Summary and Keywords

Since antiquity and through the modern era African societies maintained contacts with peoples in Europe, the Near and Far East, and the Americas. Among other things, African peoples developed local forms of Christianity and Islam, contributed large amounts of gold to European medieval economies, and exported millions of slaves through the Sahara, and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Despite this, by the 19th century historians and philosophers of history thought Africa was a continent without major civilizations, whose peoples passively rested at the margins of history. These ideas persisted into the 20th century when historians undertook the challenge of writing histories that explained how communities around the world were connected to one another. In their early iterations, however, these “world narratives” were little more than histories of the Western world; Africa continued to be largely absent from these stories. After World War II, increasing interest in the history of African societies and a more generalized concern with the study of communities that were both mis- and under-represented by historical scholarship called for a revision of the goals and methods of world historians. Among the most important critiques were those from Afrocentric, African American, and Africanist scholars. Afrocentric writers argued that Africa had in fact developed an important civilization in the form of Egypt and that Egypt was the foundation of the classical world. African American and Africanist writers highlighted the contributions that peoples of African descent had made to the world economy and many cultures around the globe. Africanists also questioned whether world historical narratives, which meaningfully accounted for the richness and complexity of African experiences, could be achieved in the form of a single universal narrative. Instead, historians have suggested and produced new frameworks that could best explain the many ways in which Africa has been part of the world and its history.

Keywords: Africa, African history, Africanist history, historiography, world history, Afrocentrism, globalization

World History as the History of Civilizations

In 1981, University of Chicago historian William H. McNeill delivered an impassioned defense of his vision for world history. At the time McNeill stated:
The pursuit of world history, therefore, conforms to the canons of our profession as far as I can see, and does so just as rigorously as history on any other scale. What is different is the conceptual frame and the geographic and temporal scope of the patterns one seeks to discern. In other respects, the method is identical; the validation the same; and the truthfulness of the result neither greater nor less than what is attainable on other scales of history.\(^2\)

McNeill’s optimism as to the capacity of historical research to deliver a new form of ecumenical narrative underestimated the momentous changes that the very “canons” of the profession had undergone since the end of World War II. At the time, this miscalculation was all the more apparent to historians of Africa who, since the 1950s, had succeeded in establishing their own field as an accepted area of historical research. Scholars interested in the study of the African past have offered critiques and engaged in debates about the field of world history in general and about the extent and nature of Africa’s global relations. This engagement has come from different approaches and has taken different forms. Ultimately, these exchanges have resulted in vigorous discussions from which both African and World historical studies have emerged invigorated.

In his 2003 survey of the field of world history Patrick Manning conceded that there is no precise definition of what world history is; rather, he generally described it as “the study of past connections in the human community.”\(^3\) Needless to say, such description hinges largely on what, at any given moment in time, are construed as “connections” and, possibly more importantly, what is understood as constituting “the human community.” The present survey will describe how scholars dedicated to the study of the African past have argued for African societies to be accepted as part of the human community and have debated about the nature and extent of Africa’s relationships with other regions of the world.

African connections to other world regions date back to the very origins of the human species, and attempts to write histories of the “known world” are as old as history itself. Classical writers such as Herodotus and Thucydides sought to write the histories of what they considered the “known world.” Information about Africa was largely limited to the northern parts of the continent that bordered the Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and the Maghrib. Despite their limited knowledge, classical writers thought of Africa as an important component of the world they inhabited. From their writings, we learn about Egypt, the rise and fall of Carthage, Roman North Africa, the spread of Christianity, and the later Vandal and Islamic conquests. Further expansion of Islam into North, East, and West Africa was documented by Arabic chronicles and travel accounts such as those of Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun or the *Tarikh of Kalifa b. Khayyat*. Among other things, these writers described the thriving trade that ran through the Sahara Desert and the key role that African gold played in the development of European economies during the medieval period. During the era of European exploration, mariners and traders established commercial contacts with societies along the west and east coasts of Africa. This was soon followed by the colonization of the Americas and the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which resulted in the forced migration of millions of Africans and largely dominat-
ed European interactions with Africa until its abolition in the 19th century. Ironically, this long process of violent exchange resulted in the consolidation of ideas about Africa that emphasized the continent’s isolation and sociocultural backwardness, many of which were useful in the justification of European conquest and colonization of the African continent in the 20th century.\(^4\)

During the 19th century, the writing of history underwent a process that ultimately established its credentials as a discipline focused on the scientific exploration of the human experience. Writers of history became professional historians that were expected to receive training and whose work had to conform to established canons of practice. These gave preeminence to the careful and dispassionate examination of documentary evidence. In addition, the processes of nation-building that swept through Europe at the time gave new vigor and relevance to histories that explained the political processes by which individual states were formed. Thus, the empirical examination of primary documents became the central methodological tenet of the professional study of history and the nation state its preferred object of study. These changes allowed little room for the study of broad historical processes, which came to be of interest to scholars focused on speculative philosophies of history, and the ways in which abstract universal forces affected the historical process.

