



Visas, Africanists and White Privilege

By Rasna Warah



An article published in *Africa is a Country* has generated some discussion online on the wisdom of holding conferences on Africa in Western countries - places that are becoming less accessible to African scholars, writers and researchers because of their punitive, African-unfriendly visa requirements. Haythem Guesmi, in the [article](#) titled "The gentrification of African studies", wondered why the African Studies Association's annual meeting and the annual conference of the African Literature Association are routinely held at North American venues.

Guesmi, a PhD candidate in English Studies at the University of Montreal, was commenting on the absurdity of situations where conferences focusing on African issues are held in Europe or North America and have panellists exclusively from the Western world - people who by virtue of their skin colour or nationality have easy access to these venues, a privilege that citizens of African, Asian or Latin American countries do not have. (A reason why I get so irritated when Kenyans who have acquired US, Canadian or European passports ask me why I am obsessed with citizenship. One so-called Kenyan activist even had the audacity to tell me that if she got into trouble with the Kenyan authorities she would immediately rush to her embassy for protection - a luxury she knows I do not have because of my Kenyan nationality.)

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Gone are the days when leading academics from around the world were invited to the University of Dar es Salaam – the incubator of revolutionaries in the 1970s and 80s – to present their research findings; today, African scholars need to be endorsed by a Western institution before their research can be viewed as credible. (Given the declining academic standards at many African universities, this is understandable, but it still doesn't explain why seminars and conferences also have to take place in the West.)

“This reality,” wrote Guesmi, “has generated numerous difficulties for Africa-based academics and scholars who are now forced to pay exorbitant, non-refundable visa fees in foreign currencies not always available to them and struggle to secure international travel funding. The resulting displacement and exclusion of continent-based Africanists have undermined the true purpose and identity of African studies; a pathological process commonly identified as gentrification.”

The marginalisation, or what Guesmi calls “gentrification”, of African scholars from the field of African studies has led to an absence of Africans from public discussions and intellectual debates. “In the news or in public venues, there is an embarrassing preference to invite white Africanists to comment on every single topic, ranging from women’s oral culture all the way to electoral violence, and anything in between,” noted Guesmi.

Representation and misrepresentation

However, this form of exclusion and marginalisation also exists within the continent. For instance, in a recent [article](#), Mordecai Ogada lamented the near-absence of black Africans in the field of conservation in Kenya. “Wildlife conservation is the one field where highly qualified black Africans are routinely supervised by white practitioners of far lesser technical pedigree or experience,” he wrote.

Those of us who are living and working in Africa are constantly reminded of how little our views or opinions are valued when we attend conferences where all the leading “experts” on a panel are white or foreign. I have witnessed this phenomenon on several occasions, particularly when the topic is about Somalia. I dare not claim to be an expert on Somalia (even though I could claim expertise, having written two books about the country) but I have often been in situations where the so-called Somalia “experts” in panel discussions have only a limited or one-sided view of the war-torn country, yet they are the ones who are flown into Nairobi to speak at such events. Somalis tend to remain mere spectators, and their views on their own country are hardly ever sought. (The fact that these seminars and conferences are taking place in Nairobi, and not in Mogadishu, is a problem in itself.)

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authors is white and either American or European.

Sometimes, for the sake of “diversity” or “representation”, a few Somali scholars or analysts may be included in a collection of essays or in panel discussions. However, in my experience, only those scholars or analysts who do not deviate too far from traditional narrative about Somalia (civil war, terrorism, piracy, pastoralism and the like) are invited to contribute; in other words, they gain visibility through conformity. Radical thinkers, or those who actively reject racist or distorted representations of Somalis, are rarely invited.

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For example, when a journal called *Somaliland Journal of African Studies* came out recently, many Somali academics wondered why none of the researchers and academics on the journal’s editorial and advisory boards were ethnic Somalis. Markus Hoehne, a member of the journal’s advisory board, explained the absence of Somalis by arguing that he “did NOT come across [sic] many younger Somalis who would qualify as serious SCHOLARS – not because they lack access to resources, but because they seem not to value scholarship as such.”

Under the Twitter hashtag [#CaddaanStudies](#) (caddaan means “white” in Somali), Somali scholars reacted furiously to his remarks, and released a long list of Somali academics who had done serious research at prestigious institutions and who were recognised as experts in their fields (albeit by a small, but growing group of their peers). Safia Aidid, a historian, said that Hoehne’s comments reflected “a mindset in which the Somali is rendered passionately partisan, while the non-Somali researcher remains worldly and detached in his analysis.”

