

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### Kenneth W. Harrow: A Legacy in African Studies

It is now one year since the passing of the legendary Kenneth W. Harrow, distinguished professor of English emeritus at Michigan State University (MSU), former associate editor of *African Studies Review* (ASR), ASR's founding film reviews editor and founder of the African Studies Association (ASA) Film Prize. Ken, who passed in April 2024, dedicated his life to advancing African literary and film studies and training generations of Africanist scholars who have gone on to remarkable careers across the world. He left a significant legacy in African studies with his intellectual impact, teaching, and field leadership and service—including shaping the film section of this journal and its parent organization, the ASA.

Professor Harrow's remarkable career saw him spend over fifty distinguished years on the faculty of MSU, where he produced work that transformed our understanding of African literature and cinema. In addition to several edited books, Professor Harrow authored six books, each of them a significant contribution to African studies. Professor Harrow's first book, *Thresholds of Change in African Literature*, proposed a novel classification of African literature when it appeared in 1994. In the book, Professor Harrow identifies a literature of *temoignage*, or witness, that embraces the African past; a literature of revolt that is revolutionary in relation to the past and status quo; "literatures of the oxymoron," that is, "literatures expressive of postindependence contradictions and frustrations;" and "postoxymoron writing," "in which the paradoxes of contemporary life do not lead to the blockage of an unsynthesized, endless dialectal struggle." *Thresholds of Change* offers a compelling rereading of African literary narratives, boldly advancing a model of engaging African literature with critical theory—an unpopular position at the time of the book's publication. African literary and film scholars since then have warmed up to the idea of enriching their critical analysis with theory and have generatively used African letters to refine the limits of theoretical postulations. Postmodern theories are deployed with verve in the book, which takes up Soyinka's Yoruba-inspired concepts (such as the figure of Esu), and generates productive insights that extend understandings of literary texts and critical materials alike. It is not an exaggeration to claim that Kenneth Harrow's book was pioneering in this regard; Harrow was able to do what other theorists of his time couldn't manage: keep the literary work central while negotiating theory and keep the language accessible while grappling with complex concepts and ideas. Harrow's impressive linguistic range also enabled him to integrate anglophone and francophone texts into his

analysis, thereby undermining the separations that often attend discussions in African literary criticism.

*Thresholds of Change* is rich with innovative readings of African literature that expanded critical possibilities beyond mere historical and contextual readings; yet Harrow's most significant work was in the field of African cinema. He published several landmark books in this area, but I will focus on two here: *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism* (2007), and *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (2013), both published by Indiana University Press. Another groundbreaking book, *Postcolonial African Cinema* shifts focus away from a merely political reading of African cinema. In Harrow's reading, this dominant mode of tackling African films ignores their surfaces and aesthetic dimensions for a predictable analysis of their social realist import. What if we approach politics differently, from the visual style of the films, Harrow asks. The resulting monograph is a tour de force reading of classical and more recent African film, from Ousmane Sembène's artistic production to the work of Jean Pierre Bekolo. In reading Bekolo's *Aristotle Plot*, for instance, Harrow argues that what remains and deserves attention in the end are "the humor, the blues harmonica, the questioning of the authority of the symbolic order of the Other" (162). Here, too, poststructural and psychoanalytical models are used to advance visions of African film, but not without highlighting their shortcomings and showing how African film illuminates and improves theoretical blind spots. In discussing Frederic Jameson's work on postmodernism and its inadequacy for an African postmodern practice, for instance, Harrow contends that "Jameson's postmodernism, and postmodernism as generally theorized, is viewed 'from above'" (212). With such a claim as a backdrop, Harrow envisions an African postmodern practice in the artistic projects of African filmmakers.

Harrow's scholarship, across books and articles, is marked by a fiercely original and innovative reading of cultural productions, ambitious theoretical interventions, and a scrutiny of existing critical models, be they African or from elsewhere. You will find these virtues in *Trash*, wherein Harrow continued the revolution in African cinema studies that he initiated in *Postcolonial African Cinema*. That revolution was obvious at the roundtable on the book at the ASA annual meeting shortly after its publication. The excitement in the packed room was palpable, and the spirited discussion confirmed the book's place as a landmark text that we will read for a long time. Whether one agrees with Kenneth Harrow's analysis is beside the point; what is most important is the field advancement that even his critics concede is a significant facet of his research output. Harrow would usually start with a field clearing gesture that problematizes the status quo—usually a commonsense in the field—before proposing a compelling new direction. We must commend his courage for challenging conventions of film criticism and opening the space for new theorizing and critical interpretation.

