

# Eyes on the Prize: Toward a Reimagining of the Role of Awards in African Studies

Kristin D. Phillips  and Kristen E. Cheney 

**Abstract:** Phillips and Cheney preface an analysis of the ASA's Graduate Student Paper Prize in a discussion with past Prize winners with a review of the sociological literature on awards and scholarly critiques of the history of African Studies. They find that the Prize has played an important role in amplifying and recognizing the voices of young scholars who have pushed the thematic and theoretical boundaries of the field. But these contributions are attended by limitations that the ASA should remediate as they consider the GSP Prize in relation to efforts to realize anti-colonial and social justice-oriented approaches to knowledge production.

**Résumé :** Phillips et Cheney introduisent une analyse du Prix de l'article des étudiants diplômés de l'ASA lors d'une discussion avec d'anciens lauréats avec une revue de la littérature sociologique sur les prix et les critiques scientifiques de l'histoire des études africaines. Le Prix a joué un rôle important dans l'amplification et la reconnaissance des voix des jeunes chercheurs qui ont repoussé les limites thématiques et théoriques du domaine. Mais ces contributions sont accompagnées de limitations auxquelles l'ASA devrait remédier lorsqu'elle examine le Prix SGP en relation avec les efforts visant à mettre en œuvre des approches anticoloniales et axées sur la justice sociale en matière de production de connaissances.

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*African Studies Review*, Volume 66, Number 2 (June 2023), pp. 305–326

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.130

**Resumo :** Phillips e Cheney apresentam uma análise do Graduate Student Paper Prize (Prémio GSP, atribuído ao melhor ensaio de alunos de licenciatura) da ASA, num debate com antigos vencedores deste prémio, revisitando a literatura sociológica sobre a atribuição de prémios e sobre críticas académicas da história dos Estudos Africanos. O prémio tem desempenhado um papel importante no que toca à divulgação e ao reconhecimento dos jovens académicos cujas vozes têm alargado os limites temáticos e teóricos deste campo de estudo. Estes contributos, porém, sofrem de algumas limitações que a ASA deve procurar superar, estabelecendo uma ligação entre o Prémio GSP e os esforços por desenvolver a produção de conhecimento através de abordagens anticoloniais e vocacionadas para a justiça social.

**Keywords:** knowledge production; history; colonialism; African Studies; awards; area studies

(Received 4 November 2021 – Revised 12 July 2022 – Accepted 18 July 2022)

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If we open the walls of our institutions physically and epistemically...our contributions to the world will be sharper, more just, and infinitely more rigorous in understanding and shaping the world. (Kessi, Marks, & Ramugondo 2020)

In 2001, the African Studies Association's Board of Directors established the annual prize for the best graduate student paper presented at the previous year's Annual Meeting. Each year, in the months following the annual meeting, graduate students who have presented papers have the opportunity to submit them for prize consideration along with a letter of support from their faculty advisor. A committee of scholars vets the entries, chooses a winner, and announces it at the following year's Annual Meeting. The author of the winning essay is invited to submit it to the *African Studies Review*, the ASA's flagship journal, for expedited peer review. If it is recommended for publication, the article appears in the following June issue.

The authors of this article accepted an open invitation from *ASR* editor Benjamin Lawrance to all published Graduate Student Paper (GSP) Prize winners to offer some commentary on the role of the award in ASA and the lives of its awardees. An initial scan of the authors' identities, affiliations, and articles, and our own identifications as White scholars teaching in North American and European research institutions, motivated us to reach out to this dynamic group of scholars to organize a conversation about the life, past, and future of the GSP Prize in a moment of historical transformation and reckoning within African Studies at large. In a virtual focus group discussion in June 2021, we spoke to past winners of the award whose pieces were subsequently published in *ASR*. The few who were unable to join us submitted their reflections via email. They shared insights about the relevance of the GSP Prize for their personal careers, how they think the award-winning papers have influenced the field of African Studies, and reflections on the

structure of the award as it relates to ongoing conversations about decolonization in African Studies.

We preface this discussion with past Prize winners with a review of the sociological literature on awards, scholarly critiques of the history of African Studies in the United States, and an analysis of Prize winner demographics and institutional affiliations. We argue that the GSP Prize has played an important role in drawing into the ASA rising young scholars who have pushed the thematic and theoretical boundaries of the field. It has also offered these young scholars valuable recognition and an opportunity to publish early in their careers. But these contributions have limitations that the ASA and the *ASR* should remediate as they consider the GSP Prize in the context of today's academic climate—a climate that encourages self-reflection and anti-colonial, social justice-oriented approaches to knowledge production. There is therefore room for improvement and a re-envisioning of the role of awards in the Association's ongoing efforts to decolonize African Studies.

### **Consecration, Induction, and the Field of Knowledge: Theorizing Awards**

Western academia has long been premised on the organization of scholars not simply into localized interdisciplinary institutions of higher learning, but also into more specialized national and international academies, learned societies, and professional associations. This form of associational life emerged and proliferated between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. As James F. English describes in *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, these associations developed a widespread custom of awarding prizes, medals, and trophies to individuals from diverse fields of cultural production and presenting them with “special tokens of esteem” in “a highly ritualized theater of gestures and counter-gestures” (2005:1, 5).

