

African Studies and Study Abroad

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Introduction

Anyone trying to understand the relationship between African studies and study abroad in Africa faces a daunting task. One must analyze a diversity of ideas and issues emanating from various professional publications and organizations, as well as research specific initiatives within numerous institutions, that have helped define and shape the field of African studies over at least the last half century. Moreover, it soon becomes evident that the development of African studies, including study abroad in Africa, cannot be understood in isolation but must be placed within the larger context of the development of, as well as debates about, international and area studies and study abroad in U.S. higher education. These must be placed in the even wider context of the interplay of forces shaping higher education in the United States, and increasingly abroad in Africa and the African diaspora, especially at the undergraduate level. Finally, while the fortunes of African studies and study abroad in Africa have been inextricably connected, drawing direct or even indirect causal relationships is ambiguous in many aspects. In brief, the inquiry into the connections between African studies and study abroad in Africa is at a very rudimentary stage, scarcely as yet receiving the attention by the scholarly community inside and outside of Africa that it deserves.

The Larger Context

Any astute observer of higher education over the past few decades could not help but be struck by the particularly virulent tone and temper of recent debates. A brief perusal of some of the most important publica-

tions in this field in the last decade alone gives some sense of this—*The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*; *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*; *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*; *Impostors in the Temple: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children*; *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future*; and *The Battleground of the Curriculum*. Debates over the curriculum are not really new, however, and have been more prevalent in the history of higher education in this country than many realize, resulting in substantive transformations in the canons of higher education over the past two centuries (Chickering 1981; Hirsch 1987; Levine 1981; Boyer 1987; Marsden 1994; Levine 1996). One of the most recent and thought-provoking analyses of these struggles and transformations is Lawrence W. Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*. According to Levine:

Academic history in the United States (...) has not been a long happy voyage in a stable vessel characterized by blissful consensus about which subjects should form the indisputable curriculum; it has been marked by prolonged and often acrimonious struggle and debate, not very different from that which characterizes the academe in our own day. (1996: 43)

While controversy characterizes these contemporary and deep-rooted debates, the analysis of the forces underpinning this debate today is connected, in part, to global changes and intense competition over the production and control of both goods and knowledge. Palat provides one poignant perspective on these forces and their significance:

If the massive dislocations caused during the “long” Nineteenth century by the French and Industrial Revolutions and the spectacular expansion of the capitalist economy to englobe the planet led to the current institutional partitioning of knowledge into discrete disciplinary tributaries, the emergence of major nodes of accumulation in Asia and the simultaneity of the globalization of circuits of material and cultural production in the contemporary era with the implosion of a variety of ethnic and religious particularisms call for an equally sweeping reorganization of the academic universe. (1997: 303-04)

Given these changes and challenges, faculty and administrators in

U.S. higher education have embarked on a massive reassessment of its structures and content. There are manifold indications that many colleges and universities, under pressure from segments of their faculty and student bodies, have begun to initiate curricular and programmatic changes that more effectively address issues of domestic and international pluralism and commonality. The sources of these pressures are manifold. A growing diversity within student bodies with attendant demands to structure comparative studies of many other cultural experiences, a growing coalescence of a “critical mass” of faculty on many more campuses with international and area studies training and background, particularly at the undergraduate level in the last quarter of a century, and a growing demand by a number of prominent educators to redefine the mission of higher education, are among some of the forces bolstering this transformation (Bell 1966; Bok 1982; Boyer 1987). During the mid-1980s some educators even began to advocate a new strategy: the combining of two forces—i.e., those arguing for some core curricula requirements in general education and international studies at the undergraduate level (McCaughey 1984; Boyer 1987). Some major institutions of higher learning began to set major precedents, stimulating replication at comparable institutions, often after intense internal debates among their faculty, by mandating that students at the undergraduate level be exposed to other cultures through core requirements. One of the earliest and most important of these initiatives came from Harvard University. In 1978 the Harvard faculty adopted the inclusion of a Foreign Cultures requirement in the core curriculum to be met by courses, “designed to expand the student’s range of cultural experience and to provide fresh perspectives on their student’s own cultural assumptions and traditions” (McCaughey 1984; 371). As the president of Harvard University noted, Harvard students in the early 1980s were required to take two courses focused on a culture other than their own, and faculty were called upon to design and offer such courses knowing that the students taking them would not intend in most cases to pursue the subject matter professionally (Bok 1982). By the late 1980s many institutions began to mandate changes in their distribution and graduation requirements, including for the first time that students take at least one “non-Western” course during their four-year education. Efforts were also beginning to coalesce on many campuses to structure interdisciplinary programs focused around area concen-

trations, such as African, Asian, and Latin American and Caribbean studies which involved existing, or stimulated the development of new, study abroad programs.

