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Loose canons: Space, race and nation in African studies

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This paper examines the sources of scholarly authority in African studies.² How is knowledge about Africa produced? By whom? Who validates this knowledge? These issues have been at the core of African studies since the nationalists dismissed the assumptions of colonial research. Today, the dilapidated state of African universities continues to defer the dream of "moving the center" of knowledge production to the continent. A half century later, African scholars continue to consume books and periodicals and even theories and models produced in the North (Mkandawire, 1995). Thus instead of moving the center to Africa, African scholars are forced to migrate to the North both physically and intellectually. This paper examines the impact of migration on canon formation in African studies.

It is undeniable that migration, both voluntary and forced, has had a major impact on the various competing canons in African studies. All versions of the field include some or all of the scholars listed in the call for papers, namely Nkrumah, Diop, Fanon, Senghor, James, Cabral, Padmore. Each of these intellectuals was impacted by the experience of migration and exile. Many wrote and published their most poignant and revealing works in exile or about the experience of exile. This paper examines the role of exile and identity in African studies canon formation. I am particularly interested in the impact of both geographic and intellectual migration and exile in the works now considered canonical. Would Kwame Nkrumah or L.S. Senghor have theorized Pan Africanity and Negritude without the experience of exile?

Thomas Kuhn in *The Theory of Scientific Revolutions* debunked the rationalistic pretensions of Northern scholarship by providing convincing historical evidence that new (and more sophisticated) perspectives take years, sometimes decades, to subvert the dominant paradigms (often outdated). This gap between the emergence of new perspectives and their acceptance as legitimate scholarly discourses stems from the spirited resistance of entrenched stakeholders who use any means necessary to maintain their privileged status. This theory of scientific revolutions underpins my discussion of African studies in the North. The dominant paradigm of African studies today asserts that

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² African Studies is defined here as the study of Africa in the United States that coalesced into the discipline of African Studies in the 1950s before splitting into two ideological camps represented by the Africanist and Afrocentric departments and programs in the United States. Recent efforts aimed integrating African and African American studies programs under the rubric of "Africana Studies" are still in their infancy.

the discipline was started by whites in Europe and the United States (Hayden, 1997). This is a particular viewpoint that ignores the contributions of African and African American scholars who studied Africa both on the continent and in the Diaspora. Hayden and his ilk are obviously working from an extremely narrow definition of African studies that ties it to the European and American academy. This paradigm of African studies established an unfortunate racial hierarchy, a division of labor within the discipline that placed white American scholars in control of the production and dissemination of knowledge about Africa (Berger, 1997).

This silencing of the African and African American voice in African studies came to a head in 1969 when black scholars demanded representation in the decision-making structures of the African Studies Association. As the largest and most important African studies organization in the United States, the ASA represented the power structure in African studies. The organization's whites only leadership reflected the status of non-whites in the African studies establishment as a whole. Thus it was not surprising that the black scholars seceded from the ASA and formed the African Heritage Studies Association. Since the dramatic rift in 1969, African studies in the United States has had a multiple personality "Afrocentricity," African American studies and traditional African Studies departments all claiming a piece of the African knowledge pie. The latest addition to this conundrum is a powerful new conservative force of scholars based at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute of Afro-American Studies. Led by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., this new force in African studies has distinguished itself by appropriating new information technologies to harness and disseminate information about Africa. Gates, a former *Time* reporter, has taken it upon himself to project an alternative African American perspective on key African studies issues from the black presence in ancient Egypt to the role of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade. These loose canons plunge the field into cyclical convulsions of self-doubt and recrimination over ideology reflected in debates about the discipline's relevance and struggles over disciplinary authority that led to the 1968 debacle in the first place. Each of these canons take Africa as a reference point but focus on different aspects of the continent's peoples and their cultures. Thus we have the emergence of several "canons" each with its own image of Africa and list of preferred African Studies scholars and resources. These scholars and their books give each faction an identity that stems from particular a perspective. Thus the dominant paradigm of African studies is shaped by the Eurocentric pretensions reflected in Hayden's statement above; Afrocentricity is rooted in Cheikh Anta Diop's unitary theory of African culture; while the Harvard paradigm of Gates and company has been shaped by African American perspectives on Africa. This paper will trace three key debates that illuminate the evolution of contemporary African studies: the Curtin debate on Africans in African studies in the mid-1990s; the Gates-Mazrui debate over the meaning of African history in 2000; and the current (2003) Kiplinger debate on the role of ideology in African studies.