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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Holding the Field Together

In early spring 2026, a few dozen scholars gathered at the College of Charleston for the annual meeting of the Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies (SERSAS). The setting was familiar: fluorescent-lit panel rooms, uneven coffee, lively conversations spilling into hallways. But the mood—while mostly upbeat by virtue of good company—was not entirely routine. The conference theme—*the future of African Studies*—felt less like a throwaway, abstract prompt and more like an urgent question. From my vantage point as Senior Book Review Editor at *African Studies Review*, that sense of urgency is not surprising.

Nor is that urgency difficult to explain. Recent cuts to National Resource Centers (NRC) and Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships have struck at the institutional core of African Studies in the United States. These were not marginal programs. They were the scaffolding that sustained language training, graduate funding, and the broader visibility and reproduction of the field. Their contraction signals something more than a budgetary adjustment. It reflects a shift in priorities—one in which area studies, and African Studies in particular, occupies a more precarious place within colleges and universities. Meanwhile, research funding, particularly for fieldwork, has become increasingly scarce, a shift that is beginning to reshape what kinds of projects are possible and who is able to carry them out.

At the same time, the broader geopolitical context has shifted in ways that complicate the field's traditional relationship to policy and power. US engagement with Africa has become more overtly transactional, increasingly oriented around security partnerships, strategic competition, and episodic, performative military intervention. Development assistance to the continent has been callously gutted, while new external actors—state and nonstate—reshape the landscape of influence on the continent. For a field that has long been entangled, directly or indirectly, with foreign policy priorities, this recalibration matters. It changes not only Africa's positionality in global politics, but also how knowledge about Africa is valued, funded, and mobilized.

These external pressures are real and consequential. But they do not tell the whole story. If the conversations at SERSAS revealed anything, it is that the challenges facing African Studies are not only imposed from the outside. They are also internal to the field itself.

African Studies today is intellectually vibrant, methodologically diverse, and geographically expansive. That is, by any measure, a success. Yet one can also argue that it is increasingly fragmented. Panels move quickly across disciplines,

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methods, and theoretical frameworks, often with limited points of intersection. Scholars speak in highly specialized idioms, shaped by disciplinary norms and publication incentives. The result is a field that is rich in content but at times thinner in conversation. We have, in many ways, become a collection of adjacent projects rather than a shared intellectual enterprise.

This fragmentation is not unique to African Studies. It reflects broader trends across the academy. But in a moment of institutional contraction and geopolitical uncertainty, it becomes more consequential. A field that cannot articulate its coherence—its shared questions, its distinctive contributions—risks becoming easier to marginalize. Diversity of approach is a strength. Disconnection is a vulnerability.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a simple but uncomfortable conclusion: the future of African Studies will not be secured by external conditions alone. It will be shaped, in significant part, by how the field responds to its own internal challenges.

What, then, is to be done?

The answers are unlikely to be revolutionary or glamorous. In fact, they may appear disarmingly conventional. But that does not make them trivial. If anything, it underscores how much the field depends on practices that are often taken for granted rather than requiring new paradigms or institutional reforms.

The first is showing up

Academic knowledge production is frequently imagined as an individual pursuit—an article written, a book published, a dataset assembled. But in practice, it is a team sport. Journals rely on peer review. Conferences rely on participation. Graduate training relies on mentorship. None of these things function automatically. They depend on scholars who are willing to read, to comment, to engage, often without immediate reward, and to do the less visible work that sustains the field's infrastructure.

If there is a quiet crisis in African Studies, it is here. Editors struggle to secure reviewers. Turnaround times lengthen. The burden falls unevenly on those who continue to participate. In this sense, peer review is not a bureaucratic hurdle. It is the mechanism through which the field reproduces itself. When scholars opt out, the system does not simply slow down. It begins to erode.

Too many people are opting out of the collective work that makes knowledge production possible. To show up is not merely to attend a conference or submit a manuscript. It is to recognize that the production of knowledge is a shared responsibility—and to act accordingly—consistently, not just occasionally.