Such “tokens of esteem” have played a particularly important role in the field of scholarly production, which holds itself to standards at least partially outside the marketplace of creative supply and popular demand. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) theorized this distinction as one between a “field of restricted production” (i.e., scholarship) and a “field of large-scale cultural production” (i.e., mass consumption). The former involves cultural goods produced for an audience of other producers (i.e., peers, or in Bourdieu's words, “privileged clients and competitors”). The latter tends to be governed by market principles of mass consumption, where success in the field is determined by the scale of uptake by non-producers of a particular cultural product. A scholarly community such as African Studies is a field of restricted production that has developed its own criteria for evaluating its cultural goods, though a sub-field of large-scale production (for example, textbooks for undergraduate audiences or popular novels and films) also exists within this restricted space.

In his 2008 article on “Prize Proliferation,” Joel Best asserts that awards-giving tends to be constituted by three stages: establishment, selection, and presentation. A group of people *establish* an award by defining its terms and selection processes, identifying sources for its costs, and announcing it. An appointed group encourages submission and *selects* who will receive the award in a given cycle. They then announce the result and *present* the award to its recipient. Awards-granting is certainly generous (benefitting recipients with prestige and its attendant material rewards) and generative (incentivizing creativity, association, and affiliation). However, Best notes that winners are not the only beneficiaries. Awards-granting confers prestige and reputation on judges and on the institutions affiliated with winners. Awards ceremonies affirm the audience, its values, and its solidarity. And awards serve the granting organizations themselves by establishing and confirming the organization’s monopoly over what Bourdieu calls the “consecration” of scholarly producers (1993; Wacquant 2013). To put it more clearly, awards tend to lay claim to a particular field of knowledge, and they constitute and communicate the legitimacy and authority of an organization to establish standards, set agendas, and police the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Associations are not natural phenomena, emerging with clear borders, identities, and purposes. Rather they require considerable social and political work to cultivate a sense of purpose, definition, authority, and belonging to a knowledge community. In this article we take stock of the ASA GSP Prize with an aim to assess, and perhaps retool, the social work that is accomplished by awards in African Studies.

### Awards, Associations, and the Worlds of African Studies

A rich scholarship has documented the trajectory and development of scholarship on Africa in the twentieth century in academic institutions throughout Africa, North America, and Europe (Ampofo 2016; Anyidoho 2018; Branch 2018; Guedj 2016; Iheka & Lawrance 2021; Martin 2011; Pritchett 2014; Robinson 2007; Zeleza 1997). In the United States, some of the deepest roots emerged at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) under the leadership of intellectual greats such as sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and historian Carter G. Woodson (Pritchett 2014), and in conversation with the African intellectuals and students they hosted, who for many decades were not welcome at predominantly White institutions in the US (Martin 2011).<sup>1</sup> At White institutions, the first scholars to study Africa in the United States tended to be White anthropologists, who in many cases ignored and devalued the existing contributions of Black scholars in the United States. There was, in the first half of the twentieth century, little scholarly interest or expertise about Africa in other disciplines at predominantly White institutions.

The African Studies Association was established in 1957 under the leadership of Melville J. Herskovits, an anthropologist at Northwestern University. The United States-based organization was born of a desire to redress what was seen as a lack of interest, attention, and support for the study of the

African continent in American higher education. The Association initially defined and legitimated its claims on knowledge production about the African continent in terms of its alleged detachment and disinterest from historical relations of lineage, geography, and colonialism (Gershenhorn 2007; Herskovits 1958; Allman 2019), that is, on a North American Whiteness that saw itself as separate from, and thus more objective than, both African-American and European scholarship related to the continent. This argument, and indeed Herskovits himself, explicitly sidelined the work of Du Bois and Woodson. Meanwhile, such claims were legitimated and strengthened by support from the US government, the Ford Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation. Over the next several decades, African Studies Centers funded by Title VI of the Higher Education Act (Pritchett 2014) were founded across the US.<sup>2</sup> Such centers, generally situated in historically White Research I universities, promoted the study of African languages and area studies with strategic importance for the United States' security. Neither the United States' own investment in Cold War struggles over Africa, nor its legacies of enslavement, racism, and ongoing dispossession of peoples of African descent in the US entered the accounting of White scholars' "impartiality."

The ASA today "encourages the production and dissemination of historical and contemporary knowledge about Africa," including its "political, economic, social, cultural, artistic, scientific, and environmental landscapes" (ASA website, accessed September 7, 2021). Through its journals, annual meetings, exchange programs, and enhancement of scholarly and policy networks, the organization boasts over 2000 members. For many scholars, the ASA has provided a refuge from disciplinary scholarly associations where theory and research related to the African continent is often marginalized as too exceptional to contribute to mainstream scholarship. As Adam Branch has argued in his analysis of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cambridge, it is the work of African studies organizations to insist that

African political thought is political thought, in addition to being African Studies; African economic history is economic history and African literature is literature in addition to being African Studies. As Elísio Macamo puts it, "Africa is what it is because of what the world is like, and vice versa. So we study Africa to understand the world." (2018:85)

To be sure, ASA—like other African Studies institutions—has helped to incubate and center scholarship related to the African continent, supporting Branch's assertion that disciplinary knowledge can be honed through the study of Africa, and that Africa can help us know the world. But, following in the footsteps of other giants such as Akosua Adomako Ampofo (2016), Amina Mama (2007), William G. Martin (2011), Oyekan Owomoyelo (1994), James Pritchett (2014), and Pearl Robinson (2007), historian Jean Allman (2019) has documented the "hard-wiring of white privilege" into the structures and processes of African Studies through gate-keeping mechanisms (such as the

awarding of prizes) that obscure the intellectual leadership and contributions of Black scholars and amplify the voices of White-trained White scholars.