African Studies and Area Studies

While area and interdisciplinary study programs were solidifying their presence and importance on campuses across the United States from the 1960s through the 1980s, debates began to emerge about their very essence (Carter 1976; Guyer 1996; Hyden 1996; Young 1984; Ralston 1988). The most recent evidence of these debates about the deterioration in area, including African, studies appears in a number of scholarly publications in the second half of the 1990s. Particularly noteworthy are assessments collected in *ISSUE: A Journal of Opinion* entitled "African Studies," published by the African Studies Association in 1995, and a 1997 issue of *Africa Today* entitled "The Future of Regional Studies." Viewpoints within these sources range across a wide spectrum: from area and African studies not really being in a crisis, something of a "storm in a teacup" (Watts 1997), to perceptions that the world of the Africanist scholars is "falling apart" and the area studies model is a relic of the past (Martin and West 1995; Heginbotham 1994; Kassimir 1997). Some, like Robinson (1997) and Hunt (1997), question how much validity exists in the reputed parochial and narrowly-bounded focus of African studies. Others argued that African studies has made major contributions to methodologies and theories that illuminate the complex interactions of local, national and global dimensions of African political, economic, and cultural life (Robinson 1997; 169). Others wrote about the contributions of area studies in general, and African studies specifically, to establishment disciplines, to enrichment of discourse about globalization, and to the training of the next generation of more informed and sensitive citizens, business elite, policymakers and scholars (Bates 1993; Guyer 1996; and Hyden 1996). Many lamented the false dichotomy of area studies and global studies, and the assumption that area studies is anachronistic, destined to be replaced by a superior approach termed global studies, contending, instead, for a new synergism, a cross-fertilization between the area studies and new global studies efforts.

As the debate unfolds there are also some concerns that the emergent

global studies effort may hastily move to superficial and deceptive analyses in which African needs and realities are further marginalized. At risk may be one of the strengths of area studies—to provide in-depth, local-based knowledge grounded on extensive fieldwork, language facility, and interdisciplinary training (Guyer 1996; Stone 1997; Ford 1999). As Stone contends, the study of complex phenomena such as health, refugee flows, pollution, environmental stress, and resource competition, require more commitment to interdisciplinary collaborations across areas or regions. Comparative research on global processes, which avoids superficial and mechanical comparisons, is only as good as “our understanding of individual histories of particular places” (1997; 180). We also need to avoid the temptation to see local populations as passive, always reacting to global forces impinging from the outside. Local agency, initiative, the search to define local issues and find solutions to local problems can be overlooked in globalization processes and theories which move to define broader comparisons or universals.

A few scholars are raising even more fundamental questions about the directions of global studies and the reconfiguring of international studies. Zeleza cautions:

The end of the Cold War provides an irresistible opportunity to recast global politics and paradigms, for a triumphalist United States to write its economic and sermonic will on the global village; and for the U.S. academy to impose an intellectual order that prioritizes U.S. perceptions, problems, and preoccupations. Bedeviled by their own internal solitudes, which are reinforced and reproduced by their very marginality in the U.S. academy, Africanists may find themselves pawns rather than players in molding this recycled new academic order. (1997: 205)

One of the most powerful arguments about the opportunities arising from the destabilization of African studies is the chance to “reconstruct a trans-continental, trans-national understanding of things African” (Martin 1996; 54). In part this would be an effort to return to perceptions and efforts of an earlier black scholarship, especially W.E.B. DuBois, Leo Hansberry and Carter Woodson, eclipsed by the white establishment dominating the development of African studies (Martin 1996; Zeleza 1997). As Zeleza suggests:

African Studies may be going back to the future, reconnecting to and reclaiming its repudiated Pan-Africanist intellectual past. (...) the road to the future, toward an African Studies that is intellectually more rigorous, socially responsible, and politically engaged may lie in promoting scholarly dialogue between Pan-African and Africanist Studies, in freeing diasporic studies from the dangers of cultural relativism by incorporating political economy, and in rescuing developmentalist Africanist Studies from the pitfalls of economic reductionism by including issues of race and culture. (1997: 206)

In part this would also be an opportunity to build new linkages that are more equitable and genuinely collaborative among Africanist and African scholars throughout the world (Guyer 1996; Robinson 1997). One notable example is the present effort by Northwestern University and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa in West Africa, together with the University of Ghana, Legon, to foster dialogue and collaborative research among scholars from all parts of Africa and the United States (Ford 1999). Building such linkages, however, will not be easy given some legacies. As Zeleza argues:

Africanists were implicated, whether by choice or circumstances, in the asymmetrical relations of dependence and domination between Africa and the West; so their work was treated with suspicion by African scholars. Many continued to view Africa as a research laboratory, to analyze and assess the continent through the prism of constantly shifting Eurocentric concepts and theories. (1997: 197-98)

Another positive indicator arising out of these recent tensions is the return of some major foundation support to international and area studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s after a period of decline (Davis 1997; Wiley 1991; Ford 1999; Ralston 1988). For example, the Rockefeller Foundation decided to fund seven major research analyses in 1989: ways to improve relationships between American Africanist scholars and U.S. policy-makers; Africa's place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda; Africa in the minds and deeds of African-American leaders; mobilizing and coordinating constituency groups on Africa; constraints and prospects for U.S. investments in Africa; Africa's image in the media; and a greater voice for Africa in schools. The Ford Foundation, one of the major donors involved

in supporting international and area studies since the 1950s, also began to look anew at international and area studies, including the undergraduate level. This Foundation decided to support some important curricular initiatives in the early 1990s, and now most recently in the late 1990s with its ambitious “Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies” initiative (Ford 1999: xii). One of the goals of this latest effort by the Ford Foundation is “to create a more truly international area studies in which scholars and practitioners (artists, activists, public intellectuals) from diverse ‘areas’ shape the agenda and formulate, from their own perspectives, important questions about the relationship between regional and global experience.”

Study Abroad in Africa

It is generally recognized that study abroad in Africa is partially an outgrowth of the development of study abroad programs in American higher education in various other areas of the world, initially in western Europe as part of a language immersion strategy in the post WWII era. Study abroad programs in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, however, were not usually added until the 1960s or much later, in most cases in the 70s and 80s. In tandem with this growth has been an emerging body of research and publication on the goals and structures of study or education abroad (see *NAFSA's Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* 1997). While these various sources provide considerable insight into the concepts and constituencies underpinning the development of these programs, there is evidence of intensifying efforts in recent times to reassess the structure and goals of these programs. Some are even beginning to argue that the very *raison d'être* of these programs is in doubt in face of manifold changes and challenges.

The number of U.S. undergraduates who participate in study abroad during their four-year education has always been small. While only about one percent of U.S. undergraduates make study abroad a part of their baccalaureate training, the absolute numbers reached close to 130,000 in 1998-99, according to the latest *Open Doors* report published by the Institute for International Education (www.opendoorsweb.org). The number of students studying in Africa, however, has been considerably smaller. One major report by the Liaison Group for International Education

