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Marcella McCoy-Deh, PhD

Inflecting the Narrative on African Studies

Inflection points can be powerful events. They can prompt an individual to take on a new career challenge. And on occasion, that individual's decision can redound to the benefit of thousands of others. Such may be the case for Marcella McCoy-Deh, PhD, associate professor of American Studies and director of the Philadelphia University Honors Institute.

For Dr. McCoy-Deh—an educator, researcher, university administrator and author—her personal inflection point arrived during her time as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah Institute of African Studies (IAS) in 2019–20. She had chosen that institution for both personal and professional reasons: her husband was raised in Ghana, and they were eager for their daughter to have a deep experience of the country and culture. The Nkrumah Institute's faculty is widely respected, including accomplished educators and researchers from across Africa and around the world.

There, she collaborated with faculty to bring relevant material from U.S. history into courses on the slave trade, Pan-Africanism and the African diaspora. She soon found that many assigned readings in courses addressing slavery and colonization in Africa were authored by non-African scholars. It was a telling sign of how knowledge is defined and distributed in the field of African Studies.

“While new perspectives are slowly working their way into textbooks and curriculum, the main body of scholarship about Africa is still rooted in Euro-centric interpretation of events,” Dr. McCoy-Deh explains. “Too often, those materials included skewed interpretations, contained omissions or were dominated by European and colonial perspectives.”

She had long known about the need to “decolonize” African Studies, but had not understood the depth of the problem—nor its broader effects on African scholars. That realization spurred her to consider—more directly and intently than she had before—how to transform the way scholarship about African culture and history is assessed and presented in global academic literature. Discussions with colleagues such as University of Ghana historian and IAS Research Fellow Dr. Edem Adotey made clear that progress depended on African researchers and educators being able to overcome a fundamental challenge: having their intellectual contributions actually acknowledged, then objectively assessed and validated. “Too often, non-African scholars simply reject or ignore information and ideas that challenge long-held, Euro-centric views,” Dr. McCoy-Deh observes.

But there is also a very practical challenge. “While African scholars are conducting high-quality research, too little of their work makes it to broadly accessible journals

and textbooks,” she adds. And even when their studies are published in journals at African universities, those publications are frequently not accessible on international databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar.

As a result, a substantial portion of scholarship produced by African researchers is difficult to access, and a generation of comparative scholarship by African researchers is effectively lost to researchers outside of the country or region of origin.

Dr. McCoy-Deh thought deeply about ways to help bridge the access gap, and tested her ideas with colleagues at the Nkrumah Institute. Their discussions gave rise to a collaborative initiative called Africa in First Person. It will be a searchable online repository of work by African scholars writing on the African experience, providing abstracts of unpublished articles and links to published papers. Initially, the repository will invite submissions of material addressing Western academic dominion in African scholarship, as well as articles rejected by scholarly journals for lack of deference to Western ideas.

“Our primary goal is that the repository becomes a widely accessible information resource for editors, researchers and students—in Africa and around the world,” Dr. McCoy-Deh says. “Longer term, we hope that Africa in First Person will become a bridge creating new collaborations among researchers and connecting scholars with publishing organizations.” A key step in the process is developing the financial support needed to launch the project, and she is currently working to identify potential funders.

As planning for the initiative evolved, Dr. McCoy-Deh realized that her commitment to supporting the work of African scholars had also evolved into a personal and professional inflection point. “Before I went to Ghana, I was uncertain what the next phase of my career would hold. Continue in academic administration? Dive more deeply into my research or writing?” she says. “But I have become passionate about this project, and I am deeply committed to addressing the challenges faced by African scholars.”

The broader impact of that commitment could well empower researchers and educators at academic institutions across the continent and help remake the way Africa is studied and taught for generations to come. ■ KM, MM