Notably, Robinson observed that Title VI centers and their networks were one of only three “worlds” of African area studies; that is, “three spatially-differentiated spheres of endeavor” (2007:235) that also include diasporic scholars, including HBCUs on the one hand, and African universities and research networks based on the African continent. She argues,

Each of these *Worlds* has its own complex sociology of intellectual pace-setters, respected elders, epistemological debates, citation conventions, overlapping memberships, and identity politics configured around a mix of symbolic and substantive associations with the production and validation of knowledge about Africa. (2007:235)

In addition to Robinson’s three US- and Africa-based worlds of inquiry, there are also regionally based African Studies organizations in Europe (AEGIS), Australasia, and the Pacific (AFSAAP), as well as country-based associations such as those in Canada, China, Germany, India, Japan, The Netherlands, and Russia.

Despite the hubris of the African Studies Association’s moniker, which suggests the universalism and comprehensiveness of its knowledge production, the ASA’s claims to knowledge are unsurprisingly more parochial, tending to represent mainly (though not absolutely) the first of Robinson’s worlds. That is, ASA membership has tended to be dominated by scholars in historically White Research I institutions, although African Studies scholars themselves at these institutions represent a wider range of origins and identities. The other two of Robinson’s “worlds” are identifiable and bound together not only by broadly shared self-definitions, but also by their institutionalization in other membership-based scholarly associations.

In the diasporic world, the study of Africa has been part of intellectual life since long before 1957. As William G. Martin relates, “...propelled from below by black student demands at historically black colleges and universities—the [B]lack study of an international Africa became steadily more widespread.... Carter G. Woodson led the way” (2011:69–70). In institutional form, this diasporic network includes organizations such as the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSAs), which emerged directly from Black Caucus protests at the ASA meetings in Los Angeles in 1968 and Montreal in 1969 (Guedj 2016), the National Association of African-American Studies (NAAAS), and the Association for the Study of Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD), along with a plethora of diasporic discipline-specific organizations.

Unsurprisingly (and indeed it is very revealing that we even feel the need to call attention to this), African institutions also have a rich history of African Studies. Martin observes that it is rarely acknowledged that as African Studies expanded in the United States,

it was met by a broad emerging consensus by scholars on the continent: the production of knowledge needed to take place in continental Africa, by Africans... [T]hroughout the 1970s and 80s African scholars and Euro-North American scholars often pursued their work quite separate from one another, with African research centers rarely engaging in collaborative research with Northerners by choice. (2011:75)

Of course today there are many African scholars working in North American, European, and African institutions who are actively engaged trans-continentially. Still, however, many Africa-based scholars do prioritize memberships with Africa-based institutions such as the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), university-based African Studies centers such as those at the Universities of Ghana, Ibadan, Lagos, Addis Ababa, and Cape Town, as well as continent-based disciplinary organizations whose knowledge production and relevance to the continent is more self-evident.<sup>3</sup> This rift bears important consequences for scholars on the continent, as well as for scholarship on Africa. As Professor Nana Akua Anyidoho of the University of Ghana observed of the US-centrism of African Studies at the 2018 ASA Annual Meeting:

We have a dominant academy in the most dominant country in the world with both black and white academics studying and relating to a continent whose academics are often sidelined in the investigation of their own societies. And that's very important.

This history points to the segmentation of African Studies that has occurred throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Joel Best argues that contemporary social conditions foster this kind of segmentation: "...they make it easy for people to break off to form new social worlds" (2008). This segmentation, in turn, compels a desire for legitimation and distinction:

Emerging social worlds must be able to articulate how they differ from older, better-established social worlds, to argue that they have legitimacy as separate entities. The need for legitimation will be especially great when a social world risks being perceived as of marginal or of relatively low status. Establishing, awarding, and publicizing prizes are important legitimation processes. (2008:14)

In short, we are interested in the way that awards do important work in African Studies to define and congeal the worlds of its scholarship. The ASA alone boasts fifteen awards. We are not here to argue that fifteen is too few nor too many, but rather to pose questions about what work such awards are doing in terms of knowledge production—particularly when it comes to the issues of induction, consecration, and segmentation mentioned above—and to ask if they might do more, or at least different, work.

## The African Studies Association Graduate Student Paper Prize

As previously noted, the GSP Prize emerged in 2001 to recognize an exceptional paper by a graduate student who presented at the previous year's annual meeting. The winner has the opportunity to develop the paper for publication in *ASR*. What distinguishes the GSP Prize from other awards such as the ASA Book Prize (formerly the Herskovits Prize), the Ogot Book Prize, and the ASA Film Prize is its focus on emerging scholars. A specific aim of the award is to identify, induct, even "capture" students at a moment when they may be exploring and soon committing to one or more of several possible scholarly communities. The GSP Prize therefore functions to assist with the social reproduction of the organization (by providing an incentive for students to attend the annual meeting) and to expand the core of the organization by cultivating and amplifying promising young scholarly voices. Below, we discuss the analytics of the prize winners to see how they might map onto the patterns of knowledge productions discussed above.