A prime example of this approach can be found in Georg W. F. Hegel’s *Lectures in the Philosophy of History* or *Lectures in the Philosophy of World History*. The lectures were delivered in 1822, 1828, and 1830 and later published in 1837. Here Hegel states that Africa is no historical part of the World, it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it- that is in the northern part- belong to the Atlantic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitionary phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which have to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.\(^5\)

Hegel was not alone in holding these views about Africa’s place in world history. In 1874 William Swinton published *Outlines of the World’s History*, where he stated that:

> Viewing history as confined to the series of leading civilized nations, we observe that it has to do with but one grand division of the human family, namely, with the Caucasian, or white race. . . . Thus we see that history proper concerns itself with but one highly developed type of mankind; for though the great bulk of the population of the globe has, during the whole recorded period, belonged, and does still belong, to other types of mankind, yet the Caucasians form the only truly historical race. . . . Of the peoples outside of the Caucasian race that have made some figure of civilization, the Chinese, Mexicans, and Peruvians stand alone. But though these races rose considerably above the savage state, their civilization was
These approaches were rooted in the concept of “civilizations” as the key objects of historical development. Civilizations were broadly defined as cultural or racial communities that shared a historical experience and had shown significant levels of cultural, political, and economic success. This level of achievement was seen as the work of abstract historical forces that allowed history to progress toward a more “civilized” state. While European or Western civilization was seen as the most advanced in this process, Africa was considered to be absent or at best marginal to this historical evolution.

The tumultuous events that shook Europe during the first half of the 20th century made historians less confident about the inevitable and progressive nature of history. Instead, some started to focus their attention on how societies and civilizations moved between periods of growth and decline. For example, in 1919 Oswald Spengler published *The Decline of the West*, and between 1931 and 1964 Arnold Toynbee authored a twelve-volume work entitled *A Study of History*. Both authors saw civilizations as distinct and independent entities and believed that the study of history consisted in understanding the principles and patterns that explained the progress and decline of civilizations.

After two world wars and as colonial empires started to crumble, historians started to question not just the primacy and progressive nature of Western societies but also the tools they had used to describe and understand them. An early and influential movement aimed to address some of these questions came to be known as the Annales school and marked a definitive break with the nation-bound histories of the 19th and first half of the 20th century and with the speculative approaches from philosophers of history. The group took its name from the French journal *Annales: Economies. Societes. Civilisations*. Solely by its name the journal announced an approach that transcended the boundaries of the traditional historical discipline and the nation state. Among its many innovations, the Annales school opened the doors to the use of new sources and the methods of various social sciences. This allowed the group to explore new areas of historical experience that went distinctly beyond political history and the narrow confines of the nation state. *Annalesistes* advocated for the study of society as a whole, and in doing so they advanced the development of fields such as social, economic, and cultural history. But the Annales group introduced methodological changes that were also largely motivated by a shift in their understanding of the work of the historian. They strongly believed, for instance, in the idea of writing a history that could respond to the needs of the 20th century and reflect the experiences of ordinary peoples. This marked a shift in the way historians perceived their work and gradually increased their focus on the study of underrepresented communities.

Many of the goals of the Annales group are exemplified in the work of French historian Fernand Braudel. He is credited for coining the term *histoire totale*, by which he meant a history that could incorporate many aspects and layers of human experience. Braudel is also known for seeking to redefine historical space and time and produce more comprehensive narratives of world history in works such as *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–*
The notion of “civilization” reappears as the key organizing principle in these works. In Braudel’s usage the term is never clearly defined, although it is clear that civilizations were characterized by certain social and political features such as urbanism and centralized and hierarchical social and political systems.

The study of world history focused on the concept of civilizations was alive and well across the Atlantic. In 1963, William McNeill published *The Rise of the West*. McNeill partially adopted Toynbee’s notion of civilization as a distinct historical entity but focused less on discerning abstract patterns of development and more on examining how different societies interacted and affected one another. In his view, a unified civilized world emerged from the ancient Middle East and expanded largely through the introduction and diffusion of agriculture throughout a Eurasian world.

