the new field of "African studies," which was based in historically white universities and dominated by white academics. The decolonization of European empires in Africa, coming as it did during the height of the Cold War, posed new challenges for America's conception of its "national security." Policy makers demanded background and up-to-date information on the emergent nation-states of Africa. Hence African studies was constructed by an alliance of academics, private foundations and government agencies. It is this relationship that nurtured the growth in African history and

African studies in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, not Africanists on the "fringes" of the civil rights struggle with "sympathy for the underdog."

While lamenting the decline of African universities and the consequent toll on faculty members, Curtin offers only a facile explanation of their plight. The migration of a relatively small number of African scholars to the United States, Curtin's "brain drain," is not the cause but merely a symptom of the decline of African universities. This decline is largely a result of the economic crises that have overtaken Africa since the global recession of the mid-1970s. Operating under the constraints imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's "structural adjustment" programs, African leaders have been compelled to withhold vital human and material resources from universities and other institutions. In addition, these universities, most of which were only founded in the 1960s and 1970s, could not have been in decline for "two or three decades," as Curtin contends.

Curtin's assertion of an African "brain drain" also provides ammunition for xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiments. Citing one of his elusive informants, Curtin accuses Duke University of "raiding" an African institution for a faculty member "who will only become a minority when he or she arrives" on campus. The question of the accuracy of the claim aside, one would have thought that an authority on the predations of the Atlantic slave trade would have made a better choice of words. The subtext of the attack appears to be that the ascriptive status of whiteness (especially when combined with maleness) is synonymous with impeccable qualifications.

Professor Curtin says he is troubled by the use of racial criteria to determine employment in African history. However, he has come to this realization rather late in his career. Our concern about what Curtin describes as the absence of a "genuinely competitive market for historians

specializing in Africa" is long standing. Certainly such a market never existed in the days when African studies was a virtual monopoly of white males and a telephone call through the old-boy network was enough to secure one's student a job.

The distress about the number of black people currently teaching African history is really a template for larger and more diffuse anxieties about economic security and the apparent contraction of opportunities for social mobility in the United States. With the attention of corporations, national-security pundits and private foundations now firmly fixed elsewhere, the prospects for maintaining, let alone expanding, funding for African studies are rather dim. This is a cause for concern among all scholars of Africa. By blaming what they consider to be undeserving black scholars for their problems, Curtin and his unnamed colleagues might be acting in the best tradition of what the great historian Richard Hofstadter called the "paranoid-style" in American politics, but they do little to advance the cause of the study of Africa.

The days when a self-perpetuating network of predominantly white male scholars exercised unquestioned control over African studies are gone. Gone, too, is the legitimacy of this network, that is, its hegemony, if not its actual power.

The study of Africa, as it is reconstructed in the post-Cold War dispensation, will necessarily incorporate new concerns and paradigms. Meanwhile, outside the academy the political base for Africa-oriented scholarship has also shifted. Today, the principal exponents of African concerns in Washington, D. C. and other centers of power are black politicians and policy makers. These individuals, in turn, are reacting partly to renewed interest in Africa in African American communities. This fact should not be lost on Curtin and his colleagues. The supreme irony, if indeed it is ironic, is that if African studies has a future in the United States, it will largely be because of the efforts of

the very black people for whom Professor Curtin shows such disdain.

NOTE: This letter was written by and represents the views of a group of black historians of Africa. However, in accordance with *The Chronicle's* policy, only 3 members of the group may sign it. A list of all the endorsers can be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to any of the signers below.

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ACAS Bulletin Editor's note: the full list of signers, not printed in *The Chronicle*, is as follows:

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April 7, 1995

To the Editor:

Philip D. Curtin's sentiments should come as no surprise to the majority of scholars in African studies--or, indeed, in any area or discipline. Indeed... Curtin is to be thanked for putting into print opinions heard behind closed doors across the country.

The great difficulty, of course, is that if apartheid in the world of scholarship exists, it is not an emerging practice but one that has long been in existence. As anyone conversant with the history of African studies knows, the "birth" of the field in the late 1950s and 1960s took place by displacing scholars of African descent. Vast expansion in these years did create a large new body of scholars, programs, and journals dedicated to Africa, all supported by federal and foundation grants linked to cold-war fears. It would be hard to illustrate, however, that these groups and institutions were any less segregated than others in the academy.

It is equally difficult to see any "increasing evidence" of the rapidly declining significance of race in the hierarchies of African studies or the academy in general. Curtin certainly provides none.

Is it possible to demonstrate that employed historians of Africa are overwhelmingly of African descent--even at the entry level? Is there any indication that this alleged trend holds for tenured professors, editors of the major book series and journals, foundation officers, or directors of major programs? And where, one might ask, are all these threatening African-American scholars coming from?

In the face of complaints about the scarcity of black scholars to hire, one might think that senior faculty and departments would be asked to recount their production of African-American Ph.D.s. This would be, of course, a most uncomfortable question, as the number of new African-American Ph.D.s between 1980 and 1989 in the social sciences *fell* by 5 per cent.

And even if by historic standards a growing number of entry-level positions were opening up to Africans or African Americans, should we not celebrate this? Should not those rare persons and programs engaged in opening these doors be applauded and rewarded? After all, would it not take a generation for black scholars to constitute in African studies a numerically significant group, much less move up the academic hierarchy?

The sad possibility is that if the racial sentiments expressed by Curtin prevail, the future of African studies in the United States may well come to parallel the trend openly discussed in print among elder British Africanists: a situation where Africanists fail to understand, much less engage, with the widespread resurgence of interest in Africa led by African-American communities--and come to watch over the demise of African studies as its old constituency in the government abandons Africa, and Africanists, as the empire, finally, folds.

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April 14, 1995

To the Editor:

Philip D. Curtin is not alone in recognizing a problem in "the use of racial criteria in filling faculty posts in the field of African history" ("Ghettoizing African History," *Point of View*, March 3, 1995). Prof. Jan Vansina publicly resigned from the American Historical Association last year over this issue, and there is a widespread perception among white job candidates that many of the jobs in African history are targeted exclusively at minorities. Indeed, Curtin cited ominous language in one such announcement confirming such fears. And Nell Irvin Painter, professor of history at Princeton, concluded a comprehensive study of recent hiring practices in the field of history overall in which she conclusively demonstrated that affirmative action has not, in fact, resulted in discrimination against white men.

Concrete evidence of so-called reverse discrimination is hard to come by, but what evidence there is indicates that there may be a substantial gap between popular perceptions of such discrimination and the reality of appointments in African history. Having both conducted a job search in the field this year and been responsible for placing our own graduate students, I can, however, cite figures for this year's job market.

We have received listings this year for 42 entry-level tenure-track jobs in which African history was identified as either the primary or secondary field. At the same time, our own search in African history resulted in 52 applications, 45 of which were from junior scholars, 10 of whom were already employed in tenure-track positions. There are, then, an almost equal number of unemployed job candidates and announced positions.

Of the 52 applicants for our own position, 40 (77 percent) were male and 12 (23 percent) female; and 39 (75 percent) were white, 12 (23

percent) African, and 1 (2 percent) African American.

As it happens, these figures roughly match those of our own graduate students in African history over the past 30 years . . . . And most of these, of whatever ethnicity or gender, have been successful in gaining jobs; 76 (89 percent) are employed in academic jobs today.

The figures for both this year's applicant pool and for our own graduates historically are thus quite similar. Whites (75 percent) and males (77-78 per cent) have predominated throughout, while women (22-23 percent), African Americans (2-11 per cent), and Africans (14-23 per cent) have comprised lesser percentages of new Ph.D.s. The only significant shift appears to be a declining number of African Americans and an increasing number of Africans in the current pool. It remains only to see how these figures for graduate students correlate with actual employment patterns.

An informal survey of the membership directory of the African Studies Association for 1992 (the latest available) reveals the following for identifiable scholars employed in teaching African history at all levels: male, 75 per cent; female, 25 per cent; white, 78 per cent; African American, 7 per cent; and African, 15 per cent, thus nearly matching the profiles of graduate students above, especially if African Americans and Africans are combined (25 per cent of recent Ph.D.s; 22 per cent of those employed).

While these figures are far from authoritative, they do suggest a couple of things. First, there are not a disproportionate number of Africans and African Americans employed the field relative to those earning Ph.D.s. In fact, the relative numbers of white and blacks have remained remarkably constant since the field started to develop over 30 years ago. Second, there are, if anything, a declining number of African Americans actively seeking Ph.D.s and jobs in the field, their shrinking numbers being augmented of late by increasing numbers of Africans seeking employment here.

April 14, 1995

To The Editor:

The result is that affirmative-action goals targeted at America's own historically oppressed minorities continue to go unrealized, and no amount of targeting individual positions can possibly reverse the trend so long as more and more schools chase fewer and fewer candidates.

Thus the widespread perception of "reverse discrimination," fueled by evidence of unreasonable and misguided searches, does not seem to be borne out by the reality. If anything, in fact, the declining number of African-American graduate schools and faculty calls for redoubling our efforts to recruit and train promising African Americans, as both Curtin and Painter rightly emphasize.

Such affirmative-action goals can only be achieved by aggressive pursuit of all candidates in all disciplines and fields, as Curtin stresses, and not just in a few positions targeted at minorities. The later [sic] strategy is bound to fail, unfairly limiting minority candidates to certain fields, demeaning the achievements of all candidates, and bringing affirmative action into disrepute, especially among people who have normally been among the most supportive of its goals. . . .

Thomas Spear  
Professor of African History  
University of Wisconsin at Madison  
Madison, Wis.

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As a white historian of Africa who lacks a permanent job, I would like to comment on Philip D. Curtin's "Ghettoizing African History."

My situation is due to the general competitiveness of the job market and to my personal competitiveness within it and not due to the use of racial-hiring criteria in the field. There simply are not enough black candidates in the market to have the effect which Professor Curtin claims. He himself partly admits this, when he says that some (many?) jobs supposedly reserved for black candidates go to whites in the end.

My own informal mental survey of African-history jobs available in the past several years indicates that they went overwhelmingly to white scholars, especially those jobs with high research opportunities and lighter teaching loads. Yet several of the job recipients had told me earlier, sometimes repeatedly, that as whites we had no chance.

In fact, the myth which Professor Curtin promotes is fairly common among whites on the history job market generally. Many whites (especially men) apparently find anti-affirmative-action resentment more comforting than facing up to the statistical and competitive realities of the market. If every black candidate left the history job market tomorrow, the chances for any given white candidate to get a job would rise only minutely. . . .