about a decade ago estimated that only about 750 students, about 1.2 percent of the total who study abroad in a year, went to Africa (Sobania 1994; Alden, *et al.* 1994). However, there is evidence in the past decade of a growing interest in expanding the numbers of students who study abroad as part of their education, as one of the strategies to meet the increasing challenges of living in a shrinking and increasingly interdependent world community. One of the most ambitious goals was set forth in the *Report of the National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad* in 1990. It included among its recommendations that, “by the year 1995, 10 percent of American college and university students (including students representing greater diversity) should have a significant educational experience abroad during their undergraduate years.” The authors of the *Report* hastened to add that achieving this will be a formidable task requiring substantial growth in the number and type of opportunities provided and a more pervasive integration of education abroad into institutional strategies (NAFSA 1997: 375). The *Report* noted that the European Community (EU) efforts in this direction are particularly instructive. Most of these efforts come under the SOCRATES program adopted in 1995 which incorporates ERASMUS—originally the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students launched in the mid-1980s. In 1987, 300 universities in Europe exchanged 3,000 students; by 1997, 1,500 universities exchanged 80,000 students, and an estimated half a million students have benefited from the program. Original goals of ERASMUS were to raise, if possible, the percentage of students undertaking part of their degree program abroad from 4 percent to 10 percent. Bolstering these efforts was the goal of advancing, “European integration by promoting mobility among European citizens and by increasing cooperation and harmonization among universities of the member states” (Coleman 1998: 169-70).

Researching information about the development and changing goals and strategies of these U.S. study abroad programs—especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America—is complicated, since most of the information is still largely local-based, within specific institutions and not yet widely available in published form. However, one significant source for information on a few such programs appears in the published proceedings of a national conference in the early 1990s hosted by St. Lawrence University in the publication *African Studies and the Undergraduate Curriculum* (1994).

In the context of a wider effort by several noted scholars to assess the state and future of African studies at the undergraduate level, this publication contains a number of articles by academics intricately involved for years in the development of study abroad programs. While these institutions have various in-house documents and reports which have not been published and may only be available through personal contact with faculty or administrators involved in running those programs, some material has begun to be placed on the internet. One example is St. Lawrence University's Kenya Semester Program, which has been posted on Michigan State University's African studies web site (Pomponio 1999).

Even a brief perusal of some of this resource material indicates that one direct relationship between African studies and abroad programs in Africa appears evident in the fluctuating numbers of applicants and participants in abroad programs over the past few decades. Take, for example, student participation in the Kalamazoo Africa Program, one of the earliest established and most extensive of study abroad programs: the number of student participants (both Kalamazoo students and students from other schools) rose from 195 in the period 1962-1972 to 411 in the period 1973-82, and then dropped somewhat precipitously to 170 from 1983-1992 (Greene 1994). Similar statistics are evident at St. Lawrence University, reflecting the rise and decline of participants as well as applicant numbers. For example, since its inception in the mid-1970s, applicant numbers increased from the low 30s each semester, for a maximum of 30 positions each semester, to over 70 applicants per semester for that same number of positions in the mid-1980s. But more recently applicant numbers have been on a steady decline, dipping to an applicant pool in the mid-20s during the mid-1990s (Pomponio 1999).

While these numbers have gradually increased in the late 1990s, with averages in the mid-30s, recruitment of qualified applicants remains a major challenge. Overall, however, it is important to recognize that these abroad programs have enabled several thousand students to study in Africa. St. Lawrence University's Kenya Program alone has made it possible for about 1,500 students to study abroad in East Africa, with about half of those students coming from St. Lawrence and the other half from 30-40 other universities and colleges throughout the United States. What these resources also demonstrate is that the major strength of study abroad programs in Africa has been getting students to Africa, where they direct-

ly encounter the diversity of Africa and African peoples, including African students and scholars. While the costs and challenges of doing this grow, retaining a core of faculty in various institutions committed to these programs and acting as effective spokespersons with administrations and alumni, remains the best hope for the survival of these programs. These faculty need to hone persuasive arguments, in part emanating from ideas from African studies and study abroad scholars, that these programs provide a unique opportunity, an indispensable way to enhance students' intercultural and international awareness.

While an increasing accumulation of expertise on campus, supported by various new technologies that enhance the engagement with Africa, its peoples, their achievements and struggles, may be enriching the undergraduate curriculum, it would be a grave loss if administrations became convinced that study abroad programs were expendable, particularly in the face of rising costs and competing needs. This is a sensitive issue that concerned faculty need to pursue with tact. While building more Africa expertise on campus brings more exposure to Africa and Africans to more students than can possibly go to Africa on an abroad program, and adds to the overall goal of diversification and greater student awareness of international and intercultural issues, enabling a smaller contingent of those students to go to a study abroad program in Africa has multiple advantages out of proportion to the absolute numbers involved. Broadly speaking, these programs help produce some of the most informed and committed future leaders in international affairs; bring students back to local campuses, where they contribute disproportionately to creating more diverse and inclusive environments; add concrete support to the notion that the world beyond the local campus, U.S. higher education, and U.S. culture is an enriching experience; and raise fundamental questions about equity, justice and our common humanity in an increasingly interdependent future.