Neither Braudel nor McNeill, however, attempted to transcend the Eurocentric focus and assumptions inherent in the notion of civilization. Both authors focused on the Western world as the center of world historical development and kept Africa as a marginal player in this process. Often their works reproduced some of the misconceptions and prejudices that were implied in Hegel’s thought. For instance, Braudel continued to differentiate Africa north and south of the Sahara and Muslim from Non-Muslim Africa in ways that preserve the notion that the spread of civilization came to Africa from the north and more generally from the outside, thus preserving the ideas of Africa’s historical isolation and passivity. McNeill, on his part, sees Africa at the margins of what he describes as the civilized world. In his view, even the development of Africa’s most sophisticated societies, such as those that emerged in the Western Sudan (Ghana, Mali, and Songhay) were a function of their contact with the Eurasian world.

**Afrocentric and African American Critiques of World History**

Since the first half of the 20th century Afrocentric scholars started to articulate their criticism against the prevailing absence of Africa in the writings of world historians. This critique traces its origins to the writings of the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop and was most persuasive among intellectuals of African descent in the diaspora. At its center lie two of Diop’s central arguments: first that the writing of African history was possible, and second that African civilization, specifically through Egypt, had strongly shaped the development of European culture. Such ideas came to be popularized in works such as *Black Athena*, where Martin Bernal argued that Greek civilization had African origins. The Afrocentric perspective certainly offers an alternative understanding of Africa’s relationship to the world, but as several critics have pointed out, it does so without a serious engagement with the diversity and complexity of the African experience and offers only a limited challenge to the Eurocentric values it aims to dislodge.
Another critique was offered by historians interested in the study of African American history in the United States and the history of slavery. Particularly influential were Carter G. Woodson, who founded the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916, and W. E. B Du Bois, who, through several publications, sought to dispel the view that African peoples had played no significant role in the development of humanity. In 1947, Du Bois published *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History*. Here he stated that:

> Manifestly the present plight of the world is a direct outgrowth of the past, and I have made bold to add to the many books on the subject of our present problems because I believe that certain suppressions in the historical record current in our day will lead to a tragic failure in assessing causes. More particularly, I believe that the habit, long fostered, of forgetting and detracting from the thoughts and acts of the people of Africa, is not only a direct cause of our present plight, but will continue to cause trouble until we face the facts. I shall try not to exaggerate this thread of African history in the World development, but I shall insist equally that it not be ignored.15

Du Bois’ interpretation attributes much of what he calls the “distorted development” of Europe to the attitudes toward labor that developed during the centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Du Bois largely sees this process as the central thread that has shaped European views and attitudes toward Africa and Africans and has distorted its political, social, and cultural development.16

Afrocentric and African American critiques were less informed by extensive scholarship on the African past and more on a conviction that Africa and Africans were in fact part of a human community that had affected the development of the world. More importantly, they emerged from a growing interest among historians in the experiences of societies and peoples that had been socially, politically, and economically oppressed and thus had been ignored by traditional scholarship. Afrocentric and African American writers joined a growing number of historians for whom the history of powerful societies and individuals no longer could be seen as the only or even the central story in the larger history of the world.

**Africanist Scholarship and World History**

During the 1950s and 1960s, as African nations gained independence, the new field of African history became a valid area of historical research. Growing numbers of African, European, and later American historians became involved in the task of researching and writing the history of African societies. Previous generations had deemed this exercise both unnecessary and outright impossible within the boundaries of what was considered sound history. But, as we saw in the case of the Annales school, such boundaries were beginning to expand. New African universities created history departments that were first staffed by European expatriates and later by African historians who had been trained both locally and in European institutions. Both African and non-African historians of this
early generation saw the writing of African history not just as a necessary step toward understanding the past of African societies but also as a direct challenge to the Eurocentric and narrow foundations of the historical discipline more generally.\textsuperscript{17} In light of these goals, the emergence and growth of the field of African history has played a key role in rethinking the ways in which world history could be written. At its most simple, it made the “known world” bigger and more complex by expanding the availability of serious historical scholarship about regions of the continent that had previously been ignored and made it impossible for world historians to attribute their neglect of Africa to a lack of reliable research.\textsuperscript{18} Modern scholarship has established that Africa is humanity’s ancestral home, that African societies were as diverse, complex, and resilient as the environments they colonized, and that such colonization was possible through creativity, ingenuity, and cooperation. Historians have also shown that Africa’s historical evolution did not take place in complete isolation nor was it purely contingent on external influences. In this regard, the African experiences have exhibited profoundly unique features as well as deeply universal ones.