The basic reason for our insecurity is too many Ph.D.s chasing too few jobs, as a result of graduate-school admissions decisions over the past 15 years, wrong reading of demographic projections, and cultural anti-intellectualism leading to funding cuts for education.

In this context, it is particularly disturbing when Professor Curtin says he and other senior colleagues advise white and graduate students

to blame "a ghettoized job market" for their difficulties finding jobs. This is poisonous advice. Could it reflect bad conscience about over-recruiting graduate students for the sake of career and program building? In any case, it fosters a myth that anyone entering the market today could have "security." It also makes black students and scholars targets of misplaced, unfair, and prejudicial resentment.

Plain old-fashioned prejudices persist, and black scholars must now also cope with the contortions of committees' bending over backwards not to commit so-called reverse discrimination. One wonders, given Professor Curtin's views, would any black candidate have a truly equal shot at a job where he was on the search committee? Likewise, black scholars often face blanket, un-evidenced disparagement of the quality of their work or abilities. . . . The African-American and African historians of Africa who I know do work of extremely high quality and deserve in a merit-based system to rise to the top.

I share (along with most black Africanists who I know) Professor Curtin's opposition to race-typing historical fields. I share his concerns about African brain drain, although it has a good deal more to do with market forces and internationally imposed structural-adjustment programs which devalue higher education, especially in non-technical fields, than with racialized hiring by U.S. schools. Thus it is hugely disappointing to find this founder of my field devoting his intelligence, prestige, and, in a perverse way, his goodwill to scapegoating black scholars. He should, rather, help find ways to train more black Ph.D.s in all fields and help make it economically possible for African scholars to survive, teach, and research in Africa, which are what the problems he identifies really require.

And to my fellow young white scholars I say: Don't listen to Curtin. Painting ourselves as victims is not the way through.

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Humanities  
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April 14, 1995

To The Editor:

Philip D. Curtin's efforts to link his personal opinions regarding affirmative action with his professional (history) background are most unfortunate and quite sad. Curtin ignores, if he ever knew, the real history of African Americans, Africa, and African studies. The essay, unfortunately, attempts arrogantly to cut off Africans and African Americans once again from their own historical roots. While this is not a new tactic, it is no longer acceptable in any academic circle.

We are astonished that Curtin, an Africanist historian and a recipient of a MacArthur fellowship ("genius award"), would not know that several courses on African history have been taught continuously at Howard University since 1921 (long before such at predominantly white universities), that an international conference of academics on Africa convened at Howard in 1924, and that Howard received a Ford Foundation grant to establish its Center for African Studies in 1953.

Dr. Melville Herskovits visited Howard during the 1924 conference and in 1927, Herskovits, the "father of African studies" in the United States, established the first formal program in African studies at Northwestern University (where one of the signatories below actually studied). All of this is pretty well known and obviously predated Curtin's seminar

at Wisconsin in 1957. African Americans have long been involved and "interested" in Africa and African affairs, and the study thereof.

Indeed, in 1836 Martin R. Delany sought to create "an immense trade, with China, Japan, Siam, Hindoostan (sic), in short, all the East Indies--or any other country in the world" connected by a great railroad terminating at the Atlantic Ocean, which would link the trade with the East Indies and eastern coast of Africa and the continent of America. Delany joined Robert Campbell to search for a place for black separatism in Africa in 1860, some 45 years after Paul Cuffe's West Africa seafaring activities. "Negro" missionary organizations traveled to Africa to "Christianize our brethrens," as demonstrated by the works of William Lloyd Garrison and others.

A young W. E. B. Du Bois completed his dissertation on Africa in 1895. He was later invited in 1900 by Henry Sylvester Williams to join the older Williams and continental Africans studying and traveling in Europe at the first Pan-African Conference. The embryonic African National Congress of South Africa chose to "borrow" the structure and programmatic model of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. African *history* is replete with examples of African Americans' demonstrated interest and work in the study of Africa and its peoples.

Quite apart from the general interest of African Americans in African issues and some books and articles on the subject prior to 1920, the period of the Harlem Renaissance and reactions to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 witnessed a proliferation of study groups on Africa among rank-and-file blacks across the U.S. and the addition of courses on Africa at historically black colleges and universities. This certainly is evidence that African Americans long have had a serious interest in the study of Africa, which Curtin should have known both as a historian and as a "sympathizer" of the civil-rights movement. . . .

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Robert J. Cummings  
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April 28, 1995

To the Editor:

I am writing to register my disagreement with the opinions expressed in Philip D. Curtin's Point of View, "The Ghettoization of African History" (March 3, 1995). Curtin argues that racial preferences in hiring historians of Africa are making the field an enclave of black, especially African, scholars. He further suggests that this supposed hiring pattern, which he terms "ghettoization," will lower the standards of scholarship in African history . . . .

Unlike Curtin, I am not prepared to generalize about hiring in the entire field of African history. Nor can I claim to speak on behalf of one those groups of scholars whose situations Curtin finds so difficult: white historians of Africa unable to find jobs, black scholars pushed into academic enclaves, or Americans deprived of jobs because universities have sought to fulfill affirmative action by recruiting foreign-born African scholars.

I can, however, offer insights based on my experience as chair of the search committee to hire an African historian at Duke, the only institution whose hiring practices Curtin cites specifically to support this argument. Based on my experience, I question Curtin's arguments about hiring patterns and their supposed deleterious effect on quality, as well as his depiction of American institutions and African scholars.

Certainly, my experience at Duke does not ring true with Curtin's argument that African history is becoming an enclave for black scholars. At Duke, three white historians in succession have taught African history for 25 years. If our search is successful, we will have a black and a white historian of Africa. Contrary to Curtin's picture of "ghettoization," we are moving away from what could be called a white ghetto to a racially balanced program. Moreover, the support of African and Afro-American studies and the president's fund for recruiting minority faculty allowed us to add a second position in African history. In these times of economic tightening, such an addition benefits the entire field of African history. . . .

More important is Curtin's argument that racial preferences lower the quality of scholarship. Maintaining that a "genuinely competitive market for historians" is necessary to maintain high standards, Curtin assumes that a pool of excellent scholars cannot be found unless it includes Euro-Americans. If Curtin is correct--and I argue that he is not--then the predominantly white faculty supervising top-notch graduate programs have failed, and continue to fail, to give excellent training to their black students.

My own experience leads me to a more optimistic conclusion. I have discovered extraordinarily well-trained black scholars trained in universities in North America, Europe, and Africa. The presence of white people is not necessary to insure a competitive pool of excellent scholars. In the fall, I worked to identify a large group of African and African-American scholars--the very endeavor that Curtin cites negatively in his editorial. These scholars have produced work reflecting the range of quality in the field as a whole; the best scholarship was first-rate by any standards. The committee found the pool to be rich in exciting scholars and indeed faced difficult choices in narrowing the pool to interviewees.

Finally, I object to Curtin's depiction of American universities "raiding" . . . African

universities in order to fill (inappropriately, he argues) affirmative-action initiatives. Hiring African scholars, Curtin says, exacerbates the brain drain from Africa. This depiction assumes a paucity of African-American scholars, impelling departments to look to Africans not because of their intellectual accomplishments but because of their race. Moreover, these African scholars, supposedly passive victims of "raiders," unintentionally contribute to the underdevelopment of their homelands.

The search at Duke absolutely contradicts these assumptions. First, we identified a large pool of qualified African-American scholars; we did not need Africans to fill the pool. Second, many of the Africans who applied rank at the very top of their profession or among the most promising young scholars--and not only in Africa but in Europe and North America. Their intellectual stature made us solicit their applications. Finally, several African candidates made it clear to me that leaving the continent was not an easy or simple decision for them. Many of them had already contributed greatly to their universities and nations. (And, of course, many African scholars have arrived in the United States as refugees from political persecution, sometimes including imprisonment.) . . .

In addition to encouraging our colleagues in other fields to hire minorities, as Curtin suggests, perhaps we should show them how to do so. My experience indicates that a first step in such hiring is to define as large a pool of candidates as possible, by means as open as possible . . . .

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April 28, 1995

To the Editor:

The April 7 letter by Keletso Atkins *et al.* ("The Significance of Race in African Studies," Letters to the Editor) usefully summarizes the history of race within the discipline and points out several problems in Philip D. Curtin's editorial . . . . Atkins *et al.* are to be commended for producing a disquieting survey of the sometimes explicit, oftentimes implicit, structures of domination within the discipline.

However, I think they have missed a central point in Curtin's piece: that race has become one of the most important criteria, in many cases the only criterion, in hiring scholars to teach African history. For example, when I applied for the position at the university where one of the letterwriters now teaches, the chair of the search committee had her secretary call up the secretary at my institution to inquire into my skin color. (This was obnoxious, not to mention illegal.) Some historians seem to think that my first name somehow signifies that I am black. They struggle to hide their embarrassment when I appear at their door for conference interviews. One search committee invited a scholar for the sole reason that her surname sounded African; only when she stepped out of the car did they discover that she was a white woman married to an African man.

One could provide additional vignettes. The point is simply that race is an important factor in many hiring decisions. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Few would argue with the need for greater diversity within the academy. What is bad is when race becomes an excuse for search committees not to do their work properly: reading the work of applicants, acquainting themselves with the field, taking African history seriously. Sadly, few African-history searches in this country are run responsibly. Tragically, racist assumptions permeate many search committees, even in committees staffed by people who would otherwise define themselves as "liberal."...

African history as a field is quickly going down the tubes. Many of the revered institutions associated with the founding of the discipline have more or less collapsed. Those few scholars of African descent teaching at research universities have not been very successful in training African and African-American graduate students. Nor has the ideological edifice of Afrocentrism done much to attract black students to advanced study in African history. This means that in the future it will be even more difficult to train historians of African descent.

The problem is not, I repeat not, affirmative action. It is, rather, a combination of white liberal paternalism, administrative ineptitude, and deep-seated structural issues in American culture and society. Black scholars of African history too often are treated disrespectfully, as if the only reason they got the job was the color of their skin. Or they are simply not taken seriously at all. Currently almost everyone entering the discipline is demeaned in one way or another. Faculty in most history departments don't give a hoot about African history. Until they do so, until they act more responsibly and break out of their own intellectual ghettos, African history as a field will continue to slide into the academic abyss.

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**Debate in African Studies:  
Black Scholars Create a New Caucus to Push for a More Central Role in the Field**

**By Denise K. Magner**

*The Chronicle of Higher Education, November 10, 1995*

A new generation of black scholars, tired of what they describe as their marginal role in the field of African studies, is organizing a caucus to promote their interests within the African Studies Association.