As we look to the future, study abroad programs in Africa face an array of challenges. While many of the challenges, identified in various resources by scholars and educators involved in the development of these programs in the 1970s and 1980s, remain relevant, there appears to be a search underway to identify and grapple with new ones more central to the prospects of these programs. Among the persistent challenges will be those of recruitment, orientation, local economic and health difficulties,

the relationship of the experiential to the intellectual components of the program, in-country impact on academic, administrative and support staff, re-entry and readjustment issues, including impact on career choices and opportunities, and reciprocity (Greene 1994; Alden, *et al.* 1994). Some of the most significant challenges are: 1) changing gender relations both domestically and within the host country; 2) costs and benefits analysis both by home institutions and host governments and institutions supporting and accrediting these programs; 3) involvement of African educators and administrative staff in the design, policy-making, and directing; 4) better assessment of the impact on students' career decisions, especially direct involvement in Africa, Africa-oriented, national or international work; 5) more creative endeavors to link up African, non-African and African diaspora students; and 6) more creative training and exposure to Africa-specific knowledge that recognizes the broader regional, national, transnational and global forces that are at work in the world.

Among these challenges the tracking of participants after their return, as well as assessing the impact of study abroad in Africa on them, is in need of substantial improvement. There have been very few institutional efforts to survey alumni about the impact of these experiences on their lives, but some preliminary results have begun to appear. Greene reported for Kalamazoo by the early 1990s that the number of students who have subsequently continued their education in graduate school by specializing in African studies, or a field concerned with another Third World area, is relatively high. "Current information on Kalamazoo College alumni of the Africa program indicates, for example, that in its thirty-year history of the program, at least one student on average every year completed graduate work in the areas mentioned above. Of the thirty-six known instances; sixteen obtained masters' degrees; twenty received the doctorate" (Greene 1994: 245). A fairly comprehensive survey was also conducted at St. Lawrence in the early 1990s which endeavored to determine the impact on approximately 800 returnees from the very inception of the program in the mid-1970s through the early 1990s (McWethy, *et al.* 1992). Results from the survey indicated that many returnees had utilized their experiences in a myriad of ways—pursuing advanced degree work, seeking out employment or internships with Africa-oriented organizations, bringing their Africa experience into their employment environment, or using their Africa experience as a means to

further their engagement with various domestic or international issues, especially issues of pluralism. Given the fact that most of the students have only returned in the 1980s and 1990s from these programs, their cumulative impact and importance has been scarcely researched or realized. More effort needs to be made by African studies faculty to better research and coordinate these outcomes, but also to devise more means to help channel these human resources into careers. An effort by the African Studies Association, or more regional associations such as the New York African Studies Association (NYASA), to centralize information on an electronic site about opportunities for undergraduates after graduation or returning from abroad would be a way to enhance the involvement of more young people in Africa-oriented or Africa-related affairs. Already some important publications have appeared that help, such as Danaher's *Beyond Safaris* (1991), but better coordination of resources is necessary.

With regard to the dynamics of changing gender relations, the feminist and related movements have had a dramatic impact on issues of power, equity, and distribution of resources in many societies over the past few decades. How men and women perceive and interact with each other and changes within those over time, have become a major area of scholarly and social inquiry and deliberation. More and more U.S. students participating in abroad programs, including in Africa, are bringing wider exposure to these issues with them. This has often produced some tensions within abroad programs, but it has also generated the demand for more courses and attention in field experiences that address these issues more candidly but with an appreciation of local cultural sensitivities.