Moreover, Africanist scholarship has also shown that the study of this diverse and complex continent requires the use of new sources and thus the development of new questions, methods, and approaches. The result has been a broad range of interests and perspectives that has affected the ways in which Africanist historians have sought to rethink the relationship between Africa and the world. For instance, in the United States and Europe, the study of Africa came to be organized around the “area studies” model, which allowed for the study of distinct regions using multidisciplinary approaches. During the 1960s and 1970s, programs of African studies proliferated and Africanist historians endeavored to explore how other disciplines could help them interpret new kinds of sources and encourage new questions. Focus on African studies also meant that scholars gave particular importance to perspectives that they thought effectively countered existing narratives about African passivity and irrelevance. This led to greater focus on things like “African agency,” “African voices,” or “African responses.” For Africanists, it was central to argue against many of the assumptions of a Eurocentric historical discipline by documenting and asserting the intrinsic value and richness of the African past and by exploring the unique contours and features of the African experience.

Despite this, many realized that Africa had never been as isolated as traditional historians had assumed. In the United states, for instance, African history came to be seen as a means to understand the history of slavery and the struggle for civil rights that was in full swing during the 1960s. Founders of African studies programs such as Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University and Phillip Curtin at the University of Wisconsin were strong advocates for the study of African history as part of the study of the African diaspora, particularly in the Americas.\textsuperscript{19} Philip Curtin sought to insert Africa in world history through groundbreaking studies such as \textit{The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census} and \textit{Cross-Cultural Trade in World History}.\textsuperscript{20} In addition, he founded the Program on Comparative World History at the University of Wisconsin that grew within the program of African history. Many Africanist historians who were trained in this program have continued to advo-
cate for a more globalized approach to the study of Africa. It is also the case that Africanist historians are often charged with the teaching of world history courses and are thus forced to both become familiar with and reflect on the shortcomings they may see in the materials they are required to teach. This further underlines the fact that, at least in the European and American contexts (where world history is in greater demand), the growing importance of world history in high school and college curricula has forced Africanists to become more engaged in debates about world history.21

During the 1960s and 1970s social science analysis came to be strongly influenced by the paradigms of modernization theory and underdevelopment. Within those frameworks, historians of Africa sought opportunities to challenge the Eurocentric view on history while defining a new place for Africa in the world. An important critique along these lines was first articulated by the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney in his 1972 book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.22 Rodney argued that Africa’s social and economic development had been stunted by the unequal relationship between Europe and African societies. Rodney’s work introduced an important question in African and world historical studies that was soon followed by other historians. Immanuel Wallerstein offered an alternative to the concept of civilization in the notion of “world systems.” The concept generally refers to a trading network around which one sees the development of a particular social, political, and economic system.23 Wallerstein’s analysis focuses mainly on what he calls the “capitalist world system,” which in his view started to develop after 1500 and came to dominate the world economy. Wallerstein’s work has proven very influential in world historical narratives, prompting the works of Andre Gunder Frank and Janet Abu-Lughod.24 A central goal of these works has been to describe and explain the development of a capitalist world system that led to the hegemonic rise of industrialized economies in Western Europe and North America while, at the same time, causing the impoverishment and marginalization of regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The notions of a center and a periphery are key organizing principles in world-system analysis. In Wallerstein’s work, Africa was incorporated into the capitalist system as part of the periphery and its relationship to the center was one of dependency. The primary processes through which Africa participated in this system were the contribution of labor through the slave trade and later as part of imperial and neocolonial economies.25 Rodney and Wallerstein wrote about a world history that highlighted the problems of the present time and centered on a world economic system characterized by growing inequality. Both were primarily motivated by the problems of poverty and underdevelopment that plagued African societies. Both tried to explain how the development of a capitalist system had come largely at the expense of societies at the margins such as Africa. In their view, it was not enough to understand how the industrialized West had ascended. It was also necessary to assess the price that societies such as those in Africa had paid to achieve that process.