Their efforts were sparked by a controversial opinion article published in *The Chronicle* last spring by a well-known white Africanist. Philip D. Curtin, a professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University, wrote that too many campus administrators were "ghettoizing African history" by "making the field an enclave within the university set aside for black scholars" (*The Chronicle*, March 3, 1995).

#### AN ANGRY AND CONTINUING DEBATE

His article touched off an angry debate, and people are still talking. At the annual conference of the African Studies Association in Orlando last weekend, a plenary session was scheduled solely to debate Mr. Curtin's article.

Many black professors say they were infuriated by the article, given that white men still control "the power and resources" of the field. The black scholars seeking to form a "Pan African Caucus" within the association were slated to hold an organizational meeting at the conference.

Their efforts may reopen some old wounds. In 1969, members of the association's first Black Caucus disrupted the group's annual meeting in Montreal, in frustration over white dominance of the field and the association. The Black Caucus split from the ASA entirely after

the membership refused to adopt a policy requiring half of the members of the Board of Directors to be black.

Since then, black scholars have made a few unsuccessful attempts to resurrect the caucus, most recently in 1991.

If this latest effort succeeds, the new caucus is expected to be less confrontational than its 1969 predecessor. Many of its organizers were not even in the field then. But its goals are just as ambitious. Its major concerns: the declining number of black Americans working in African studies, and the general "underrepresentation" of black scholars "within positions of power in the field," according to a statement announcing the organizational meeting of the caucus.

#### 'OVERWHELMINGLY WHITE AND MALE'

"This is not an attempt to break away from the association," says Carolyn A. Brown, an assistant professor of history at Rutgers University and one of the caucus organizers. She also sits on the ASA's Board of Directors. "African studies is underrepresented in terms of African Americans especially. Just because the topic is African studies doesn't mean affirmative action is not relevant."

Organizers also emphasize that they are not suggesting that African studies be limited to black people. "It's not a question of excluding whites from the study of Africa," says Michael O. West, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "It's a question of including more blacks. We're saying, 'Make some room. Move over a little.'"

Mr. West says black scholars do not edit the major African-studies journals in the United States, Canada, or Europe, nor do they edit a major book series on Africa. "Look at the major research institutions across the country. Look at the people who hold the senior professorships in African studies. They are overwhelmingly white and male.

"These are the main power levels of the field, and they are dominated by white scholars, mainly white males."

Mr. Curtin, the Johns Hopkins professor who wrote the controversial essay, was going to Orlando last weekend to speak at the special session devoted to his article. While he wasn't looking forward to it, he says, "I started it."

What he started was a debate about whether universities are now tailoring positions in African studies to black candidates and leaving white candidates out in the cold. He agrees that most faculty appointments in African studies still go to whites, and that far more whites obtain doctorates in the subject than blacks.

"That's not the point," he says. "My point is, half of the jobs are reserved for blacks, if they can find one, and about 1 per cent of the Ph.D.s are African American." Many universities, unable to hire a black American, then seek to hire a black scholar from Africa, Mr. Curtin says.

In his essay, he wrote that universities should not "automatically favor immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean over white Americans, in the name of affirmative action, if the latter are of greater ability."

#### IMPRECISE STATISTICS

He says he knows of one job search at a research university in which a white female candidate who had received her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, and had published her dissertation, was rejected in favor of a Nigerian candidate studying in Canada who had yet to finish his. "He could be absolutely brilliant,"

says Mr. Curtin, "but it looks like a racial hiring." A lot of job searches in the field have been like that, he says.

Mr. Curtin has some supporters, but his arguments have been attacked by many other scholars, black and white. The ASA's board took the unusual step last summer of publicly repudiating his views. Its statement criticized his article for "misrepresentation of the employment situation in African History and especially for its appeal to racial sentiment."

The board acknowledged that statistics on the presence of Africans and African Americans in the field are imprecise. That's partly because most scholars obtain their doctorates not in African studies *per se*, but in a more traditional discipline, such as history. In the early 1990s, the ASA statement said, white males received about 75 per cent of the doctorates awarded and the faculty appointments made in African studies. By comparison, black Americans accounted for 2 to 7 per cent of those doctorates and appointments, and Africans for 15 to 23 per cent, the board said.

Ms. Brown and other black scholars believe Mr. Curtin has his facts wrong. "There's a kind of two-tier system," she says, "in which the Africans tend not to be in the best positions in the best universities, and African Americans are almost nonexistent there."

#### A STANDING COMMITTEE

One of the goals of the proposed caucus would be to persuade the ASA to conduct a census of the field. "No one has done that," Ms. Brown says, "and everyone is operating on the basis of what they think is happening."

Organizers of the caucus say it also could lobby the association to create a standing committee on the status of blacks in the field and to create formal programs to recruit undergraduate and graduate students to African studies.

Many scholars point to the Ford

Foundation's new grant program for African studies. One of its major goals is to increase the number of black Americans in the pipeline. Ford awarded grants of \$50,000 each to 14 programs in an effort "to give support to a field that is suffering from neglect," says Toby A. Volkman, a program officer at the foundation.

The prospect of a new black caucus within the ASA, given its contentious history, makes some white scholars a little nervous.

Goran Hyden, outgoing president of the association, says he is reserving judgment on the new caucus until he understands its agenda better. Mr. Hyden, who is a Swedish citizen, is interim director of the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida.

"When Africa is being marginalized both academically and politically, the worst thing that could happen is to divide this very fragile community--or worse, to say that certain people have a birthright to study Africa more than others," he says. "If that happens, that would be a step in the wrong direction."

But, he adds, the scholars behind the new caucus "have a more constructive agenda."

The field of African studies is in transition, Mr. Hyden says. Government and foundation support is falling. Some critics question the rationale for area studies, instead favoring global studies, which focus on particular, cross-continental issues. Meanwhile, new perspectives, including feminism and Afrocentrism, are being brought to bear on the study of Africa.

## ALLIANCES PLANNED

White scholars and some black professors view the A.S.A. as the leading association in the field. But other black academics--especially those in the Afrocentric movement--belong to such groups as the African Heritage Studies Association, which was created when the Black Caucus left the ASA a quarter-century ago.

Although they recognize that divisions exist

among black scholars, organizers of the new caucus are hoping to build alliances with other black groups. Some black scholars who left the ASA after 1969 have since returned. Their numbers have been augmented by Africans who were hired by American universities and have joined the ASA.

Edward A. Alpers, a professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles and a past president of the association, says it runs on a shoestring, with little money for programs to attract black Americans to the field. Still, says Mr. Alpers, who is white, "We haven't done enough."

But he and other white scholars don't expect a repeat of the tensions that exploded 26 years ago. "The ASA has changed so much since 1969, when the leadership was pretty much an inner circle of white male Africanists," says Iris Berger, the new president of the association and a professor of history and Africana studies at the State University of New York at Albany. "If you look at the composition of the board, it's a much more diverse organization."

Black scholars agree. But some issues remain unaddressed, they say, and they need to organize within the association to attend to them.

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## Letter to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

By Barbara Alpern Engel, James Jankowski and Susan Kingsley Kent

December 15, 1995

To the Editor:

In the article "Debate in African Studies" (November 10, 1995), *The Chronicle* wrote of Prof. Phillip D. Curtin of the Johns Hopkins University: "He says he knows of one job search at a research university in which a white female candidate who had received her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, and had published her dissertation, was rejected in favor of a Nigerian candidate studying in Canada who had yet to finish his. 'He could be absolutely brilliant,' says Mr. Curtin, 'but it looks like a racial hiring.'"

After assuring ourselves that the university referred to was the University of Colorado at Boulder, and that the candidate in question was Dr. Chidiebere Nwaubani, we write to take vehement exception to this charge, which constitutes a serious breach of propriety, ethics, confidentiality, and common decency. Professor Curtin's willingness to speculate concerning applicants about whom he knows nothing, and to attribute their success to race, is careless and irresponsible, to say the least. The history faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder--the research university to which Professor Curtin referred in the quote--wish to set the record straight.

We conducted our search for a historian of Africa openly and fairly. As we went about setting the parameters for the position, we considered the programmatic strengths and weaknesses of the department, the linkages we hoped the successful candidate would make with other departments and programs on our campus, and the intellectual well-being of our undergraduate and graduate students. Above all, we sought a scholar of outstanding quality: someone who spoke the languages of the people he or she studies and could thereby

utilize a broad range of written and oral sources, someone with an established publication record and impressive teaching skills, someone with a vision for expanding and invigorating the study of Africa at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Of more than 90 applicants from all over the world, including several African scholars with Ph.D.s, Dr. Chidiebere Nwaubani best fit our requirements. We hired him on the basis of his record of publication and his ambitious and impressive research agenda, his ability to speak to a variety of disciplinary interests on campus, and his achievements as a teacher. The unique combinations of his strengths was matched by no other applicant.

Professor Curtin's suggestion of race-based hiring has had a destructive impact on Dr. Nwaubani and on his colleagues, who have proudly welcomed him into their ranks. We are saddened that such unwarranted and unjustified allegations concerning Dr. Nwaubani's scholarly credentials have appeared in print. Such insinuations can serve no good purpose and have no place in academic discourse.

Barbara Alpern Engel  
Professor of History  
Chair of the Department of History

James Jankowski  
Professor of History

Susan Kingsley Kent  
Associate Professor of History  
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## African Studies Association Board Letter

### ASA BOARD OF DIRECTORS RESPONDS TO PHILIP CURTIN ESSAY

The following letter was sent by the Board of Directors of the ASA to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in response to the March 3, 1995 essay of Philip Curtin, titled "Ghettoizing African History."

June 26, 1995

The Editor  
The Chronicle of Higher Education  
1255 23rd Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

To the Editor:

The Board of Directors of the African Studies Association takes exception to Professor Philip Curtin's Point of View essay, "Ghettoizing African History" (March 3, 1995), both for its misrepresentation of the employment situation in African History and especially for its appeal to racial sentiment. The Board also wishes to put on record the following points:

First, as the professional association representing all Africanists, the African Studies Association reaffirms its commitment to diversification of the Africanist scholarly community and the institutions that lead the intellectual life of our fields. By identifying excellent scholars in underrepresented groups (both gender and race) the entire academy, including the field of African history, benefits.