### *The Prize Winners and their Papers*

In the twenty years since the Prize was established, nineteen paper Prizes have been awarded (there is no record of a Prize being awarded in 2012).<sup>4</sup> The papers that were recognized deal with varied topics: from economics, to election violence, to enamelware. Twelve of the nineteen Prize-winning papers were published in or are currently in press with *ASR*. Four of the seven papers not published in *ASR* appear to have been published elsewhere (one in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, two in sub-disciplinary journals; and the last as part of a monograph). Three Prize-winning papers do not appear to have been published either as journal articles or book chapters.

We reviewed available online biographies to assess the demographics of the Prize winners, relying on pronoun choice as a proxy for gender identity (see [Table 1](#)). The gender of Prize winners appears to be roughly half female and half male. Only three of the nineteen explicitly identify roots (fully or partly) on the African continent. While this may indicate that gender equity has progressed in the field, equity in race, ethnicity, and nationality still lags.

We analyzed the institutional affiliations of the Prize winners (see [Table 2](#)) and found that fifteen of nineteen were PhD students or candidates at Research I institutions in the United States. Fourteen of these fifteen are also generally considered to be predominantly White institutions (PWIs).<sup>5</sup> Many of these institutions (University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Florida, Harvard University, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, University of Illinois, and UCLA) are or have been designated as Title VI institutions. The other four Prize winners were PhD students or candidates at elite European universities: Cambridge University (UK), Lund University (Sweden), and the University of Atwerp (Belgium). Significantly, none of the Prize-winners studied at HBCUs in the United States or at universities on the

**Table 1. Prizewinning papers since establishment of the award**

Year of Award	Author	Paper Title	Paper Published in ASR
2002	Benjamin N. Lawrance	"La Révolte Des Femmes: Economic Upheaval and the Gender of Political Authority in Lomé, Togo, 1931-33"	Yes
2003	Staffan Lindberg	"The 'Democraticness' of Multiparty Elections: Participation, Competition, and Legitimacy in Africa"	No
2004	Kristen E. Cheney	"'Village Life is Better than Town Life': Identity, Migration, and Development in the Lives of Ugandan Child Citizens"	Yes
2005	Abena Dove Osseo-Asare	"'Dangerous Properties': Poisoned Arrows and the Case of <i>Strophanthus hispidus</i> in Colonial Gold Coast, 1885–1922"	No
2006	Severine Autesserre	"Local Violence, National Peace? Local Dynamics of Violence during the Transition in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo"	Yes
2007	Habtmu Mengistie Tegege	"Revisiting Land Tenure in Eighteenth Century Gondarine Ethiopia: Zéga and the Land Charter of Däbrä-Sehay Qwesqam Church"	Yes
2008	Kristin D. Phillips	"Consuming the State: Hunger, Healing, and Citizenship in Rural Tanzania"	Yes
2009	Bert Ingelaere	"Peasants, Power, and Ethnicity: Centre and Periphery in the Knowledge Construction in/on Post-Genocide Rwanda"	Yes
2010	Laura Weinstein	"The Politics of Government Expenditures in Tanzania: 1999–2007"	Yes

*(Continued)*

**Table 1. (Continued)**

<b>Year of Award</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Paper Title</b>	<b>Paper Published in ASR</b>
2011	Noel Twagiramungu	"The Anatomy of Leadership: A view-from-within Post-genocide Rwanda"	No
2012	<i>No award on record</i>		
2013	Jamie Miller	"Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War"	No
2014	Catherine Porter	"Bound and Unbound Identities: The Reconstruction of Katanga's Nationhood Struggle"	No
2015	Kathleen Klaus	"Contentious Land Claims and the Non-Escalation of Violence: Evidence from Kenya's Coast Region"	Yes
2016	Moritz Nagel	"Precolonial Segmentation Revisited: Initiation Societies, Talking Drums and the Ngondo Festival in the Cameroons"	No
2017	Amanda B. Edgell	"Vying for the 'Man's Seat': Constituency Magnitude and Mainstream Female Candidature for Non-Quota Seats in Uganda and Kenya"	Yes
2018	Shaonan Liu	"Symbol of Wealth and Prestige: A Social History of Chinese-made Enamelware in Northern Nigeria"	Yes
2019	Victoria Mary Gorham	"Displaying the Nation: Museums and Nation-Building in Tanzania and Kenya"	Yes
2020	Allen Xiao	"Lagos in Life: Placing Cities in Lived Experiences"	No
2021	Justin Haruyama	"Shortcut English: A Pidgin Language and Symbolic Power at a Chinese-operated Mine in Zambia"	Accepted

**Table 2. Institutional affiliation of Prize winners**

Institution	# of Papers	Total
<i>US-Based Universities Research I Universities</i>		15
– University of Wisconsin-Madison	3	
– University of Florida	2	
– Harvard University	1	
– Michigan State University	1	
– New York University	1	
– Northwestern University	1	
– Stanford	1	
– Tufts University	1	
– University of California, Santa Cruz	1	
– University of California, Los Angeles	1	
– University of California, Davis	1	
– University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	1	
<i>US-Based Universities (Historically Black)</i>		0
<i>Universities on the African Continent</i>		0
<i>European-Based Research Universities</i>		4
– Cambridge University	2	
– University of Antwerp	1	
– Lund University Sweden	1	

African continent—indicating that the Prize is still centered in predominantly White institutions of the United States and Europe.