Wallerstein’s world-system analysis has resulted in insightful and provocative studies of the development of the world economic system. However, it has arguably fallen short of the expectations of both Africanists and world historians. Chronologically, its focus on the emergence and development of a capitalist system that starts in the 16th century leaves the impression that Africa’s connections to the world did not exist before that time or out-
side of that context. Historians of Africa would argue that such belief is not only inaccurate but disturbingly reminiscent of notions that African history only started with the European engagement in the continent. Africanist critiques of world-systems analysis strongly object to the erasure of African agency. The particular focus of the world systems approach, by its very nature, highlights the roles of Africans as victims and dependents rather than as active and deliberate agents in their own history.\textsuperscript{26}

During the 1980s and 1990s Africanist historians were key figures in what came to be known as the “New World History,” a new wave of thinking about world historical writing that specifically tried to transcend obsolete concepts and develop more inclusive frameworks to understand how human communities had interacted in the past.\textsuperscript{27} The work of historians such as Ross Dunn, Patrick Manning, Jonathan Reynolds, Erik Gilbert, David Northrup, and Robert Harms has not just increased the presence of Africa in world history surveys, but it has also encouraged a questioning of how existing concepts, such as “civilization,” need to be carefully used or how new thematic and chronological structures can achieve better syntheses and interpretations of the global past. Ross Dunn and Laura Mitchell’s \textit{Panorama} attempts a broad survey of human history that focuses on the nature of interaction among different societies around the world; it starts by looking at those communities that lived in geographical regions and then traces how these connections started to expand to other areas. Africa starts as part of “Afroeurasia,” but as geographical connections start to be layered by commercial, cultural, and political exchange, such construction is replaced by different themes.\textsuperscript{28} On a somewhat smaller scale other authors have focused their work in the African continent but sought to place it in a more global context; two examples are Jonathan Reynolds and Erik Gilbert’s \textit{Africa in World History} and Robert Harms’s \textit{Africa in Global History}.\textsuperscript{29} Attempts to place Africa in the context of the Atlantic world have remained important among Africanists since the 1950s, and more recent examples include John Thornton’s \textit{Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400–1680} and \textit{A Cultural History of the Atlantic World}.\textsuperscript{30} On the Indian Ocean front Edward Alpers published \textit{East Africa in the Indian Ocean} and \textit{The Indian Ocean in World History}.\textsuperscript{31} Many of these authors have also been active participants in methodological and pedagogical discussions about the goals and methods that world history ought to adopt. No Africanist has been more vocal in these debates than Patrick Manning, who published \textit{Navigating World History} in 2003 where he surveyed the field of world history and proposed ways in which it could move forward. In this and other places, Manning credits the historical revolution from which African history had emerged as a major source for the reinvigoration of world and global history since the 1960s. African history, for instance, had benefitted from the way in which new approaches such as social and cultural history were breathing new life into more traditional ones such as political and economic history. Modern world history, which has largely privileged politics and economics in its analysis, could also benefit from such shifts in perspective. For instance, Manning suggested, world historical writing should seek to expand its study of non-elite populations. In his view, such a shift of perspective would have the added bonus of increasing the attention given to Africans and their diaspora, thus increasing our understanding of Africa’s place in the world.\textsuperscript{32}
Africanist scholars have also engaged in debates about globalization as a new approach to the study of how human communities have interacted in the past. For instance, Anthony Hopkins has argued that the study of globalization can offer a “miraculous cure” to the shortcomings of existing world history in that it offers a broad sounding board to the questions and knowledge of historians interested in the study of all manner of global connections. Among the intriguing contributions of this approach is the notion of “waves of globalization,” emphasizing the idea that globalization is not a single unilinear process nor one that has started only recently or has centered in a particular area of the world. For instance, Christopher Bayly has examined the concept of “archaic globalization,” which in his view is “an ideal type or heuristic device. It can help us investigate discontinuous and ruptured processes that brought large areas of the world into contact with each other before the age of the nation state and the international industrial economy.” In the same volume John Lonsdale uses the globalization context to explore the history of ethnicity in Africa and warns that Africa’s “global commercial and ideological connections have filtered through specific networks such as ethnic diasporas, chartered companies, Islamic brotherhoods, cartels, Christian churches and armed mafias. The impersonal markets suggested by the term ‘globalization,’ are a fiction with respect to Africa.” The globalization approach is not intended to be a new form of organizing principle that will enable the writing of a new universal narrative. Its goal is to produce discreet thematic studies that may open conversations and debates about the many and complex ways in which societies around the world have interacted with each other.