Ken worked until the very end, completing two studies on world cinema from an African perspective and a monograph on time in African cinema. *African Cinema in a Global Age* (2023) redefines the contours of world cinema with a brilliant turn to the worldmaking projects of African films, running the gamut from video production to digital film. The resulting manuscript is shrewdly

historicist, formally innovative, and theoretically intelligent. In *Space and Time in African Cinema and Cine-scapes* (2022), Harrow studies the treatment of spatiality and temporality in African cinema, drawing insights from physics. This interdisciplinary study offers a transformative view of cinema in Africa while shedding new light on some of the problematics of physics, especially regarding the operation of time. Taken together, Harrow remained consistent until the very end, producing ambitious and complex projects demonstrating the worldliness of African cultural productions, foregrounding their novel contributions to global discourses, and accentuating the agency and subjectivity of African peoples. With his books and over seventy articles and book chapters, Harrow was the foremost scholar of African cinema of his generation.

Excellent scholarship and transformative teaching and mentoring coinhabited in the late Professor Harrow. He was a dedicated teacher and a committed citizen at MSU, where he trained generations of students, many of whom are now leading scholars in their own light (I am one of them!). Like other former students of Harrow, I chose MSU for my PhD because of his legendary mentoring and commitment to rigorous scholarship. Harrow would nudge his students to deepen the tenor of their thought in the classroom and on the page, pushing us to reach the heights of our potential. His former students hold positions at Brandeis, Bristol, Rutgers, Texas A&M, University of Minnesota, Yale, and other universities.

Over his long career, Harrow made a tremendous impact on the profession with his service. He convened field-shaping conferences and symposia at MSU and served as president of the African Literature Association (ALA) and as film reviews editor of the *ASR*. In fact, we will forever owe Harrow for establishing the film reviews section of the journal. Harrow also conceived the film screenings at the ASA and the ASA Best African Film Prize, which he chaired until his demise. My current role as editor-in-chief of *ASR* can be credited to Harrow too. It was while studying with him that I took my first position with the journal, as his film editorial assistant. This position would ultimately lead to a film reviews editor position, a role as associate editor, the deputy editorship, and my current role as the journal's editor-in-chief.

Kenneth Harrow left a legacy of paramount research, high-impact teaching, and field-leading service. Harrow's greatest lesson was that a scholar's intellectual achievement must be matched by robust engagement with students and junior scholars through mentoring. Until the very end, he read the work of his students and joyously shared his own research and film recommendations. Until the very end, the sustainability of film studies at the ASA and on the continent exercised him. With his wife, Liz Harrow, he created the Ken Harrow Film Fund at the ASA to support the Sembène-Kelani Film Prize (named for two distinguished African filmmakers whom Ken researched and taught). He also donated his library holdings to Université Gaston Berger in Senegal. It is gratifying to know that film screening and its study will continue at the ASA due to Ken's generosity. Ken would also like that the *ASR* is planning a film review writing workshop at the Lagos Studies Association Conference in June 2025. For his dedicated service and accomplishments, Ken was honored with a distinguished professorship at MSU,

and the ASA, ALA, and the University of Texas at Austin each bestowed on him their Distinguished Africanist Award.

As we celebrate Ken's legacy at this first anniversary of his passing, his extraordinary life and work summon us to recommit to the highest standards of scholarship in African studies, to take Africans and their knowledge seriously for their intellectual and sociopolitical contributions. Ken would refuse a ghettoization of African knowledge, inviting a robust reflection on its particularities and cross-disciplinary and transregional dialogues. Ken's premium on the accomplishments of his students is a salutary reminder of the importance of mentoring for the future of African studies. He recruited and supported several African students directly from the continent even as he taught in Senegal and Cameroon and supported exchanges with colleagues and students there. We all have a responsibility to assume the mantle. As his widow, Liz, noted at the ASA panel honoring Ken's life in Chicago in December 2024, "it is time to build on his work." Continue to rest, Professor Harrow—scholar, teacher, mentor. Thanks for the shining example of the possibilities of a life devoted to a rigorous study of Africa.

Following in Kenneth W. Harrow's intellectual footsteps, the March 2025 issue of the ASR features articles that redefine established paradigms and center the view from below. The first article by Jing Jing Liu is a fine example. Liu's "Decentering the Dollar in Africa-China Trade: How Nigerian Entrepreneurs Navigate Currency Swaps and Digital Currencies in an Era of USD Hegemony and RMB Internationalization" demonstrates how Nigerian entrepreneurs challenge dollar dominance by turning to alternative modalities of payment. Contributing to the scholarship on Africa-China, Liu foregrounds the multipolar world system that emerges from the traders' circumvention of the dollar, as they navigate renminbi internationalization and digital currencies, including cryptocurrencies. As the author puts it, "[T]hrough tireless workarounds, workwithins, and workbetweens, Nigerian entrepreneurs entwine and unwind the global financial system as needed." Liu's refreshing article turns us away from state-led dedollarization efforts as it charts a transnational economy hinged on multicurrency nimbleness.