Second, we wish to affirm the historic contribution of both African and African American scholars to the development of the historical study of Africa. It was, in fact, from

this circle of scholars that the first efforts were made to treat the African continent historically within the academy. In the post-independence period, these scholars have been among those who led the field of African history into new and more challenging directions away from the dominance of colonial historiography. Not to acknowledge the importance of their contributions makes a mockery of the historical record.

Third, in view of the conservative political climate of the moment and the national attack on affirmative action, the Board considers the intervention of Professor Curtin to be particularly misleading. Affirmative action is not reverse discrimination, but the affirmative creation of opportunities for those qualified individuals who have been shut out of full participation in our nation's institutions of higher learning. Despite Professor Curtin's implication, available data suggest that both recent Ph.D.s and faculty appointments in African History have remained remarkably stable over the past quarter-century. In the early 1990s, for example, white males comprised about 75% of both cohorts, and women about 25%, while African American representation ranged between about 2-7%, and Africans between 15-23%. Certainly, even allowing for the imprecision of these data, there is no evidence at all to indicate that reverse discrimination is a significant factor nationally in the field. Perhaps most notable, however, is the apparent decline in recent years of African Americans being trained and seeking jobs in the field, and the increase in African scholars competing for these academic positions. If anything, this trend argues for increased attention to developing the academic pipeline for African Americans into African Studies, in

general, as indeed across the disciplines.

Finally, at a time when the intellectual validity of area studies, in general, is being questioned and national funding for research in the humanities and social sciences is threatened, we hope that frank discussion of these important issues will serve to bring us together as scholars dedicated to the study of Africa and to the welfare of the people of Africa.

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors  
African Studies Association

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**Summary Report of "Ghettoizing African Studies? The Question of Representation in the Study of Africa," a Roundtable held at the 38th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, November 4, 1995**

by Michael West

The Current Issues Council of the ASA decided to sponsor a roundtable on the question of race and African Studies soon after the appearance of Philip Curtin's piece in *The Chronicle*. Our intention was to provide a forum for an exchange of views from the widest possible variety of perspectives. Having secured a commitment from Curtin to participate, which we thought was crucial, we then turned our attention to rounding out the panel. This proved to be far more difficult than anticipated. A number of individuals contacted, white and black, politely but firmly declined our invitation, several of them after having initially accepted, others after "careful" or "serious" consideration. All, however, would be present, "in the audience."

A second obstacle in organizing the roundtable was the one-appearance rule, which prohibits multiple presentations at ASA meetings. Several prospective participants had previous commitments which they felt bound to honor. An appeal to the panels chair to waive the one-appearance rule, given the importance of the subject, seemed to offer a way out of this dilemma. But the proffered *quid pro quo*--inclusion on the roundtable of an individual designated by the panels chair, someone whom he said had been interested in arranging a similar forum--was unacceptable. After yet another round of reshuffling, we ended up with a panel consisting of David Johnson, Micere Githae Mugo and Edward Alpers (who was coopted at the last moment, after having been initially eliminated by the one-appearance rule). Curtin, who had specified that role for himself

in agreeing to be on the roundtable, would be the respondent, with the present writer in the chair.\*

It seemed clear early in the process of organizing the roundtable that it was shaping up as a transcendent event, an important moment in the history of the ASA, if not the U. S. Africanist enterprise as a whole. Black scholars of Africa were uniformly and deeply offended by Curtin's article. This reality was forcefully impressed upon the writer who, in the course of helping to put together the collective response that appeared in *The Chronicle* on April 7th, had personally spoken to dozens of them. There was talk of a fork in the road, of a gauntlet having been thrown down, even of a moral crisis at the center of African Studies. The blatant attack on the integrity and dignity of black scholars, the reasoning went, was not just the work of one person. As the black historians asserted in their letter to *The Chronicle*, Curtin's "repeated citation of unnamed colleagues and reference to 'most of us' and 'many of us' suggest that the editorial is not merely a personal statement, but rather the conclusions of a distinct group of Africanist scholars. We can only assume from the internal evidence that this group must be composed entirely of white scholars of Africa." Some eight months later, as we assembled in Orlando for the ASA annual meeting, feelings were still running high.

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\*All four roundtable participants were invited to submit their presentations for inclusion in this collection. All but Curtin agreed.

Then on Saturday, November 4th, as the clock approached 5 PM, we all began to file into the huge room reserved for the roundtable. As the seats filled up, more chairs were brought in. But these too were quickly occupied and stragglers began crowding around the back of the room. One head counter put the number of those seated at 800. It was going on 5:30 when we finally started.

After a brief introduction by the chair, David Johnson spoke, delivering the stinging rebuttal to Curtin included in this collection. He was followed by Micere Mugo, whose electrifying presentation (also included in this collection) revealed for all to see the fault line in the audience. Her thorough deconstruction of Curtin's article was received enthusiastically and effusively. The joy, however, was not equally shared: those standing, clapping and hugging were overwhelmingly black. The majority of whites in the audience remained in their seats or responded tepidly, if at all. (From the vantage point of the podium, the audience appeared about evenly divided between black and white, with perhaps a slight black majority.)

It was then Edward Alpers's turn at the podium. He approached the microphone gingerly and pronounced: "How would *you* like to follow that!" The task, admittedly, was difficult; but Alpers, ever irrepressible, eventually warmed to his subject, affirmative action. While critics of affirmative complained of reverse discrimination, he had "not noticed any shortage of white males" in academic positions, whether in African Studies or elsewhere. The academy has always had meritorious people, he offered, but much of the current talk about meritocracy is a "good example of Benedict Anderson's imagined community: it never existed."

Curtin's response was very brief. He denied opposing affirmative action. On the contrary, he favors more affirmative action, not just in African Studies but in other fields of academic endeavor as well. His article, he

continued, was entirely silent on the question of the ability of different peoples. The range of abilities possessed by scholars of Africa is about equal, regardless of race or national origin. That was not a point worth making. In any case, he did not say that people of African descent are less good than others. The ASA Board accused him of appealing to racial sentiment, "but I couldn't find that in my article."

Curtin then turned to the question of "where I'm coming from and why I'm doing this." He was, he reiterated, one of those on the fringe of the civil rights movement. He did not go to Selma, but he was busy registering black voters in Chester, Pennsylvania in 1948, "before many of you people were born." In the event, his efforts did not bear fruit, at least not immediately, for "we lost the election anyway." Continuing, Curtin explained that he was an "integrationist in American society," meaning that he supports the "integration of all races with each other, as much as possible." Integration, however, was not happening in the university. At his own institution, The Johns Hopkins University, there are eight black faculty members, only two of whom teach non-black subjects. There are no blacks in the sciences, not because there are no good blacks available, but because university administrators do not see the importance of recruiting them. His article sought to call attention to this imbalance. It was addressed to university administrators, not Africanists. Hence the choice of location.

The discussion was then thrown open. What followed was noteworthy in several respects, not the least of which was Curtin's refusal, to their utter dismay, to engage his many critics and would-be interlocutors. There were perhaps only two meaningful exceptions to this; and both of these, significantly, dealt largely with personal issues as opposed to the larger theme of racial representation in African Studies.

Curtin responded at some length to

accusations made by Trevor Hall, who identified himself as a 1992 Johns Hopkins Ph.D. and a Jamaican. Hall's point was that Curtin had attempted to ruin his academic career. He blamed Curtin for his inability to obtain internal funding while at Hopkins, even though he won external fellowships. Hall further claimed that in 1991 Curtin telephoned the chair of his department at Arizona State University, where he was teaching while completing his dissertation, to say that he would never receive his degree and that he was "a fraud." Angry, shaking, and pointing his finger from the back of the room, he called Curtin "a racist."

Curtin rejected the charge of racism and disputed the veracity of Hall's account. He said the call to Arizona was made not by him, but by his chair, who wanted to protest the fact that Hall had been listed in the American Historical Association directory, inaccurately, as having a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. At the time the call was made, Hall was not a registered student, and since his major advisor was not present on campus, "the true state of his progress may not have been known." Curtin himself had rejected Hall as a student when he applied to graduate school, because he did not think he was qualified. Hall, however, had been admitted by another professor, since decisions about admission to Hopkins are made by individual faculty members. Hall had not taken any courses with Curtin during his sojourn at Hopkins. (Presently, the chair intervened to request that the use of "personal invectives" be avoided.)

Curtin also offered a substantive response to queries by Boubacar Barry. Barry noted that in 1972 Curtin had reviewed his book, *Royaume du Waalo*, and had said good things about it. However, he was hurt by Curtin's comment that "the history written by Barry is not recognized." He was not sure what that meant. Barry also noted that in 1995 he applied for a position at Duke University, after which Curtin wrote the

article in *The Chronicle*, mentioning the Duke job prominently. He wanted to know if there was any connection between the two events. While he respected Curtin's scholarly contribution, it was of no concern to him whether or not he is a racist. Responding, Curtin apologized to Barry for using words that were not clear, and explained that he meant that Barry was more under the influence of French Africanist thought than he himself. As stated in the review, he liked the book and still thought it was important. He denied having anything to do with the Duke job.

His replies to the personal concerns raised by Hall and Barry constituted Curtin's most significant comments during the interchange. It was mostly in vain that others attempted to engage him on the issues raised in his article and their implications. However, it was not just Curtin who appeared tongue-tied. The leadership of the ASA (past and present) and the senior Africanist establishment, though out in force, also generally responded with a deafening silence. The majority of those who spoke from the floor were younger and lesser known black scholars. Most of the white speakers fit this description as well.

Among the first speakers was Femi Taiwo, who rejected Curtin's claim that he had been misinterpreted. He asserted that Curtin should either concede all the points made by the members of the roundtable and others, in which case he should "fess up," or he should be bold enough to stand by what he said in the article. There was no other way to understand the article outside the linking of the entrance of more black scholars into African Studies with a lowering of standards in the field, Taiwo continued. He then issued a challenge: If anyone in the audience knew of a case in the last five years in which an African historian trained on the continent had been hired over a better qualified white candidate, he or she should speak up. There was no such case, black scholars of Africa are often "three times

as qualified" as their white counterparts. They should therefore "stop apologizing for affirmative action. It is an indictment of your selection system that you have to bring us in on special dispensation," he concluded to loud applause.

Other speakers pursued the lines of inquiry opened up by Taiwo. Jacqueline Vieceli rose to declare that she was mourning and in shock. Speaking "for the moment as a scholar who happens to be white," she addressed Curtin directly: "If you are saying that standards are being lowered because Africans and African-Americans are entering in larger numbers into the study of African history, I am personally dishonored by that." She demanded to know where Curtin would be but "for the permission and probably the active graciousness of Africans during the time that you researched." In speaking out, she may have committed "career suicide," but taking a principled stand was worth that price. She ended on a note of high drama: "Please, sir, in the name of God, what are you doing?"