With regard to the need for more creative efforts to link up African, African-American and Africa diaspora students with other students, much more thought needs to be applied to the potential of study abroad programs. Particular attention is necessary to making the costs for abroad study more affordable, to open the opportunity to more economically disadvantaged students. There are two efforts at St. Lawrence University that, while very small in the scope of the larger needs, demonstrate some of this creativity. The first effort derives from a consortia with the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Trent University in Canada as part of the ongoing "Crossing Borders" initiative funded by resources from the Ford Foundation and the respective institutions. This project entails, in part, student exchanges from the three institutions, and some

potential linkage with the St. Lawrence Kenya Semester Program. The second involves a direct effort to link up with two of South Africa's historically disadvantaged institutions and establish a student exchange program which would enable some South African students to participate in the study abroad program in Kenya with a reciprocal opportunity for some U.S. students to study at those institutions in South Africa. While these efforts are at a very preliminary stage of development, there is every expectation that they will be operational within a year or two. This latter effort is related to a major conference hosted by Michigan State University, in conjunction with the Committee of Technikon Principals, the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions Forum, and the South African Universities' Vice Chancellors' Association, in the fall of 1998, on the theme, "Academic Partnerships with South African for Mutual Capacity Building." This conference brought together hundreds of educators from the United States and South Africa to initiate dialogues and linkages that promise to yield significant results over the years ahead. At present, Michigan State University is collecting data through a questionnaire on institutional partnerships existing or being constructed through websites (the questionnaire can be found at www.isp.msu.edu/USSA/InstitPartQ.htm).

Another critical issue is increasing the involvement of African educators and administrators in the design, policy-making, and directing of study abroad programs. At many colleges and universities throughout the United States, more and more Africans have been hired in recent years to fill academic positions and contribute to the strengthening of the African studies program, including the study abroad component. St. Lawrence University, for example, has added two African scholars to its faculty in the last five years. In addition, in the late 1990s, for the first time a Kenyan with a Ph.D. was hired as assistant director, and with the recent retirement of the longstanding director, has recently taken over as acting director (for two years) of the Kenya Abroad Program. At present all the senior administrative staff as well as the adjunct faculty teaching in the program in Africa are Kenyan. For the first time, all the students who participate in the program will be working with a preponderance of Kenyan leadership in Kenya, supported by an increasingly diverse core of faculty based in the United States (Pomponio 1999).

A final very important issue is the numerous initiatives on many campuses today to construct a more collaborative, yet more cohesive, set

of programs that meld area, international and global studies. While this constitutes one of the “cutting edges” of faculty interaction, often acrimonious and distrustful both in terms of leadership and concepts, it is underpinned by considerable uncertainty. The road ahead is not very clear, and the impact that it will have on study abroad programs everywhere, including in Africa, is equally uncertain. Will we see an effort to create leaner structures in which some abroad programs are reduced or eliminated? One example of such initiatives is at St. Lawrence University, where an interdisciplinary combined major in global studies has been constructed and bolstered by the recent hire of five new global studies faculty with diverse backgrounds and skills. The new major in global studies requires students to complete at least one abroad program, do coursework in foreign language training, and complete coursework in at least two area studies concentrations.

Conclusion

We are in the midst of significant changes and challenges in international, area and African studies in the 1990s and beyond. How the differing initiatives will interact, as well as how they will shape higher education over the immediate and longer-range future, remains very much an open question. What is beyond question, however, is the need to help students better engage these developments on U.S. campuses and through abroad programs. Particularly important will be helping students to embrace a wider vision of Africa, to dismantle the constructed barriers among European-American, African-American and African scholars. Study abroad programs provide a unique opportunity for interaction of an increasing diversity of U.S. students with a diversity of African peoples, as they both struggle with the seminal issues of our times—issues of globalization, wealth and poverty, social and political power, gender relations, health, environmental stress, etc. Widening and diversifying these opportunities for intercultural dialogue across national, racial, ethnic and gender boundaries surely constitutes one of the most important challenges facing the world’s community in the years ahead. Study abroad, both by African students coming to the United States and American students going to Africa, can play a significant role out of proportion to the absolute numbers involved in meeting that aspiration.

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Author's Note: An additional resource devoted to study abroad in Africa, published too recently to be included here, is the special double issue of *African Issues* (formerly *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*), Volume XXCIII/1&2 2000, edited by Christine Djondo and Beverly Hawk.