In their quest to re-examine Africa’s place in the world, historians of Africa have vigorously debated the extent to which Africa’s historical development has been determined by “external” influences. This question has been particularly important when writing about the history of Islam and Christianity in Africa or in the extensive literature about colonialism. In Colonialism in Question Frederick Cooper laments Africanists’ initial disregard for the study of colonial histories and encourages a new examination of the diverse and unique ways in which the colonial experience changed the world for both metropolitan and subject societies. Jean Francois Bayart has suggested yet another model for understanding the relationship between Africa and the world by introducing the concept of “extraversion.” In his view, Africa’s relationship to the rest of the world is best described as “baroque” and “proceeds by reusing existing practices or by juxtaposing them; by processes of sedimentation, transfers of meaning and the manufacture of identities which are subsequently deemed authentic.” The paradigm of extraversion aims to minimize what he sees as a sterile distinction between African internal and external dynamics. Bayart is particularly concerned with the notion that exploring the history of economic dependence and colonialism must come at the expense of minimizing African agency. He argues that Africans actively participated in processes that have led to the increasing dependence of their societies, sometimes opposing them and at other times supporting them. In his view, this proves that strategies of extraversion are not only prevalent in African history, but also that political or economic subjection does not equate with inaction: “New research underlines more clearly than previously, just how much Africans have participated in the processes which have led to the insertion of their societies as a depen-
Africanist engagement in the writing of world history has also come in the form of pointed critiques of the way in which traditional world histories have portrayed African societies. Steven Feierman, for instance, has remarked on the “unproblematized” use of a concept such as “civilization,” which is strongly rooted in European historical discourse and conveys notions of an evolutionary progression contingent on decidedly European markers of social and cultural development. Maghan Keita sees the concept of civilization as one of many constructions inherited from the Enlightenment that reveals how “We are subject to racialized historiographies and epistemologies” and that such racialization “has posed a serious impediment to any consideration of Africa in the history of the world.”

These critiques led Feierman to wonder about the consequences of “the relationship between the crisis of historical representation that came about when historians began to hear the voices of those who had been voiceless, and the more general epistemological crisis affecting all the social sciences and humanities.” If the history of Africa in world history is any indication, Feierman suggests, both processes fed one another, and among the casualties of this encounter was the belief that a universal history could be written. The more historians of Africa sought to document the African past the more they had to go beyond the traditional historical methods, questions, and sources. At the same time, consecutive attempts to write new universal histories found themselves incapable of reflecting the scope and complexity of African experiences. Should this mark an end to the search for universal narratives or should we just simply forego the expectation that Africa can be meaningfully written into world history?

In a similar critique, Joseph Miller has argued that the knowledge and methodology produced by Africanist history demands a markedly different approach to any attempt to reframe the place of Africa in world history. In Miller’s view, greater knowledge about Africa has taught us that Africans often held views of themselves and the world around them that stood in stark contrast to those of societies in other parts of the world, and that trying to make those worldviews commensurable is a disservice not just to Africans but to historical understanding more generally. He thus advocates for what he calls a “multicentric” approach to world history.

An awareness of the multiplicity of perspectives inherent in all history must mark the future of the profession. The sphere of unperceived chaos somewhere “out there” is vanishing. We are all becoming neighbors. Fewer and fewer “great unknowns” thus remain, and the frustrations of failure are visited more intensely, and at greater removes, on the “others” to whom we are growing close enough to demonize. Perhaps the resulting agonies are merely growing pains. But most people live too close to the edge to have the space in which to embrace difference with any confidence. Even so, “our story” must now incorporate everyone’s stories.
Frederick Cooper, on his part, argued that the concept of globalization is too all-encompassing to be able to reveal anything meaningful about the experiences of distinct, diverse, and ever-changing societies around the world and has the danger of producing abstract and ahistorical interpretations of past experiences.

The incessant talk about globalization—the word, the images associated with it, and arguments for and against “it”—both reflects and reinforces fascination in boundless connectivity. Yet scholars do not need to choose between a rhetoric of containers and a rhetoric of flows. They do not need to decide whether Africa is part of a necessary and universal trend or a peculiar and frustrating exception, but they can instead analyze how it and other regions are linked and bounded and how those links and boundaries shift over time. Activists are not faced with a singular force to oppose or promote, but they . . . need to understand with precision the patterns of interconnection, the choices and constraints which they imply, and the consequences of different sorts of actions along different sorts of interfaces. Not least of the questions which we should be asking concern the present: What is actually new? What are the mechanisms of ongoing change? And above all, can we develop a differentiated vocabulary that encourages thinking about connections and their limits?45