We were also interested to note whether Prize-winning papers tended to study certain parts of the continent or certain countries more than others (see Table 3). A total of five papers were centered on West African countries and contexts (Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and Togo); nine papers related to Eastern and Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda); two focused on Southern African contexts in Angola and Zambia; and three included cross-national analysis. Significantly, none of the prize-winning papers focuses on northern Africa, reflecting perhaps what Guy C.Z. Mahone called “the contrived [Africanist] distinction between Africa south of the Sahara and North Africa” (1971, in Zeleza 1997:197) rooted in colonial pasts that bifurcated sub-Saharan Africa from the rest of the continent, not only geographically but culturally and politically. Nor does any paper examine diasporic or trans-continental contexts—raising questions about the legacy of historical divisions in the ASA about what constitutes African Studies.

The disciplinary orientation of Prize winners (see Table 4) was concentrated in two fields: History (7) and Political Science (6). Other disciplines represented were Anthropology (3), Geography (2), and interdisciplinary

**Table 3. Geographic focus of prizewinning papers**

Region	Papers per Country	Total
West Africa		5
– Nigeria	2	
– Cameroon	1	
– Ghana	1	
– Togo	1	
Eastern / Central Africa		9
– Democratic Republic of Congo	2	
– Rwanda	2	
– Tanzania	2	
– Ethiopia	1	
– Kenya	1	
– Uganda	1	
Southern Africa		2
– Angola	1	
– Zambia	1	
Northern Africa		0
Cross-National		3
– Cross-National	3	

**Table 4. Primary disciplinary orientation of prizewinning papers**

Discipline	# of Papers
History (including 1 History of Science)	7
Political Science	6
Anthropology	3
Interdisciplinary	2
– Development Studies (1)	
– International Relations (1)	
Geography	1
Economics	0
African Literature/Language	0
Sociology	0

programs including Development Studies (1) and International Relations (1). Significantly, no Prize has been awarded to students in Economics, Sociology, Philosophy, or African Literature/Language. In future analysis, it would be worth exploring if and why students in the unrepresented disciplines are either less likely to present or less likely to submit their papers for consideration and/or if these trends reflect the constitution of Prize committees.

**Table 5. Career trajectories of Prize winners**

Category of Employment	# of winners	Where employed (last-known)
Employed in tenured, tenure-track, or equivalent positions	13	Barnard College/Columbia Univ, Beijing Normal (China), Emory University, Hampton University, Millsaps College, Rutgers University, University of Alabama, University of Antwerp (Belgium), University of Arizona, University of Gothenburg (Sweden), University of San Francisco, University of Texas-Austin, University of Victoria
Ongoing Ph.D. Candidacy	3	
Employment unknown	2	
Africa-Related, not primarily academic	1	USAID (affiliation with Boston University)

Prize winners have gone on to mainly academic careers in a range of institutional contexts, with most still conducting research related to the African continent (see Table 5). Three Prize winners are in the process of finishing their PhDs. Thirteen are teaching in tenure-track or equivalent academic positions in universities and colleges in the United States, Belgium, Canada, China, Netherlands, and Sweden.<sup>6</sup> All of these institutions could be termed “Traditionally White Institutions.” However, two Prize winners (Cheney and Ingelaere) teaching in Development Studies programs in Belgium and the Netherlands noted that nearly a third of their programs’ students were from the African continent. Six of these employed academics are already tenured, while seven are not yet tenured. One Prize winner maintains *both* university affiliation and a successful career beyond academia (with USAID). We were unable to confirm the employment status of two Prize winners.

In sum, this analysis of Prize-winning papers points to the significance of the GSP Prize in recognizing and supporting early-career scholars conducting research in a variety of African contexts, who by and large continue to contribute to teaching and scholarship on Africa. But it also supports Robinson’s argument that although Prize winners themselves represent a diversity of identities, disciplines, and professional trajectories, the GSP Prize largely recognizes students from—and subsequently goes on to strengthen the faculty of—one particular world of African Studies: that is, the world of predominantly White institutions. It is important to note that the group of authors themselves represents some degree of racial, national, and ethnic diversity (though less than desired, to be sure). But the near-exclusive awarding of the Prize to PhD students at predominantly White institutions

points to an ongoing hegemony in how African Studies is defined and delineated. We now turn to our conversations with the Prize winners themselves for insights into their own perceptions of the award and its social and professional work.

### *Winners' Perceptions of Prize Significance and their Career Trajectories*

To some extent, our conversation with past Prize winners affirmed the idea of awards as “tokens of esteem” that influenced to varying degrees their confidence as scholars. It also tended to act as an important induction into the field, and academia more broadly, advancing their career trajectories by amplifying their contributions to African Studies and solidifying their participation and identification with the field as a scholarly community.

First and foremost, Prize winners agreed that the honor helped them in their careers, directly as well as indirectly. Several scholars noted that winning the GSP Prize gave them confidence in the quality of their work. Shaonan Liu wrote:

Winning the ASA graduate student paper prize in 2018 meant a lot to me. First, it helped establish my confidence as a junior scholar in my career, and I learned a lot from the publication process, like how to make a dissertation chapter into a journal article for the *ASR*.