The next speaker, Ayesha Imam, concurred in the view that there was a contradiction between what Curtin said in the article and "what he's saying now." Previously, he was concerned mainly with what he described as a process by which black applicants were favored over better qualified whites for academic jobs, whereas now he was posing as a champion of greater black inclusion in the academy. Then came Onaiwu Ogbomo, who also wondered aloud about the price a young scholar might have to pay for daring to stand up to the Curtins of African Studies. He urged Curtin "to apologize for what you have done." Another speaker, a black woman unknown to the writer, agreed. While that may not have been the intent, she asserted, Curtin's article had "hurt a lot of people. It's honorable for you just to apologize."

By this point the anger was palpable. And yet the last speaker had made a constructive,

sensible and entirely reasonable suggestion which, if followed, likely would have broken the tension. She effectively offered Curtin a chance to make what amounted to a cost-free rhetorical gesture, one that might well have allowed him to disarm his detractors. You need not retract or repudiate what you have written, was her message, just acknowledge the pain we feel as a result of it and say you are sorry, not for the content of the article but for the severity of our pain. Curtin, however, conceded nothing. "I'm sorry; I stick by what I said," he retorted dryly.

Curtin again declined to make a token restitution when Ali Mazrui, one of three speakers explicitly to defend him, provided an even better opportunity. Likening the roundtable to a judicial process, Mazrui implied that the prosecution had gone on a fishing expedition, and that the indictment was too broad. "We want to be clear about exactly what and who is on trial," he cautioned. Speaking as a prosecutor himself, he insisted that it was necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, charging Curtin for "one journalistic article to which we object" and, on the other hand, putting his scholarship and character on trial. The one, he intimated, was a legitimate exercise, the other more akin to an inquisition. Mazrui then switched roles, assuming now the dual position of character witness and defense counsel. He had known Curtin for over thirty years, he announced, his voice rising. They had had many scholarly debates; they had even debated race; and he did not believe Curtin was a racist. He should certainly not be put in the same category as the reactionary forces abroad in the land, such as those who currently control Congress. The flourishing conclusion was quintessential Mazruiana, couched in the language of legalese: "We should be absolutely categorical that it is not his [Curtin's] character that is on trial; that it is not the whole corpus of his scholarship that is on trial; it is only one lousy, mistaken journalistic article which he should not have

written, and it is that, and that alone, which is culpable.”

Yet, even after this sharp rebuke of those who would try him unjustly, Curtin still refused to engage or make any amends. Instead, it was left to Robert Collins, who it is fair to say was the least coherent speaker that evening, to respond on his behalf. Collins asserted that Curtin is an outstanding scholar, well respected at the University of California. Meandering, he expressed the view that merit should be the sole factor in making academic appointments, and that the best person should be hired, irrespective of race or gender. He said a system of meritocracy was in place at the University of California, a claim greeted with jeers from the audience. Collins was followed by Merrick Posnansky, who wanted to address a point made by Curtin towards the end of his article. Noting an exodus of faculty members from African universities and a consequent drop in academic standards, he urged US-based scholars of Africa to consider going to teach in an African university.

Subsequent speakers returned to the issue of race and African Studies, some of them implicitly taking Mazrui to task in the process. Salilah Booker rose to address the notion of ghettoization, but not before chiding the chair for referring to him as “doctor.” He was not, he declared proudly, “a doctor,” in fact, he was not an academic at all. Academics *were* the problem. Concerning the term ghettoization, Booker stated that it was not coined by Curtin. He first came across it some years ago while doing a study on public education. Civil servants in the Africa Division of the State Department are concerned about ghettoization, now that their boss is a black Assistant Secretary of State. The concern is shared by their counterparts at AID, since the head of that agency’s Africa bureau is also black. “There is a quiet riot going on among whites who work in Africa related fields,” he concluded. The issue is not a lowering of standards but diversity,

which threatens white control.

White denial was the subject of the next speaker, a white graduate student at the University of Florida. She wondered if white Africanists had ever bothered to ask themselves why it is that so few African-American students were entering African Studies programs. She suspected it had a lot to do with racism, which should be rooted out, not covered over or denied.

Carolyn Brown then took to the floor, saying she found Curtin’s article “offensive” because, in failing to mention white women, it “racializes affirmative action.” Responding to Mazrui without naming him, she denied that anyone was saying the article “is the same as Newt Gingrich.” Black academics, she continued, “catch hell from everybody, and when you are black and a woman it is worse.” Returning to a point made by previous speakers, she urged white scholars to abandon their denial and insensitivity. “I think one of the things our white colleagues need to do is to listen, because if we say you are standing on our foot, please don’t say you are not there.”

The next speaker, an unidentified black woman, asserted that Curtin was merely “a product of the white supremacist system.” This view was strongly supported by Gloria Waite, who gave it as her opinion that those asking Curtin to apologize had “missed the point. Will you please go back and read Curtin’s work.” In *The Image of Africa* and *Africa and the West*, she argued, Curtin outlines the genesis and evolution of racism and white supremacy. His article was “a mirror image of the rationalization” that Europeans historically have used to devalue Africans and “boost their own sense of superiority.” Also responding to Mazrui indirectly, she added that the question of Curtin’s own racial attitudes was not relevant. “What he has written in *The Chronicle* is classic racism.”

James Webb, identifying himself as a 1983 Johns Hopkins Ph.D., countered with a

vigorous defense of Curtin. Curtin, he stated, had greatly advanced the study of African history, blazing trails, for instance in the study of the Atlantic slave trade, now followed by other scholars, white and black. Adu Boahen's *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, one of the most useful books he has found for his students, is the outgrowth of a symposium at Johns Hopkins. Boahen's visit to Hopkins had been sponsored by Curtin, "who oversaw the publication of that book." Turning to what he described as the larger context for understanding the evening's proceedings, Webb argued that the roundtable, like the O. J. Simpson trial, had revealed a gulf in perspectives between black and white in the United States. (On the introduction of the Simpson case some in the audience interrupted with a chorus of "no, no," but they relented when the chair requested that the speaker be allowed to continue.) There was no point in trying to "vilify" Curtin, Webb went on. "We need to understand him." He had opened up issues for discussion in ways that they had not been opened before.

Keletso Atkins had the last word. She noted that while everyone seemed to be focused on the "brain drain" from other parts of the continent, little was being said about the "influx" of white South Africans into the American academy and the fact that they are often given jobs over black Americans.

Given the intensity and energy of the audience, which showed few signs of abating even as the last speaker rose, the discussion could have continued well into the evening. But the inaugural meeting of the Pan-African Caucus, itself an outcome of the ferment and mobilization resulting from Curtin's intervention, had already begun. The roundtable had been a remarkable event, but it would have to end. The evening's proceedings would supply grist for many a conversation over the next two days of the meeting and beyond. The issue of race, racial representation and racism in African Studies had been squarely and prominently placed on the agenda. The future of the field will depend in large measure on how it is resolved.

### **Panel Introduction: "Ghettoizing African Studies? The Question of Representation in the Study of Africa"**

**by Michael West**

This roundtable, which is sponsored by the Current Issues Council, has its origin in Philip Curtin's op-ed piece "Ghettoizing African History" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 1995). Curtin's piece, of course, speaks for itself, though others also will endeavor to speak for it this afternoon.

The article, as you are all well aware, provoked a good many responses in varied

locations, ranging from letters to the *Chronicle* to, I understand, frantic activity in cyberspace, where as a postmodern Luddite, I am not located. The telephone companies, too, realized a small windfall in the wake of Professor Curtin's intervention. Indeed, it appears that ATT and MCI have so far been the greatest beneficiaries of this intervention. I virtually had to take out a small loan to pay my phone bill

that month.

Among the many responses to the Curtin piece was one that appeared in the *Chronicle* on April 7 above the names of Keletso Atkins, John Higginson and Atieno Odhiambo. These individuals, however, were merely standing in for a larger group of black historians of Africa, since the *Chronicle* as a matter of policy allows no more than three signatures on letters to the editor. The letter, in fact, was written and endorsed by a total of fifty black historians, all but one of whom--Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba--are based in the United States. The Curtin piece and the black historians' response have since been reprinted in *Southern African Political and Economic Monthly* (June 1995), an organ published in Harare, Zimbabwe. Both pieces are also scheduled to be reprinted in the Dakar-based *Codesria Bulletin*. Representatives of the two organizations, Ibbo Mandaza and Mamadou Diouf, are in the audience.

It is entirely appropriate that this roundtable should be organized by the Current Issues Council, which actually is the brainchild of Philip Curtin. It was Curtin who, as incoming president of the ASA in 1970, co-authored (with Marshall Segall) and moved the resolution establishing what was then called the Committee on Current Issues. In creating a separate auxiliary body to deal with "current controversial issues of concern to Africanists," the ASA Board and president were, of course, responding to a challenge of social and political relevance issued by black scholars, first at the 1968 Los Angeles meeting and more forcefully in Montreal the following year.

Today, the question of representation in the study of Africa--representation based on gender, national origin, and intellectual approach, but most fundamentally representation based on race--is one of the burning issues that concerns Africanists and other scholars of Africa. And while controversial, the issue is hardly new. It has

been, as is well known, the subject of endless chattering, gossiping, sneering and smirking wherever inquiring Africanist minds meet--but in private settings, huddled behind closed doors. Now Professor Curtin, to his credit, has ripped away the cloistering veil, placing the issue where it rightly belongs, namely in the public domain. This roundtable is an attempt to build on that foundation, irrespective of its soundness or stability. For the first time, perhaps, we are going to have a public, face-to-face exchange on the question of representation, specifically racial representation, in the study of Africa.

Our panelists, and I will ask them to come in this order, are David Johnson (City College) and Micere Mugo (Syracuse University). Philip Curtin (The Johns Hopkins University) will respond. I will ask each speaker to take no more than 15 minutes, and I will insist on this, as we want to open to the floor as quickly as possible.

## Drawing a Curtain on African Studies

By David Johnson

I am an immigrant from the Caribbean, one of those driving bright-white Americans out of the field of African history, leading to an inevitable decline in the standards Professor Curtin and his colleagues have so painstakingly constructed over the last four decades. I am part of a "brain drain" from the other world, although once I arrived in these United States cognitive ability was rendered problematic. I am here with the support of affirmative action policies that were meant to benefit disadvantaged African-Americans, whose cause Professor Curtin says he is now championing, in the twilight years of his career.