African Histories and Histories of the World

It is undeniable that critiques by Afrocentric, African American, and Africanist scholars have changed the ways in which Africa is represented in world histories today. This does not mean, however, that Eurocentric assumptions and models have been completely dislodged. In response to some of the criticism directed at his work, William McNeill himself recently offered if not apologies, at least explanations for the shortcomings of his original interpretations. He explained that at the time of writing The Rise of the West the breadth and depth of Africanist scholarship was still in its infancy, and he had no way of reflecting on the complexity of African societies. He also stated that Africa had not been seat to a major civilization, and that this made it unsuitable to be included in a civilizational approach other than at the margins.46 These remarks underline the naïve expectation that in the writing of world history the challenge of Eurocentrism is one that can be attended primarily by the empiricist methods of traditional historical practice. In this regard, world history has proven to be more than “just history.” Its pursuit and its shortcomings have revealed the fundamental limitations of the historical discipline as it had been defined, both in terms of questions and methods and also in terms of the constituencies it sought to address. In the words of Robert Moore:

Eurocentrism is now sustained not by conviction or complacency, or even by the weight of inertia contained within the traditional hegemony of European and American historiography, so much as by the fact that it is deeply embedded in both the main forms currently available for the writing of synthetic world history, the comparative study of civilizations and world-systems theory. The classical social
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theory in which both are rooted is itself largely a product of industrial capitalism, and largely designed to explain it.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus, it is likely that new representations of Africa in world history will have to coexist and compete with persistently Eurocentric approaches. This will continue to be the case as long as world historical accounts are primarily written by European and American historians and for European and American audiences. The road toward producing more diverse and rich world narratives should include mechanisms by which historians throughout the world can appreciate and argue for the relevance of their work in a global context.\textsuperscript{48} What is clear is that new frameworks in world history will have to account for questions that Afrocentric, African American, and Africanist historians have tried to answer themselves and that have become central in the writing of modern history: Who is history written for? Who has a right to write it? Are the methods, questions, and perspectives of modern historiographical practice capable of producing the study of societies whose historical trajectories differ from those of Europe and the Western world? Early on, historians of Africa came to realize that perspective matters, and that units of analysis such as the concept of “civilization” privilege certain kinds of experience while diminishing and obscuring others.

It is also the case that scholars dedicated to the study of Africa’s past have been influenced by debates about Africa’s place in the world. It has become increasingly clear that the African experience is a construct that acquires meaning in a diversity of contexts: continental, regional, and local. Any attempt to define it, locate it, or explain it requires a clear-eyed interrogation of epistemological approaches, methodological tools, and avenues for intellectual dialogue. As David Northrup has said, “Africa’s complexities and commonalities admit of many (simultaneous) perspectives.”\textsuperscript{49} The search for a single “authentic” narrative of the African past may turn out to be as futile a pursuit as the search for a single universal history. As Keita rightfully concludes, “Can there be a world history? No. But there certainly exist and will exist histories of the world.”\textsuperscript{50}

Discussion of the Literature

Afrocentric and African American historians were among the first to question the marginalization of Africa in world historical narratives and to provide alternative interpretations. The Afrocentric critique is best represented in the work of Cheikh Anta Diop (for example, \textit{The African Origin of Civilization}).\textsuperscript{51} Diop did not question the concept of civilization that has been used to organize world historical narratives but rather argued that Africa had in fact produced one major civilization in the form of Egypt and that it was central to the development of the modern world. African American historians also questioned the ways in which the experiences of African peoples were minimized or ignored in world historical narratives. In \textit{The World and Africa}, W. E. B. du Bois argued that Africa’s fraught relationship with Europe was the root cause of the many problems that shook Europe during the first half of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{52} Africa specialists have offered both critiques of existing world histories as well as new interpretative frameworks that reinterpret Africa’s
relationship to societies around the world. Important areas of research have included histories of slavery and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and more broadly the place of Africa in the Atlantic world. Particularly important in these areas are the works of Walter Rodney (How Europe Underdeveloped Africa), Immanuel Wallerstein (The World-System and Africa and The Modern World-System), Phillip Curtin (Cross Cultural Trade in World History), and John Thornton (A Cultural History of the Atlantic World). Edward Alpers has examined and reflected on the place of Africa in the historical context of the Indian Ocean (East Africa and the Indian Ocean). Africanist scholars have produced surveys of African history aimed at examining the history of the continent in the context of world history (see Erik Gilbert and Jonathan Reynolds, Africa in World History; Robert Harms, Africa in Global History with Sources; Christopher Ehret, An African Classical Age; and Christopher Ehret, The Civilizations of Africa). The spread and impact of world religions is another area where Africanist writers have made valuable inroads (see Nehemiah Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, The History of Islam in Africa; David Robinson, Muslim Societies in African History; and Elizabeth Isichei, A History of Christianity in Africa). Historians of Africa have produced a wealth of studies that explore and reflect on the history of European colonization. For important critiques of how this particular relationship has been studied by historians of Africa see Frederick Cooper’s Colonialism in Question and Jean Francois Bayart’s article “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion.”