While Liu's article focuses on the maneuvers of Nigerian entrepreneurs navigating a dollar hegemonic world order, Barwendé Médard Sané's article contributes to discourse and praxis of ecological restoration with a focus on Yacouba Sawadogo's work in Burkina Faso. Sané's "Roots of Resilience: Unraveling Yacouba Sawadogo's Afrocentric Ecological Wisdom through Qualitative Inquiry" explicates the importance of Sawadogo's lifework for battling desertification and the climate crisis. The premise of this article is the marginalization of African ecological perspectives as the world tackles planetary threats. For Sané, the world has much to learn from the elderly Sawadogo, an ecologist, revered farmer, and recipient of the United Nations Environment Program's prestigious 2020 Champions of the Earth Award. Adopting a qualitative inquiry premised on interactions with the elder and his community and the principle of "smelling his smell," Sané unfurls Afrocentric ecological insights on resilience and reconnecting with the earth among other strategies of combating the climate crisis.

E. Sasu Kwame Sewordor's "Women and Gendered Roles in the History of Diamond Mining in Colonial Ghana" shares with Sané's article a preoccupation with foregrounding submerged perspectives and histories. In Sewordor's telling, women have played an important role in the diamond mining business in Ghana even if male-centered narratives have obscured their contributions. The article traces the life and activities of Abina Nokuba, remembered in oral tradition as the woman who first discovered diamonds in the area under focus. Problematizing such gendered exclusions, Sewordor "illustrates that reading multivariant sources together can unearth fresh perspectives and project the agency of African women in the diamond enterprise from archives in colonial Ghana, wherein they punctuate dominant male voices." Sewordor's account of the Wassa mining industry is as telling for what it reveals about women in the industry as it is for its methodological implications for a gendered African historiography.


In "Violence against Muslims: Conquered, Not Fully Colonized, in the Making of the Muslim 'Other' in the Central African Republic," Suzanne Francis traces the contemporary violence against Muslims in the Central African Republic to the colonial era practices of subject formation. Combining ethnographic and archival research, Francis argues that existing accounts of contemporary violence against Muslims are incomplete. She analyzes "how ruptures of the present have deeply colonial origins and how the ways in which they are rooted in the longer past, including the ways in which the extreme brutality of the longer past impacts collective memories, shape the present."

The reverberation of a silenced past also animates Doyle D. Calhoun's "'A Kind of Literary Archeology': Excavating Morocco's Slave Past under the Protectorate (1912–1956)." Calhoun's essay buttresses the affordance of the literary text for an archaeology of stories of the enslaved in North Africa. Centering Morocco and Nouzha Fassi Fihri's *Dada l'Yakout* (2010) as his case study, Calhoun makes a case for the affective and scriptural value of the literary work for inscribing the subjectivities of the enslaved in the face of a compromised colonial archive. In Calhoun's words, "in revisiting and reimagining the slave past, recent literary works offer themselves up not as historical evidence but as *imaginative archeology*: that is, as speculative excavations of a past that rely on fiction to 'yield up a kind of truth' not available or accessible elsewhere." Calhoun concludes that these literary excavations of Morocco's slave past "offer important counternarratives to prevailing colonial and postcolonial scripts by making visible a history of violence that continues to shape contemporary dynamics."

Calhoun's investment in an understudied past finds resonance in ASR's Neglected Voices series, which invites essays on important, neglected, or understudied works by African and African diasporic thinkers whose contributions have broadened the horizons of their respective fields. We are pleased to publish the series' first article, by Richard Atimniraye Nyelade, on Chinweizu. Chinweizu is that thinker who is widely cited without a deep engagement with the breadth of his ideas. Nyelade's essay offers a corrective in "Chinweizu's Vision: Unveiling the Complexities of Pan-Africanism and African Sovereignty," locating the thinker's work as important for ongoing discourses and practices of decolonization. Two scholarly review essays on recent books in African studies sit

alongside these articles: they focus on land governance, extraction, and waste infrastructure; and the state's enmeshment with war and peace processes in Africa. The issue concludes with reviews of fascinating new titles in African studies, including a review forum on David Mwambari's *Navigating Cultural Memory: Commemorative and Narrative in Post-Genocide Rwanda*.

The preparation of this issue, as others, depends on the labor of a dedicated team of editors, the goodwill of reviewers, and the meticulous work of our managing editor, Tracey Anderson, and editorial assistant, Charlotte Bednarski. I thank all of them but particularly want to express my deepest gratitude to Benjamin Talton and Anne Bunting, who completed their term as ASR associate editors in December 2024. What a delight it has been to work with and learn from them over six years! As I wish them the best in their exciting new endeavors, I warmly welcome Dawne Curry, who joined the team in January 2025 as an associate editor. Dawne is no stranger to ASR, having served as the journal's lead book reviews editor. Our reconstituted team remains committed to publishing the highest quality Africanist scholarship and welcomes your submissions through the journal's ScholarOne portal.

Cajetan Iheka 

Editor-in-Chief

Yale University

New Haven, CT, USA

[chiefeditor@africanstudiesreview.org](mailto:chiefeditor@africanstudiesreview.org)

---

**Cite this article:** Iheka, C. 2025. "Kenneth W. Harrow: A Legacy in African Studies." *African Studies Review* 68 (1): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.32>