I learned all this in March this year, after a colleague called to spread the news of Professor Curtin's latest publication. I was preparing a lecture for my class at the time of his call. How can you be engaged in such esoteric pursuits in a time like this my friend, haven't you seen Professor Curtin's article on "Ghettoizing Africa History". Ghettoizing African History?, I asked. Who would publish an article with such a title? Which Curtin? Not that erudite professor who tried to do good with the image of Africa in two volumes back in 1964; the one whose book on the plantation complex I ordered for my students; the former president of the African Studies Association; past president of the American Historical Association; the man who influenced a generation of historians to go around counting slaves?

By this time my brother had grown irritable. Yes, that one, he snapped. How many Curtins do you think there are anyway? And he no longer seems to be doing research on the enslavement of Africans. He and his friends are

now conducting censuses on the number of Africans and their descendants in the field of African history, and they are alarmed by what their research findings have shown. In fact, they appear even more distressed than they were by their research on the European slave trade, because this time they are actually calling for folks to rise up and take action. That's why his article is published on the most prominent page in higher education in the United States.

So off I went to the library, to read of ghettos, white founding fathers of the study of Africa, and intellectual apartheid. It's an article whose methodology, whose disregard for basic rules of evidence, whose insensitive language, revealed the Africanist emperor without his robes. And, as we say in "the islands", "lawd, what a sight dat was". Some were left wondering whether a man who could be so wrong in reconstructing a history that he has lived and helped make could really be trusted with the history of other peoples, in other times and places.

Professor Curtin tells us that on his visit to the ASA meeting in Toronto last year he observed many advertisements for positions in African history which made it "clear that the job will go only to someone either African or of African descent". I don't know what he was doing checking out job notices; things can't be that bad at Johns Hopkins; and besides, I understand that jobs like his aren't normally advertised. Still, it's a free country. What seems clear, however, is that the Professor and I could not have attended the same conference. I saw no such advertisements, and I challenge him to produce them.

Is it possible that the Professor had in mind

advertisements that encouraged women and minorities to apply? This is a caveat included in some advertisements at the behest of Affirmative Action policy makers, one of the historic gains of the civil-rights movement that Professor Curtin confesses was of marginal concern to his founding fathers of African history. They operated on the "fringes of the movement". Indeed, the distance between the projects of Africanists and the social and political movements of "disadvantaged African Americans" has endured. It represents a rupture with the tradition of African-Americans like W. E. B. Du Bois who linked the emancipatory struggles of America to the African past and present.

Few are the black scholars fooled into believing that an advertisement encouraging women and minorities to apply signifies a job reserved for blacks. My own survey of 19 such African History job advertisements in *Perspectives* - the newsletter of the American Historical Association - between 1988 and 1993, showed that 13 of these vacancies were filled by whites. On a broader level, researchers have shown the main beneficiaries of such Affirmative Action policies in the professions to be white females.

Curtin tells us that this job reservation policy, which he and his friends have observed, is not new. It represents a form of intellectual apartheid that "has been around for several decades, but it appears to have become much more serious in the past few years, to the extent that white scholars trained in African history now have a hard time finding jobs." White scholars are having a hard time finding jobs because of decades of intellectual apartheid that has privileged black over white. Let's talk about apartheid.

Insofar as apartheid existed in the field of African history as it was constructed in the 1950s and 60s, its influx control mechanisms definitely were not directed against white historians. A central feature of actual apartheid

as it was practiced in South Africa was displacement, the forced removal of black people from the land, the worksite and the classroom, among other places. So too, in the United States, black scholars who pioneered the study of Africa in the period before World War II were displaced from their preeminent position by the white-dominated African studies establishment after the war. The Cold War, along with the emergence of African decolonization, greatly increased the strategic significance of the African continent to the United States, spurring the development of African studies programs in white universities under the direction of white scholars.

Bankrolled by public and private money and Cold War ideology, the African studies establishment enjoyed robust growth in the 1950s, reaching the "take off" stage in the 1960s. The number of programs and faculty positions, as well as the recruitment of graduate students, increased exponentially during these years. Research grants became increasingly available. New book series and journals were established, in which a generation of researchers firmly rooted in their national histories and identities sought to define what was Africa, what was worthy of study in Africa, and who was qualified to speak and write about Africa. This was the golden age of African studies in the United States.

Professor Curtin helped give birth to this enterprise at the University of Wisconsin, where he ran a center for tropical and comparative history. Unlike the present, he seems to have had little difficulty in those days providing jobs for those he favored. An example: In late 1960 Professor Curtin learned of the possibility of recruiting a Belgian historian of Africa whom he had met briefly the previous year. Off he went to his big supporter, Fred Harrington, the Vice President of the university, to propose a three year appointment for our Belgian scholar (see Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994)). Fred

was manicuring his garden at the time and casually gave the go-ahead, as he returned to mowing his lawn. It's not that he would have agreed to anything in order to be left alone with his lawn. Fred Harrington, according to the memoir from which I eavesdropped on this conversation, believed strongly that decolonization was leading to greater US involvement in the former colonies and a consequent demand for area studies programs. He wanted Wisconsin to take the lead. So he later convinced the Rockefeller Foundation to provide the funds for the post. A few weeks after a transatlantic phone call offering a job, our Belgian scholar was in Wisconsin, with a green card. Two years later, to his utter surprise, he found himself being congratulated for something called tenure, which he knew nothing about and for which he had not applied.

This was indeed the golden age of African studies in the United States. But like actual apartheid South African-style, which also enjoyed its golden age in the 1960s, very few blacks benefited from the boom. Almost without exception, black scholars of Africa and the broad pan African intellectual tradition they represented were rejected in favor of the Africanist bantustan policy, which involved constructing a wide, exaggerated division between the African continent and the diaspora. Two generations of graduate students were brought up on a historiography that placed the Tarzans of the Africanist world at the center of discovery. Historical knowledge did not really exist before their arrival and approval.

Professor Curtin complains of African-Americans being "pushed" into the field. But I have yet to meet an African-American who was coerced into the study of African history by white scholars and administrators. To the contrary, many are rich with details of the obstacles to entering a field that was perceived as an enclave of whites. The details range from white upper middle class professors who felt that African-Americans had too distant a

connection with Africa, to those who thought blacks too emotional for the study of Africa.

There were more Africans from the continent admitted to these programs, part of the age of developmentalism, which Africanists helped sponsor. No doubt Africanists felt more comfortable with their presence, since they were expected to return home and not remain to compete with white power in the academy. Africanists also looked forward to the possibility of strengthening their research careers through these relationships. And it is worth reflecting on whether they did not feel more comfortable with those of us who did not bring a memory of white supremacy (US-style) to the conversation.

Now that black scholars are beginning to establish a toe-hold in the neighborhood of African studies, Professor Curtin pulls his white students aside to warn of the embryo of a slum, from which they would be excluded. He and his friends join in a discourse in which young Ph.D.s in African history are encouraged to believe that jobs in the field are reserved for blacks, and whenever they lose out in the recruitment process to a black candidate, it's all a case of superior talent falling victim to racial essentialism.

There were several white undergraduates at my previous institution whom I encouraged to pursue graduate work in African history, and some did follow through. Beyond being fine students, they were some of the finest human beings I have come to know in America--individuals who struggled against their backgrounds to cross cultural and racial boundaries that some Africanists will never surmount. It disturbs me to think that they may have found themselves in programs where they are being subjected to the poisonous language of the Curtins of the Africanist world. As a committed cynic on the recruitment process, I wonder how much they are being told about the other factors, besides race, that play a role in recruitment. Have they been informed of the

white female historian who was removed from the original shortlist because members of the department discovered that many of her friends were postmodernists. Members were unclear as to what "pomoes" were, but they had been warned by knowledgeable folks that they were to be kept as far as possible from their students. Have they been told of several candidates, white and black, who lost out because they knew little of Africa beyond the narrow specialization of their Ph.D. research topic, a problem for departments that think of Africa as a country to be covered by one specialist. What of the candidate who had never heard of Cheik Anta Diop, to the astonishment of African-American students present at the interview. The list is infinite, but I will end for now with one of my favorite anecdotes on the travails of the recruitment process that all young scholars should commit to memory.

In 1968 Professor Curtin and company had a vacancy at Wisconsin for an historian of Africa. Circumstances had changed somewhat, for they were now compelled to hold interviews. Along came the first candidate, dressed in a pointy tip shoes, flowered shirt,

tight jeans, long hair, and an earring. To compound matters he proceeded to deliver a radical critique of liberal historiography in South Africa. There and then Professor Curtin and company decided against pushing the candidacy of this "nonconformist rebel" any further. The next candidate must have got wind of the poor dress sense of his predecessor. "He arrived in an impeccably conservative outfit" and evoked the air of a nineteenth-century romantic; so much so that some thought they were in the presence of Chopin. The department loved him, and his academic credentials; he got the job.

Narratives on the ghettoizing of African history have no room for the reflections I have shared with you. Like so many other narratives on ghettoization, they must recreate the pristine neighborhood that is being ruined by the arrival of other folks. The scapegoating of black scholars of Africa also aims to erase the memories of the multi-layered inequities that have long plagued academic life, and evade the shortcomings of the socially constructed standards that so many Curtins have imposed on the field.

## **Response to Philip D. Curtin on "Ghettoizing African History."\***

**By Micere Githae Mugo**

I am honored by the invitation to participate in this discourse because I view it as yet another opportunity that we could all seize to try and bridge a lot of negative gaps and spaces that exist between us as professional people. For me, here is one further moment to respond to a historical calling upon us to break the many awkward, destructive silences around the work we do. Some of these gaps, negative spaces

and silences exist around the question of whether or not, as academicians, ours is a relationship of partnership and collegiality, or a stratification of superiors and inferiors, as defined by politics of race, class allegiance and power. My intervention thus seeks to address the nature of this relationship, while attempting to dislodge some of the missiles directed by Professor Curtin at scholars of African origin in

the United States of America through his article, "Ghettoizing African History."<sup>1</sup>

Before I take up this challenge, however, let me make it abundantly clear, from the very start, that nothing I say here is meant as a personal attack on Professor Curtin. Not being a historian, Professor Curtin's path and mine have never crossed once before this encounter. Indeed, I only saw the professor, for the first time ever, a few minutes ago when the panelists were being introduced to each other. Hence, as colleagues in the legal profession would say, there is no "personal motive" behind my critical appraisal of the professor's article. In fact, my comments will seek to strictly address Professor Curtin as no more than the author of the now famous, or is it notorious(?) article that has occasioned this debate.<sup>2</sup>

In the interest of communication and popular consumption, my discourse will be conducted in plain language, shorn of post-modernist jargon, academic enigmatism and other forms of intellectual mystification. We badly need to converse.