Benjamin Lawrance, the first GSP Prize recipient and now Editor of *ASR*, also felt that it was very helpful and important for his career development—particularly because the GSP Prize chair gave very helpful comments. Bert Ingelaere, who won the GSP Prize in 2010, also noted that, as a graduate student struggling to find his disciplinary home at the time, it helped reaffirm the quality of his work as well as its validity for African Studies.

For many winners, the GSP Prize and its subsequent publication process inducted them as emerging scholars in African Studies by helping them with the development of their dissertations. Kristen Cheney won the GSP Prize in 2004, the year she finished her dissertation, and felt that receiving the award and going through the publication process helped work out the place of the topic in her dissertation as well. For 2017 winner Amanda B. Edgell, on the other hand, presenting the paper at the ASA helped work out a piece of PhD fieldwork that did *not* fit neatly into her dissertation:

...it was a paper idea that came out of fieldwork but that didn't really fit nicely into the overall dissertation project. And so it really encouraged me to continue to pursue that paper—and gave me the opportunity to do that, and get the structured feedback I needed [in order] to push the project forward.

Many felt that winning the GSP Prize helped them to get a job once they finished graduate school. Habtamu Tegegne, 2007 winner, wrote that “Several of the jobs I applied [for] including the job I am at now asked for

[a] strong publication record. I presented this paper at my on-campus interviews, and it helped me get my current job.” 2006 winner Severine Autesserre added:

I have been at Barnard for close to fifteen years—it has been my first and only faculty position. I genuinely believe that the Graduate Student Paper Prize helped me get this job. As far as I know, there were hundreds of applications for the position when I applied in 2006 (i.e., shortly after being awarded the GSP Prize). At that time, there probably wasn’t much that made my application stand out. My dissertation research was solid, and I’m sure that my doctoral supervisors wrote lovely and supportive letters, but I suspect that 90 percent of the other candidates had similarly strong research projects and supportive reference letters. Being a “prize winning” grad student is probably what made me stand out—and thus be invited for an interview, and eventually be offered the position [as tenure-track Assistant Professor].

Victoria Gorham, 2019 winner, also felt that winning the GSP Prize and publishing the paper helped her secure an assistant professor position at the same place where she was doing a post-doctoral fellowship at the time.

Most importantly, perhaps, many of the recipients felt that the GSP Prize rooted them in African Studies as an academic discipline—even though many are currently situated in different departments, including history, development studies, anthropology, and political science. For example, Kathleen Klaus, 2015 winner, feels that the GSP Prize bound her to the African Studies community:

I think it’s more a matter of what it signals and how it binds each of us into this African studies community. Especially, as a political scientist, I’m always trying to prove that I am also part of—and really value—African studies. So in that regard I think it’s a nice way of signaling my engagement with area studies, and African studies specifically.

Kristin D. Phillips, 2008 winner, said,

For me it very much cemented part of my academic identity as being within African studies... Each of my postgraduate positions has actually been very defined by African studies. And I think that the award helped to cement that as part of how I saw myself as a scholar and a teacher, and also how others saw me, and it’s pulled me in... Since I started presenting at ASA, it has become one of my central scholarly communities and homes. The Paper Prize was certainly part of that process.

For Autesserre, winning the GSP Prize even helped cement her identity as an academic more broadly:

Receiving the Graduate Student Paper Prize is one of the reasons why I work in academia. Until I received this award, I had never thought that academia

might be for me. I'm a first-generation college student—neither of my parents graduated from high school—and I had a rocky time at school until well into my first year in college, so it never occurred to me that I may have the skills and knowledge (or, for that matter, the desire) to be a professor. I also felt like a misfit in my doctoral program... And then I received this prize, and a job offer at Barnard, and I started thinking that maybe—just maybe—this might be a career path worth exploring.

In addition to winning the GSP Prize itself, recipients valued the editorial support for publishing their pieces, as most of them were going through that process for the first time. For Cheney and Ingelaere, their Prize papers remain among the most read and cited of their careers. In these important regards, then, the GSP Prize has succeeded in amplifying the work of promising young scholars, as well as cementing their sense of belonging to the field, and even to academia more broadly.

While it is not possible to quantify the exact significance of the Prize in scholars' trajectories, there does seem to be a correlation between the Prize and the ongoing visibility of awardees and their work. Of the nineteen Prize winners, at least nine have published one or more books based on their doctoral research. Five of the authors (Autesserre, Ingelaere, Lindberg, Osseo-Asare, and Phillips) went on to receive national and international awards in African Studies and/or other disciplines for books directly related to their prizewinning paper research. Of special note, Abena Dove Osseo-Asare won the ASA Book Prize (formerly the Herskovits Prize) and Bert Ingelaere won the ASA's Bethwell A. Ogot Prize for Eastern African Studies. Prize-winning authors have taken up high-profile leadership positions in African Studies, disciplinary and interdisciplinary organizations, and international aid and diplomacy. Benjamin Lawrance, Professor of History at University of Arizona, for example, serves as co-editor for *African Studies Review*. Severine Autesserre, Professor and Chair of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, has been a leader in international aid and peacebuilding movements in conjunction with foreign ministries, the United Nations, and Doctors without Borders. Noel Twagiramungu—a Crisis, Stabilization, and Governance Officer at USAID and Research Fellow at Boston University's African Studies Center—serves as Director of the Leadership & Governance Policy Lab at the Africa Center. Kristen Cheney co-founded the American Anthropological Association's Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group and is now Professor and Director of the School of Child & Youth Care at the University of Victoria. While it is not possible in the context of this article to tease out a causal relationship between the Prize and professional success, nor to confirm the Prize as an effective bellwether of future success, the trajectories of winners certainly point to its significance.