Having been on the editorial side of the field, I have seen this firsthand. Now, the intellectual payoff of that role is enormous. It offers a panoramic view of the field, exposing me to work I would not otherwise have encountered. But the less visible reality is the constant effort required to secure reviewers and keep the process moving. Without people willing to step in, even the most basic functions of knowledge production begin to stall. If anything, my experience highlights a simple point: the field only works when enough people decide to do the work.

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The second is organizing—and staying organized

If funding streams are uncertain and institutional support is uneven, scholarly communities become even more important. Organizations like SERSAS are not incidental to the field. They are part of its core infrastructure. They create spaces for exchange, collaboration, and intellectual risk-taking that are difficult to replicate within more formal institutional settings.

What was striking about the SERSAS meeting was not only the range of topics, but the sense of continuity. Senior scholars, early-career researchers, and graduate students engaged in sustained conversation across panels and sessions. Ideas circulated, not just within disciplinary silos, but across them. My own experience with the editorial team at ASR offers a similar lesson. What appears from the outside as a smooth process is, in practice, the result of sustained coordination among a small group of people committed to keeping things moving. In an era where large conferences can sometimes feel impersonal and diffuse, smaller regional gatherings offer something different: density, familiarity, and the possibility of genuine intellectual community.

This is not a nostalgic appeal to a bygone era of collegiality. It is a recognition that, in the absence of stable institutional anchors, networks matter. They sustain the field in ways that are not always visible in publication metrics or grant totals. They also provide a platform for rethinking what African Studies can be, and who it is for. SERSAS itself offers a small but telling example: a new leadership team has stepped in, has committed to sustaining the organization and, perhaps more importantly, remaining committed to it.

At a broader level, the African Studies Association (ASA) continues to adapt to these pressures and provides essential infrastructure for the field. But ASA's effectiveness ultimately depends on the willingness of scholars to participate in and sustain it.

The third is educating

If funding fluctuates and policy priorities shift, the classroom remains one of the most durable sites of the field's reproduction. It is where new generations encounter Africa—not as an abstraction, but as a set of histories, societies, and political dynamics that demand serious engagement.

This pedagogical function is often undervalued in discussions about the future of the field. Yet it may be the most consequential. Working through the steady flow of new books to review made clear how much of the field remains outside any one scholar's immediate view—a reminder of how much teaching depends on continually expanding what we ourselves know.

Students who pass through African Studies courses carry those perspectives into other domains—law, policy, business, education, and beyond. They become not only the audience for future scholarship, but also its interlocutors and, at times, its critics. To teach African Studies, then, is not simply to transmit information. It is to shape how Africa is understood in a broader intellectual and public landscape. That responsibility is both significant and, in the current moment, indispensable.

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But the classroom cannot do this work alone. We also have to make the case outward. Don't just excoriate and fulminate—educate. Colleagues, chairs, deans, provosts, the broader public. At the same time, we need to embed African Studies wherever we can: in general education, in departmental requirements, especially in introductory courses. If students don't encounter Africa early, they may not encounter it at all.

None of these responses—showing up, organizing, educating—will, on their own, reverse funding cuts or reshape foreign policy. They are not solutions in the conventional sense. But they are conditions of possibility. They determine whether the field retains the capacity to adapt, to articulate its value, and to sustain itself over time.

The future of African Studies is unlikely to resemble its past. The institutional environment is changing. The geopolitical context is shifting. The field itself is evolving. These transformations will produce both constraints and opportunities. They will also require a degree of clarity about what African Studies is and what it seeks to do.

If the conversations at SERSAS are any indication, getting to that moment of clarity is still work in progress. But the questions are now unavoidable. What binds the field together? What distinguishes it from adjacent areas of inquiry? And what responsibilities does it carry in a moment of institutional and global change?

There are no definitive answers. But there is a starting point.

The future of African Studies is not something that will arrive at a later date. It is already taking shape in funding decisions, in policy shifts, and in the everyday practices of scholars themselves.

The question is not whether the field will change. It is how. And that, in the end, is a collective decision.

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