Critical works on the impact of African history in world historiography can be found in the works of Patrick Manning (see Navigating World History, “African and World Historiography,” and “Locating Africans on the World Historical Stage”). The edited collection The New World History includes valuable contributions from the perspective of Africanist scholars such as Jonathan Reynolds, Joseph Miller, David Northrup, and Frederick Cooper. Journals such as History Connected, Historically Speaking, and World History Bulletin have also published special editions devoted to examining the place of Africa and African history in the evolution of world history.

Primary Sources

There are important projects, collections, and databases that contain primary sources about the diverse connections of Africa to other parts of the world. One of the most important is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Database, which has information about 36,000 slave voyages. The University of McGill hosts the Indian Ocean World MCRI, which collects information about regions adjacent to the Indian Ocean. Northwestern University is home to the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies. Among its most relevant collections are the Arabic Manuscript from West Africa and 16th–Early Twentieth Century Maps of Africa. The Library of Congress hosts the World Digital Library with the support of UNESCO. The site contains maps, images, and documentary resources. Also at the Library of Congress one can find the Islamic Manuscript from Mali Collection, which holds thirty-two manuscripts from the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library and the Library of Cheick Zayni Baye of Boujbeha. A separate project dedicated to the collection of Islamic manuscripts is the Timbouctou Manuscripts Project, supported by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung and the University of Cape Town. It supports research in the multiple
The University of Wisconsin holds the collection *Africa Focus: Sights and Sounds of a Continent*. The collection contains 3000 slides, 500 photographs, and fifty hours of sounds from different parts of the continent. The Cooperative Africana Microform Project held at Center for Research Libraries, Global Resources Network, provides guides to multiple collections including the *Timbuktu Manuscript Digitization Project*, *South African Indian Pamphlets*, and *Pan-Africanist Congress of South Africa* among many others. A large collection of African Newspapers between 1800 and 1922 has been made available by the World Newspaper Archives. This is available to subscribing institutions. Finally, the Afriterra Foundation preserves original rare maps of Africa and makes them available in a digital form. Their collection contains more than 2700 maps.

**Further Reading**


Africa in the World: History and Historiography


Notes:


(2.) McNeil, “A Defence,” 86.
Africa in the World: History and Historiography


Africa in the World: History and Historiography


Africa in the World: History and Historiography


(38.) Bayart and Ellis, “Africa in the World,” 251.

(39.) Bayart and Ellis, “Africa in the World,” 220.

(40.) Feierman, “Africa in History,” 45-46.


(42.) Feierman, “Africa in History,” 51.


(50.) Keita, “Africa and the Construction,” 300.


(52.) Du Bois, *The World and Africa*. 
Africa in the World: History and Historiography

(53.) Rodney, How Europe; Wallerstein, World-System and Africa; Wallerstein, Modern World-System; Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade; and Thornton, A Cultural History.

(54.) Alpers, East Africa.


(56.) Levtzion and Pouwels, History of Islam; Robinson, Muslim Societies in African History; and Isichei, History of Christianity.

(57.) Cooper, Colonialism in Question; and Bayart and Ellis, “Africa in the World.”


(60.) History Connected 8, no. 1 (February 2011); Historically Speaking; Finding Africa In World History 6, no. 2 (2004); and World History Bulletin XXII, no. 1 (2006).

(61.) Voyages, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

(62.) Indian Ocean World MCRI Database.


(64.) World Digital Library, UNESCO.

(65.) Islamic Manuscripts from Mali, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress.

(66.) Timbouctou Manuscripts Project.

(67.) Africa Focus: Sights and Sounds of a Continent.

(68.) Cooperative Africana Microform Project, Center for Research Libraries, Global Resources Network.

(69.) Afriterra: The Cartographic Free Library.

Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia
Department of History, Montclair State University