Beyond plausible impacts on personal career trajectories, past Prize winners agreed that the award does important work for the ASA and the field of African Studies more broadly. Past Prize winners tended to agree that

the GSP Prize enhances African Studies by embracing new and innovative research, encouraging young scholars in the field, and expanding disciplinary thematics to accept and legitimize certain subfields. Gorham, who wrote in 2020 about the construction of national narratives in state-run museum spaces, said,

A dissertation committee member...encouraged me to submit the paper after seeing the presentation, and I had a couple of other conversations with people at the meeting about how I should retool the paper and submit it. It was validating to see that this kind of work was valued and [that I could get] some feedback about this wonky little project I was working on that isn't common in political science that was just part of my dissertation because I loved it. I thought that was a really helpful part of the conference experience and I gained the confidence to think that this paper was enough to stand on its own.

However, Klaus also pointed out that deeper engagement with Prize winners and with the scholarship itself might help the GSP Prize to make a more lasting impact on the field of African Studies:

...it does feel like these prizes are awarded and then life moves on, and scholarship moves on, and these papers get lost. That's one reason why I think it's neat that we're bringing these [papers] together... this is exactly the type of engagement, I think, that should be happening for there to actually be greater significance for African studies.

Past recipients also felt that winning the GSP Prize helped legitimate their particular subfield within African Studies—itsself already quite broad and interdisciplinary—whether that was children and youth studies (Cheney), museum studies (Gorham), or Africa-China relations (Liu). Gorham noted, “I didn't really know that I would care that much about museums in Tanzania, but it was something that I really loved that I just wanted to work on,” so receiving the GSP Prize helped highlight museums on the continent as a topic of import for African Studies.

Liu similarly noted that,

...from the list of previous winners, it seems that I was the first Chinese (probably also the first East Asian or Asian) student/scholar who got the GSP Prize, and the news was publicized and celebrated among the Chinese Africanists' circle at that time. It was a breakthrough and encouragement to the whole community of Chinese Africanists. I think the ASA/ASR also paid great attention to the topic of my article—the historical connection between Nigeria and China—that can speak to the cutting-edge area of Africa-China studies. ASA and ASR acknowledged the importance of the emerging new area of Africa-China relation studies.

This legitimation also extended to national studies within the continental study of Africa: Tegegne noted, for example, that winning the GSP Prize

“brought more critical attention to the field of Ethiopian studies and in particular to the role of property in early modern Ethiopia.”

One overarching concern that was raised in our conversation was the extent to which the criteria for the GSP Prize entail a rather considerable degree of selection—that a graduate student is able to travel to the meeting (entailing both sufficient funds as well as relative proximity to the meeting); that the graduate student knows about the award and feels comfortable submitting; and that a faculty advisor is aware of the award, and is willing to nominate a work-in-progress. Indeed, a Prize committee member acknowledged to us that the number of submissions in any given year is relatively low. That said, the scholars we spoke with noted that the recent virtual format of pandemic-era meetings has provided new opportunities for participation and collaboration from the African continent and attracted young scholars who might otherwise not have the funds to attend the annual meeting. Both the future of virtual presentations and their effects on the GSP Prize submission rates remain open questions.

### **Eyes on the Prize: Toward a Reimagination of the Role of Awards in African Studies**

While GSP Prize winners were grateful for the recognition winning the Prize afforded them, they were also well aware of how the historical structures and contemporary processes of the ASA may have advantaged them in certain ways. This led to a discussion of ways to re-think the Prize in order to address the historical, racial, and geographical inequities in the organization that continue to this day. The discussion is, of course, not new. In 1969, Nell Painter (herself a graduate student at the time) posed questions to President James Duffy at the ASA Annual Meetings in Montreal that resonated with the broad and growing discontent with the racial composition and dynamics of African Studies. She asked, “Have members asked why there are so few black people in the Association? Has the Association taken meaningful steps towards changing the conditions which keep most black students from reaching a level where they might even know of the existence of the African Studies Association?”<sup>7</sup> Examining the structure, history, context, and perceived effects of the GSP Prize allows us the opportunity to revisit Painter’s pointed questions. Even in our conversation with the winners, a sense of unease about whom this Prize was speaking to, on behalf of, and the scope of its claims were clearly communicated by a number of Prize winners, even as they expressed tremendous gratitude and extolled the rewards of the GSP Prize for their own personal career trajectories and the broadening of African Studies as a discipline.

