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The house that Africa built

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It's a privilege and an honor to have been invited to be a part of this conversation, a conversation that is, and has been, going on in different sites and among different groups since human beings discovered how to exploit difference, and the framing of difference, to garner resources and power. Here are vibrant conversations filled with possibilities for dismantling old yokes. The conversations are also painful, for the memories and experiences of oppressions (especially those unacknowledged centuries after the effects have been made public) linger, and haunt. These emotions are all the more agonizing for their palpable rawness, and the tenderness that the papers in this collection summon from those places in our hearts and minds that we often close off so we can survive and live to fight another day.

We are tired of having to respond to all the charges thrown at us that we are always whining, that we should get up and move on, that we should show what we are really worth. As Chisomo Kalinga notes in this collection, African researchers *have* been speaking up, but are researchers from and in Europe and North America (predominantly) and all other protagonists who claim to be interested in 'Afro futures' and 'Africa rising' and supporting 'emerging scholars' listening? In fact, are they interested in our perspectives and progress at all, or are these merely another set of trendy keywords that can easily be distilled into 280 twitter-sized characters? So, the 'they' here includes donors, journals, scholars, aid workers, philanthropists, students and so forth principally located in Europe, America, and sometimes Australasia. The 'we' here includes the scholars, students and activists of Africa located both in Africa and our diaspora.

Crying, even howling, can be important, they have their role, both cathartic and as a catalyst to force fact building. What I want to do in the rest of this piece, however, is to wax lyrical about the growing possibilities of local efforts, such as those Walter Rodney so eloquently called for and that Toby Green reminds us of; and what Mjiba Frehiwot¹ refers to as blue collar pan-African work. I do this with reference to two projects in which I am involved: a blog created by scholar-activists, and the work of the African Studies Association of Africa. These 'local efforts' must contain certain ingredients: they must be built from African experiences; have a conscious liberatory agenda led by Africans; and be self-reflective and critical.

The first example, the CIHA blog, is a collaborative project in which I am involved. Five colleague scholars in the academy and myself – five 'from' Africa, and four located on the continent – together with our nine graduate students – eight from, and located in Africa –

seek to reflect on the help/intervention/giving industry and Africa through our blog, *Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa*.² Our mission statement reads,

The Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa (CIHA) Blog seeks to transform the phenomenon of aid to Africa into egalitarian and respectful relationships that challenge unequal power relations, paternalism and victimization. Our research and commentaries highlight critical and religious voices to explore connections among issues of faith, governance, gender and race in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Through analysis and dialogue, we strive for equality, justice and, ultimately, respect for others' desires, beliefs and practices.

Of course we explore religion, faith, humanitarianism, giving and their related industries, criticisms, as well as critical legacies from the past. For example. We also 'track changes' by providing links to online content that we have found to be problematic in its assumptions, framing, or language and provide a question or thought(s) provoked by each piece. The aim is to ask how portrayals and representations need to be rephrased, reframed and rethought.

I mention the CIHA blog because it has been an important space to activate transformative agendas, recognizing that 'giving' and 'helping' are not benign, and indeed can be highly problematic and even downright oppressive. And yet both historical and contemporary forms of recognizing and practicing our humanity and our indebtedness to each other can be liberatory for both 'giver' and 'receiver'; the lines between the two are really being blurred when we appreciate our mutual obligations and that no condition is permanent. The blog does this both on and off line; through the posts on varied topics from a diverse group of people; and through conferences and the editors' and students' engagements with each other and numerous publics. The CIHA blog has been a safe and productive space for me where ideas are nurtured, and relationships thrive. However, the funding that has enabled us to do the work we do does come from a Northern donor, one, in sharp contrast to the usual *modus operandi*, who has given us more freedom than I have experienced from many, but albeit with certain demands and whose funding will one day come to an end.

The second example is the African Studies Association of Africa, an organization of which I am currently the President.³ The ASAA was established in 2013, during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies. Our birth, built on the toils and projects of our great-grandparents,⁴ was the culmination of a few years of conversations among scholars who shared a similar vision but had not met to activate an action plan. Following Professor Takyiwaa Manuh's introduction of myself and Professor Lungisile Ntsebeza to each other at a CODESRIA General Assembly in Casablanca in 2011, several planning meetings were held. In October 2012 the Centre for African Studies (CAS) at the University of Cape Town hosted a colloquium on African studies as a result of extensive discussions among directors of various centres/institutes of African studies on the African continent, as well as other scholars in the field who expressed the need to come together and share experiences on the status of and challenges facing African studies on the continent. A total of 40 odd individuals from institutions that are based on the African continent participated in these discussions and were invited to the colloquium. Subsequent meetings were hosted at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in 2012 and 2013 and led to the eventual birth of the ASAA in 2013.

The organization currently holds a conference every two years and has a number of committees that continue to push our agendas on an ongoing basis. This year we meet

for our conference at the United States International University-Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, from 24–26 October 2019. The aim of this year's conference is to take stock of the knowledge produced by Africans in Africa and the Diaspora, from scholarly work through artistic expressions, to policy engagements. Clearly this is not a new, but rather an on-going project, the uniqueness of which surfaces more through emphasis and media employed. We also intend to pay attention to the Afro-futures discourses. (See <http://as-aa.org/index.php/asaa-2019-conference/call-for-papers-posters-and-panels>.)

Obviously, we are not an untouched island, nor is our knowledge simply etched in our DNA. So, we eschew essentializing or romanticizing the 'African condition'. However, we recognize the solidarity-building imperatives of our shared histories and shared experiences of today's global capital paradigm. Our common cause is not an option. This is thus an important time to reassess and learn from the Afrocentric canon(s) and renew a kinship between African and Africana Studies. These two perspectives on African ontologies have been pitted against each other as if they were competing disciplines, when they are not. Indeed, as many now know, thanks to the public lectures of ASA presidents James Pritchett in 2014 and Jean Allman in 2018, this bifurcation was a deliberate effort by white academics in the US to separate us. If all Black Lives Matter, then we must work intentionally to overcome this divide. This is a conversation that must happen in Nairobi highlighting African emancipatory traditions that are practiced globally.

Yes, we have had our cry. We have dared to express our anger and our pain: expose our vulnerability, as our tears were harvested to wash another woman's child. Those were not all our tears; we kept enough to push pain to resurrection into the present. The ASAA sees itself as being that space where we enrich and protect our work; nurture the next generation; provide professional support via workshops and counsel; and celebrate the achievements of our ancestors as well as our children.

Emancipation is not a passive word. It is built on hunting for and tossing off shackles, celebrating our life-affirming traditions, and (re)learning and practicing self-love and self-respect. This is the only way we can own what is ours and ensure we are not enslaved again.

Notes

1. 'Pan-Africanism and the Intelligentsia: the role of the African Academy in the Pan-African Movement', seminar presented to the Institute of African Studies on 4th April by Mjiba Frehiwot.
2. <http://www.cihablog.com/about/>.
3. <http://as-aa.org>.
4. See Adomako Ampofo (2016), for a brief discussion of some of these traditions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Reference

Adomako Ampofo, Akosua. 2016. "Re-viewing Studies on Africa, #Black Lives Matter, and Envisioning the Future of African Studies." *African Studies Review* 59 (2): 7–27.