But some might wonder: what does a non-historian have to do with this whole debate? The answer is obvious: even though the substance in the said article references historians, what Professor Curtin says is relevant to all scholars of African origin and beyond, irrespective of their academic disciplines. The simplest of reasons is that the stench of Professor Curtin's imagined "ghetto" that Africana historians are supposedly creating in the United States is likely to hit all our noses at some point. You know how easily ghettos and their attendant problems sprawl! In any case, reading between the lines, one suspects that Professor Curtin is only acting as a spokesperson for a larger, covert constituency of offended intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the beans are spilt, as it were and we cannot ignore the fact that they are on the floor. Indeed it is very healthy that this debate extends itself beyond the person of Professor Curtin,

for, this will help define the ground(s) whereupon various academic interest groups and individuals position themselves when it comes to the question of ideological power struggle in the university classroom. Contention: there is no running away from the fact that the classroom is a battlefield for dialectically opposing ideologies and ideas.

At this juncture, allow me to share an illustrative anecdote, coming as I do from an African orature cultural and academic background. Since I am persuaded that the anecdote is relevant to our current discourse at several levels, I will delay the plunge into the Curtin article, dwelling upon the essentials of the illustrative orature piece as a means of firming the board from which to spring. Over and above this, as already intimated, it is essential that we push this discourse beyond one person, contextualizing *The Chronicle* piece within other relevant events in the American academy. We need to remember that the Curtin statement is not an isolated episode, but an event situated inside a given, wider framework of reference. First the anecdote and then the levels of relevance.

In 1992, I was invited to an African Studies conference that took place in a private American university that will remain unnamed. The theme of the conference was the teaching of African Studies at the undergraduate level. I had been asked to serve on what the invitation letter had termed a panel of "Distinguished Scholars," with two other African colleagues. Later on the program featured the panel under "Central Issues." Our task, as we understood it, was to provide a critical commentary/summary/assessment/synthesis, highlighting key issues from the conference, while making recommendations on the way forward.

Nurtured under the Makerere-Nairobi-Dares Salaam university debating tradition of the late sixties and seventies, I have always respected academic discourse that is open, energetic, even aggressive and if necessary,

ruthless - so long as it is creatively so and free from personalization. "Tell it like it is," has been my motto, for as long as the debate remains scholarly and academic. I believe that my "distinguished" colleagues and I were guided by this spirit. So, having complimented the conference organizers on the event's achievements, we proceeded to point out what we perceived as serious gaps and weaknesses in the proceedings, including the following:

- under-representation of African scholars and non-reference to African scholarship in general;
- overall absence of African American, African Caribbean and other scholars of color, as well as their work;
- marginalization of current African faculty from the hosting institution's semester abroad "campus" who were at the conference;<sup>4</sup>
- non-inclusion of Kiswahili in the presentations, even though it was taught as an undergraduate course - surely the most indigenous of an African Studies menu worth focusing on;
- the inequality of intellectual "exchange" between so-called "Africanists" in America and African scholars on the mother continent;
- the unequal access to knowledge production, control and information dissemination between scholars in the south and the north;
- the allocation of extremely limited time to each of the so-called "distinguished panelists" even though they were supposed to synthesize "central issues" from the entire conference etc.

The ultimate questions that we posed were: whose project was the teaching of African Studies in the American undergraduate classroom? Who defined, funded and controlled the agenda? Who had the authority in terms of generating knowledge, determining the methodology used and naming the terms for

teaching African Studies? Who or what was the point of reference? How did classroom teaching address the concrete problems facing the people of Africa? What was the place and role of the scholar of African origin in all this? To turn Paula Giddings' book title into a question: "When and where do I enter?"<sup>5</sup> Also, **how** do I enter? ...All of these and other concerns seemed urgent to us in defining the way forward.

The conference organizers and I understand, a sizable population of "Africanists" at that conference were simply unamused. A friend warned me, "You have just committed professional and career advancement suicide (*sic.*)! You do not criticize leading U.S. Africanists like that and hope to survive academically or professionally." I brushed her aside, concluding that she was being unnecessarily dramatic. People knew that I was outspoken, I argued. She was persistent: "speaking out as a visitor from Africa is fine; but you are now working in the U.S. and that makes all the difference." Well, my friend certainly knew what she was talking about and has ended up having the last word in this argument. My written submission on our panel was ultimately excluded as a part of the conference publication --accompanied by a web of spurious explanations, of course. There was nothing by my other two colleagues either. Since then I have had two substantial career rejections that have dragged me all the way back to that first major encounter with a section of U.S. "Africanists." Believe me, I have learnt not to idealize or romanticize so-called integrity and objectivity in academia. And now, in the face of all this, here I go again!

The narrative ended, the levels of relevance to our exchange to-day must be obvious. As I will argue later in my conclusion, it is clear that as far as **some** Africanists are concerned, African academicians are only acceptable from a measured distance. Within that defined proximity, they **may** say and do certain things.

The proximity, it would seem, is defined and controlled by a privileged group of those in the north. Thus if the former decide to enter the northern academic market without the sponsorship or authorization of the power brokers, the entry is construed as trespass. This becomes especially so when the entrants happen to be competing for a common pool of resources.

The situation aggravates if the immigrants are unwilling to become voiceless academic collaborators, refusing to be mere footnotes, refrain callers, chorus singers, or sheer ululators --at best commentators -- witnessing and affirming the finished efforts of their supposed bosses. Specifically, they must never disturb the neat arrangement whereby the academic scramble has carved up Africa, all over again, into territories and fiefdoms of research monopoly, where particular scholars have literally become the last word. Absolutely forbidden is the question of African scholars coming to America and posing challenges in this intellectual monopoly game. There, then, stands parameter number one in decoding the heart of Professor Curtin's statement. To this, I will return.

The second point of relevance is the realization that in African Studies, as in African neo-colonial politics, most of us have become active contributors to the tradition of creating godfathers (and godmothers, I am sure), who have been elevated to heights beyond criticism and challenge. Often, African scholars occupy the status of godchildren. Thus when invited to play a part in the American academy, they are expected to strictly observe the boundaries and strata betwixt which they are sandwiched. More than this, they are expected to sing the tune that their piper or financier happen to call at all times. Failure to do so is perceived as an abuse of the largess of the latter. Working in close league with their African American/ Caribbean counterparts is looked upon with suspicion and even as treachery by some

godparents. I suspect that Professor Curtin has some of these offending, rebellious, off-line African scholars in mind as his bemoaned academic ghetto builders -- not the "good boys" and "good girls" of African academia.

The third level of relevance is that window dressing has become an unspoken cult in academia. Once window dressers reject their frozen image and climb down the wall, standing on firm earth, the shop owner's facade is unveiled and the illusion game is over. Thus when African academic "window dressers" insist on becoming real subjects in the intellectual power game, seeking epistemological authenticity and recognition, they commit a sin in the eye of their sponsors. They are either silenced, through exclusion from publication and other means that ensure that they perish, or are openly castigated through the public media which attempts to depict them as threats to national interests. And, as we know, there are controlling interests in the media!<sup>6</sup> It is indeed no accident that Professor Curtin chose to publish his article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This is the employers' and funders' media venue. Careers and jobs are either made or placed at risk here!

However, all this notwithstanding, one hopes that these kind of maneuvers will not coerce those who are targeted by the attacks into silence. In fact, let us hope that our discussion here will not be deterred by such barriers.

Lastly, a reminder, as my final posting on this preceding theoretical framework of reference: namely, that every struggle, or most struggles, are not without casualties. There is a price for standing up and being counted. However, there is also a costly historical debt hanging around our necks if we refuse to intervene in critical moments to interrogate abuse. Such refusal is not just a mark of cowardice but a surrendering of our human dignity. If we choose to forget this, history will remind us.

These observations provide a loose, but indispensable theoretical framework against which to examine Professor Curtin's article, "Ghettoizing African History."

For me, the bottom line is this: however explained, Professor Curtin's statement is a downright insult to all scholars of African origin, including those who would defend his remarks, for whatever reason. Indeed, I agree with those who have described the "outburst" as: condescending, ridden with covert/overt racism, divisive and insidious and I would add, callously mischievous in intent. This is what the article is. If the author of the piece is something else, only abstraction can tell, especially in the eyes of those who do not know him personally.<sup>7</sup> What a sad legacy to leave behind as one moves into retirement!<sup>8</sup>

You see, this statement neither emanates from the mouth of a random "hot head," nor that of a crazy xenophobic errant, nor the shorn mind of a raving skin head. The ideas in this article are not the rumblings of a senile old man. These are the calculated thoughts and pronouncements of a famous professor: a scholar who enjoys high standing in academia; a widely acknowledged "father" (or is it midwife?... midhusband?) of African history; an icon in the American intellectual world. Coming from such a figure, the statement is nothing less than a missile in the hands of groups such as the anti-affirmative lobby, anti-immigrant advocates and increasing xenophobic hysteria mongers. It is certainly a very clear recommendation to would-be funders of African Studies projects to keep off. After all, who really wants to invest in a ghetto - human or academic!

Unfortunate as the parallel is, one is reminded of the conduct of the colonials on the eve of African independence (and of their departure). When it became apparent that they could not plant their protégés into the positions of power that they were vacating, many of them went out of their way to either malign and

discredit those who were taking over, creating a crisis in confidence, or engaged in worse forms of destruction as they exited the scene.<sup>9</sup> Although Professor Curtin and his supporters will deny that this is what he is doing, the principle behind the stone of words thrown by him at his Africana colleagues as he prepares to retire is basically the same. He clearly believes that without his certified white scholars African Studies will become a ghetto in the hands of African and African American scholars (read non-white scholars).

The professor's choice of words, language and linguistic concepts in this outburst intrigue me. Much as the notion of "ghettoizing" phenomena has been used in writing to connote alarming deterioration of status, the way the term is applied here is mischievously symbolic. It constitutes a virtual refrain that is deliberately played against the purposeful, antithetical positing and positioning of whites versus blacks, in this piece of constructed repellent opposites. The use of antithesis, in itself, is quite instructive here as a device. Whites are equated with excellence and high standards: Africans and African Americans<sup>10</sup> are associated with ghettoization of African history, the academic profession (by implication), the universities and the clearly defined capitalist job market by and large. Once more, one recalls how departing colonials would rationalize denial of democratic space for their underdogs, citing fear of "falling standards" as their excuse.