It is important to note that despite its relatively short history, the institutional structure supporting the award has been dynamic, undergoing several changes in recent years to respond to ongoing conversations about equity, race, and decolonization in the ASA. First, although it was conventional to include a US-based African scholar on the GSP Prize selection committee, a

recent policy change requires at least one Africa-based African scholar to serve on the committee. Second, the *ASR* editor has long served as a member of the committee, but that role was converted to a non-voting *ex officio* role in 2019, to moderate the role of the editor in the selection process and eliminate a possible bias toward rapid publishability versus other scholarly attributes. Third, criteria for the submitted paper were refined by requiring an article-length manuscript to be submitted. Prior to this shift, the pool of submitted papers might pit fifteen-minute talks against dissertation chapters against article manuscript drafts, with some forms more likely to be chosen than others. Finally, the guidelines of the GSP Prize were revised to acknowledge up to two runners-up in order to distribute recognition and its rewards more widely. Finally, while not a change to official GSP Prize policy, it is noteworthy that the *ASR* editor-in-chief and members of the Editorial Review Board have been conducting workshops with graduate students in a number of regional hubs on the African continent to discuss manuscript preparation and Prize submissions, and to generate more linkages between the journal and young scholars on the continent.

We laud these efforts, and in the spirit of these important recent revisions, we would like to propose some additional ideas for consideration, based on ideas articulated in our conversation with past Prize winners. Of particular concern is the way that the Prize itself intervenes in a professional reward structure that is itself constituted by seniority. As such, the Prize is not simply recognition for the internal merits of the paper and its author but is also a marker of good mentoring by a higher-status scholar, usually from an institution accorded higher status in the ASA—a field comprised mainly of predominantly White institutions.

One key issue to address is thus not only the quantity of submissions from which the committee can select a winner, but also the overall diversity of the institutions, demographics, and mentors that the overall pool represents. In this light, and given the expense of travel, we encourage the ASA to either decouple the GSP Prize from conference participation altogether or to require that submitted papers have been presented at one of a broader selection of conferences that include more diasporic perspectives and/or are held on the African continent. Institutionalizing hybrid conferences to allow for both remote (and low-cost) participation as well as face-to-face opportunities could also go a long way toward diversifying the applicant pool and the voices amplified by the Prize. We applaud and support ongoing engagement in concerted efforts to recruit paper presentations and GSP Prize submissions from graduate students at HBCUs and Africa-based universities. We also think the ASA should encourage and/or incentivize student papers to be co-written with (or among) continentally based, African researchers and research assistants.

But a larger question relates to the work that awards are doing, and the work we want them to do, in this larger field of scholarship on Africa. While we do not purport to know the answer to this question, we encourage ASA to develop a conversation with multiple scholarly associations of the diaspora and

the African continent (e.g., AHSA, ASWAD, CODESRIA, even former ASA Prize winners) about potentially collaborating to select and mentor a diverse group of young scholars through paper presentation at an array of African Studies conferences, awards submission, and manuscript submission, and to build among these young scholars networks of communication, mutual support, and a more integrated world of African Studies for the next generation.

None of these actions is a magic bullet. Each could also serve to further reproduce and institutionalize inequalities by—as one reviewer of this article noted, for example—“poaching” promising students from continentally-based organizations. But, if carried out with transparency, dialogue, and an ongoing eye on the ultimate aim of decentering Whiteness and re-centering African and African-descended voices in African Studies, such restructuring of the GSP Prize could constitute important steps toward Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks, and Elelwani Ramugondo’s call in the opening epigraph to “open the walls of our institutions physically and epistemically,” to make our contributions “sharper, more just, and infinitely more rigorous in understanding and shaping the world” (2020:280).

As Paul Zeleza has so bluntly written, “If meaningful transatlantic intellectual conversations are to develop that do not replicate the earlier infamous exploitative slave triangle, all of us need to reflect more seriously and self-critically than we are often inclined to do on the integrity and impact of our scholarly production and positions” (1997:207). In this spirit, we end this introduction not with answers but with questions about the larger structure of awards in African Studies. What would it look like for awards to honor collaboration, and not individuation? How can we continue to renovate awards to result not just in consecration, but in communication, amplification, and redistribution? And how can we build awards that augment and incentivize dialogue and connection, rather than disconnection and segmentation, between the worlds of African Studies?

## Acknowledgements

Thoughtful and detailed comments from three anonymous peer reviewers were vital to the development of this article. We are very grateful to all past Prize winners who responded to our invitation to discuss their experience of winning the GSPP, thus providing valuable insights that guided our analysis. It is also with heavy hearts that we acknowledge the passing of Bert Ingelaere in February 2022.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

1. The Higher Education Act explicitly identifies six types of Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). While it does not formally identify "predominantly White institutions," or PWIs, the term has come to designate colleges and universities in

which more than 50 percent of the student population is White. Brian Bourke (2016) notes that the Whiteness of these institutions is not simply enrollment-driven, but rather embedded in an array of institutional orientations and practices.

2. Title VI of the Higher Education Act authorizes a variety of grants to institutions of higher education (IHEs) and related entities to enhance instruction in foreign language and area studies (FLAS) (<https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=484271>).
3. It is important to note that such memberships are neither mutually exclusive nor absolute in their effects on scholarly identity, as noted by AHSA founder and former ASA member, Prof. Shelby Lewis (2018).
4. The ASA has no GSP award on record for 2012. According to a representative of the current Secretariat, "Records indicate that in 2012 there was a crisis in the Secretariat. Many administrative and financial operations were left incomplete as there was a period entirely without staff" (personal communication with Phillips, June 29, 2022).
5. The exception was University of California, Davis.
6. At the time of this analysis, Kristen Cheney was Associate Professor at the Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. In 2022, she transitioned to Professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada.
7. Quoted in Allman 2019.
8. <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/great-lakes-africa-centre/bert-inge-laere/>, accessed 28 June 2022.