The other disturbing reality is that African scholars who do not wish to be “Africanists” and who would like to focus their research on countries or regions outside the African continent are even less likely to be taken seriously. If a Ugandan scholar studies the archaeological history of Scotland, for example, he might as well say goodbye to any recognition for his work. No Scottish institution will invite him to present his findings and his work will hardly ever be cited by researchers. This unfortunate reality forces most African academics to focus their work exclusively on Africa – a restriction that is never placed on European or North American “Africanists”, who are presumed to know more about Africa than Africans. The few African voices whose opinions are sought tend to be those who have more access to the Western world, or who are considered the “acceptable faces” of African intelligentsia, which leads to a homogenous view of the continent, a view that in essence reinforces negative stereotypes about Africa and which is unlikely to question the authority (and superiority) of Western scholarship.

White privilege and issue-based activism

The idea that Africans are not qualified to research or write about things non-African is one that the writer Aminatta Forna has grappled with. Forna, who has been described as a Sierra Leonean writer, even though she is half-Scottish and was born in Scotland, wonders where the “orthodox idea” that writers must only set stories within their own country of origin came from. “Writers do not

write about places, they write about people who happen to live in those places,” argued Forna in an article published in the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper. “This is something that the labellers and their labels don’t understand either. [Chinua] Achebe did not ‘write about Africa’, he wrote about people who happen to live in Igboland. Likewise, I do not ‘write about’ Sierra Leone or Croatia; those places are settings for my characters.”

However, what writers such as Forna, who are based in the West and who hold European or North American citizenship, fail to recognise is the imbalance created by “white privilege” (which Forna also benefits from given that she has a white mother and grew up in the United Kingdom) that determines who can say what about where and how. White privilege allows white writers from Europe or North America to become experts on the rest of the world, but people who are not from the bastions of the Anglo-Saxon world are confined to being experts only of their region, their country of origin or their ethnic group – and even then, they are often dismissed as amateurs or not scholarly enough.

It is also important to recognise that Western academics and writers have access to more financial resources and influence than African academics and writers, and so their work has more chances of being published, which could explain the dearth of African contributors in scholarly journals. The lack of credible and respected journals based at African institutions also plays a part in devaluing African scholarship. And those that exist on the continent are almost entirely dependent on Western funding. This allows the Western world to set the agenda on what kind of scholarship on Africa is acceptable and what isn’t. Western institutions that fund research on the continent decide the tone, content and focus of research – and quite often the conclusions.

This also applies to activism, particularly on women’s rights, which tends to be issue-based, rather than taking a more holistic approach to the challenges facing Africans and how these might be overcome. As the Sudanese women’s rights activist Hala Al-Karib noted in a recent [article](#) published on the Al Jazeera website, “most Northern institutions reduce women’s rights and violations against women to a one-dimensional fight against FGM [female genital mutilation]...In this context, the rhetoric of gender mainstreaming becomes a box-ticking exercise while minimising the root causes of women’s subordination and the politics behind the subordination. The few publicly-aware activists become the outsiders, bearers of bad news, and are often labelled difficult – too political.”

Issue-based activism also tends to obscure the historical reasons for a problem. When I was in Kabul, Afghanistan, in early 2002 as part of a United Nations mission to assess the country’s developmental needs after President George Bush invaded the country following 9/11 and expelled the woman-unfriendly Taliban from the capital city, the chatter in the UN compound where UN officials and NGO workers were living was all about how the international development community could help Afghani women to abandon their *burqas*. For them, the light blue veil donned by women in the country symbolised everything that was wrong with Afghanistan; no one asked how the United States contributed to the establishment of the Taliban in the first place through its support of the Mujahideen during the war with the Soviets in the 1980s.

When poverty, underdevelopment or human rights abuses are depoliticised – i.e. taken out of the realm of politics – they become problems that have technical, not political, solutions, which Al-Karib believes is “extremely dangerous for the future of African women”. She says that the depoliticisation of the women’s movement in Africa “has already influenced generations of younger women in our part of the world, causing them to aspire to work for NGOs on women’s rights to claim social and economic privileges rather than making any meaningful change”.

Fortunately, a new group of young African writers and academics are emerging and creating their own spaces. The Kenyan literary journal *Kwani?* emerged as a response to the fact that few African

writers had a space at home or abroad to publish their work. The online magazine *The Elephant* is another example of a publication that is filling an intellectual and journalistic void that mainstream East African newspapers, which are increasingly being captured by the state or are heavily skewed towards commercial interests, are not filling. Africa-based research institutions, such as The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), which has its headquarters in Dakar, Senegal, are also having an impact in global academic circles. Unfortunately, because most of these are funded by Western donors, their long-term sustainability continues to remain precarious.

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