Going back to rhetoric and antithesis, white academicians in America, Britain, France and Europe as a whole are credited with making African history a scholarly enterprise. Africans and African American intellectuals are depicted as either absent, or as being observers in the entire process. The only group of scholars acknowledged as being academically competent are those of the first generation whom the article clearly points out were trained in the northern metropolises. Affirmative action is equated with "ghettoization" and later described

and consequently dismissed as "intellectual apartheid." The hiring of Africans from African universities, in support of affirmative action, is termed "a raid" and blamed for the problem of "brain drain from Africa." Amazing ahistorical statements! Need one say more?

Besides the callous, uncanny, insensitive and racially inflammatory way in which the above terms and words are used, the most chilling thought is that the writer is none other than a leading "Africanist" and historian. Is it possible that the historical implication of the parody in words such as "ghetto," "apartheid" and "raid" could have escaped the professor of history's attention, used as they are to vilify scholars of African origin? Whatever the intention, one definite effect is to belittle the painfulness of the encounters that African peoples have had in the ghettos of capitalism, under past apartheid's oppressive rule and as a result of raids during slavery, colonization and neo-colonization. Lest we forget, simple understanding of psycholinguistics teaches us never to undermine the impact of word association, especially given a much needed historical eye view to boot.

Language and words aside, nowhere does the professor analyze, for our appraisal, the economic systems that cause or aggravate the situations that he is writing about. For example:

- IMF and the World Bank policies that have greatly aided the erosion of the African university under neo-colonial regimes, resulting in the migration of scholars;
- unjust economic conditions that are, historically, largely responsible for the imbalance in knowledge production and control between western scholars and their Africana counterparts;
- economic cut-downs that then result in the shrinking of the academic market, leaving no space for the hiring of Professor Curtin's "white scholars" and other deserving candidates; etc. Instead, historian Curtin lashes at affirmative action, in itself an important historical

intervention, aimed at correcting social, professional and human injustices directed at women, other disadvantaged groups and people of color in particular.

One wishes that the professor might, at least, have honored his calling by placing affirmative action within its historical context, if nothing else. The blame that he places on historical victims of western market forces would have been prevented had the scholar moved beyond stereotyping the people he is bashing, viewing them from a human rights perspective.

In conclusion, it is my contention that a close reading of the last paragraph of Professor Curtin's article reveals what is truly at stake. There, he argues that Africans and African Americans be deployed to teach in areas other than African and African American Studies. Consequently, one concludes that Professor Curtin's problem was never that Africans and African Americans were incompetent teachers lowering academic standards, but that they were teaching African history. This would have to be the only logical conclusion because the anti-ghettoization proponent could not surely be advocating that these supposedly inferior teachers worsen the situation by "ghettoizing" other disciplines! In very plain language, the professor simply objects to African and African American scholars teaching African history. Why?

To answer this question we have to go back to our earlier theme of defined perimeters that prohibit any challenging of territorial monopoly on the part of designated academic godchildren. We have to revisit, once more, the metaphorical scene of academic fiefdoms where the departing chief possesses absolute, exclusive powers to bequeath the kingdom to his chosen heir(s), short of which there is an outbreak of a war - even if only in the form of stones of words. Simply, the problem that causes this war in the Chronicle's stones of words has to do with the fact that African and African American scholars are moving from the periphery to the center.

They are writing their own text instead of elaborating someone else's text in footnotes. They are no longer research objects, assistants, or questionnaire distributors but centers of reference. Serious, committed Africana scholars are seizing agency by assuming the limelight and becoming generators of their own knowledge -- experts of their epistemological heritage. More than this, many of them are working in concert with other progressive colleagues in academia, irrespective of color lines, to revolutionize learning. The conservative liberal old guard are doomed to turn into footnotes. **That** is the problem.

From the foregoing, it is clear that academicians are part and parcel of the larger world of contradictions around their campuses. Voluntarily, or involuntarily, they are either advocates of false consciousness, manifested through backward nationalism, chauvinism, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and so on; or alternatively, agents of liberating consciousness, affirming the humanity in all of us. Professor Curtin, yourself and myself are all a part of this historical process. There is no drawing a curtain around the challenge.

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\*This response was originally delivered as a 10-15 minute presentation at the ASA Orlando conference on November 3-6, 1995. The current version is an elaboration of that original statement.

<sup>1</sup>The article was first published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on March 3, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>I was invited to be a member of the panel that debated the article, with P. Curtin as a panelist, during the ASA Orlando meeting of November 3-6, 1995. See endnote 1 as well.

<sup>3</sup>This became clear during the debate at the ASA panel discussion and even clearer following the conference, through exchanges via electronic mail - e-mail, in particular.

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<sup>4</sup>None of the African faculty delegates from overseas program participated as presenters, or discussants, or as chairs of sessions. Their silence and observer status were very pronounced.

<sup>5</sup>Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), and *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (videorecording; National Film Board of Canada), (Montreal: Necessary Illusions, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>During the discussion at the ASA conference, there was an attempt by some participants to distinguish between the scholar, his record of academic/scholarly output and the particular article under discussion. But, is this realistically and practically possible? How does one separate the scholar from the thinker? Ironically, in the course of the continuing debate, Professor Curtin himself authenticated the controversial statement, making it clear that he had nothing to apologize for.

<sup>8</sup>It is understood that Professor Curtin is on his way out into retirement.

<sup>9</sup>This legacy had particularly devastating effects on so-called Lusophone African countries, such as Mozambique and Angola.

<sup>10</sup>Henceforth add on: "African Caribbean and other scholars of color."

## Affirmative Action in African Studies

by Edward A. Alpers  
University of California, Los Angeles

I want to cast my comments for this forum of the Current Issues Council in the wider context of the struggle to achieve diversity in higher education and affirmative action as a means of effecting this goal. I begin by asking who took responsibility for this project historically in African Studies and will organize my comments into three very general phases.

### PHASE 1 (KOREA TO KENNEDY)

The historical roots of African Studies in mainstream (read white) American universities can be understood as a response both to the foreign relations needs of the United States and to the impetus from the civil rights movement in cross-fertilization with the movement to establish African American/Pan-African/Black Studies in the academy. This period was characterized by the general optimism that marked American attitudes at this time, a robust economy, and a concomitant expansion of higher education, with the opening of many new faculty lines and lots of money for fellowships. In African Studies, focus on the training of both Africans and African Americans came from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. To a certain extent the new programs in African Studies assumed some responsibility for supporting affirmative action, but like most graduate study, the main initiative came from individual black Americans who were determined to study Africa for their own reasons.

### PHASE 2 (VIETNAM THROUGH THE 1970s)

Although the same commitment to

affirmative action prevailed during this period, most universities took a more *laissez faire* attitude towards identification and recruitment of African Americans into their programs once the first generation of scholars was in place. At the same time, it can be argued that the women's movement superseded the civil rights movement at the center of the struggle for representation at most American universities. We can also begin to see more clearly the strategies of affirmative action hiring in universities that isolated many women and most faculty of color in programmatic niches that were designed to restrict the intellectual impact of their presence on the university community. This strategy produced distinct programs or departments in ethnic studies, women's studies, and area studies that on most campuses rarely communicated with each other, let alone struggled together to achieve common goals. It is worth remembering, too, that the scars of the anti-war movement left many faculties divided amongst themselves in a way that rarely worked to the advantage of the progressive goals of affirmative action.

### PHASE 3 (REAGAN TO GINGRICH)

In this phase we enter into familiar territory for all of us, a period characterized by cutbacks in higher education at both the federal and state levels, shrinking university budgets and resource-based management techniques that lead to careful scrutiny of institutionally-defined "add on" or "peripheral" programs, with the epiphenomena of early retirements, elimination of faculty lines, and a shrinking academic

market for new jobs. No less worrying is the rise of global studies, with its threat to area studies and grounded research experience, and the valorization of theory over foreign language training and fieldwork. Here we can also situate the larger attack on affirmative action, with its assertion of an ideal meritocracy that never existed either in our society as a whole or in our universities, as representative institutions of that society. At the national level, there is plenty of action to support this view in the ravings of the current Congress, but it can also be witnessed by the writings of conservative spokespersons such as Dinesh D'Souza and Shelby Steele, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, or by the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, or by the inordinate attention paid to the so-called "culture wars" and the invention of political correctness by the Right.

In California, regrettably, we sit at the very center of the storm. As a member of the faculty and as an academic administrator in the University of California, I find myself confronted by many convergent currents. The passage in 1994 of the anti-immigrant measure, Proposition 187, despite the fact that most of its provisions are being rejected by the courts, served as a warning shot across the bow of the university. Last July the Regents of the University of California passed two resolutions that effectively end affirmative action in all admissions, hirings, and business contracting except where these are superseded by federal regulations. Now we are faced with the possibility that the so-called California Civil Rights Initiative will qualify for the November ballot and wipe out all traces of affirmative action in the state of California. All this in the name of establishing a level playing field and providing equal opportunity based on merit alone!

But there is some good news to report. Diversity is slowly, though always too slowly, beginning to break down those academic

barriers in the university to which I referred above. On many of our campuses we now enjoy the company of an increasing number of colleagues of color whose academic expertise transcend race and gender. Greater attention to development of a pipeline for underrepresented minority and women students has also begun to yield in ever greater numbers cross-cutting faculty mentors and role models for a wide range of students. Closer to home, interest in Africa among black Americans is high, at least as high and perhaps higher than it was in the 1960s. This interest in the campus and wider community poses a challenge to which all of us in African Studies must strive to respond. And, once again, I must recognize the foresight and leadership of the Ford Foundation for its "Strengthening African Studies" initiative, with its focus on attracting and nurturing a new generation of African American scholars of Africa.

From the perspective of California and the University of California, I see no viable future that is not multicultural in every sense of that much abused term, one that includes Asians, Chicanos, Latinos, Pilipinos, Native Americans, women and men, as well as blacks and whites studying Africa, each other, other areas of the world, and contributing intellectual leadership to all disciplines. I also believe firmly that affirmative action is a critical means for achieving these social and educational goals, one that provides access where access has historically been and continues to be denied, opportunity where little existed or exists at present. Of course, there are abuses and tensions in the application of affirmative action, although no more so than there are in the absence of affirmative action. But that reality should not sway us from a course that addresses fundamental historical inequalities of race, class, and gender in the United States and, by extension, in African Studies as it is practiced in the United States.

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