Looking back on the 1980s from the early 1990s means looking back across a major historical watershed. The disappearance of most of what used to be referred to as "the socialist world", the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War period have instigated far-reaching changes and new developments that are affecting all regions of the world. While it is by no means clear what the "new world order" heralded at one international gathering after the other is actually going to look like, there can be no doubt that the old world order that shaped the last four decades has come to an end.

In Africa, this historical watershed has been marked by widely differing developments. On the one hand, many African nations have seen a re-emergence of movements pressing for democracy, political pluralism and human rights; these movements are challenging the stifling, state-centred authoritarianism that beset so many post-colonial societies and have already brought about significant changes in the political field. On the other hand, a number of countries are moving towards or have gone through a "season of anomy" marked by a veritable collapse of civil order, while most African nations are faced with the results of long-term economic stagnation and the prospects of an involuntary "delinking" from the world economy.

The current crisis into which so many post-colonial societies in Africa have moved was undoubtedly prepared during the 1980s. The economic decline during this period not only turned the 1980s into a "lost decade" for economic and social development in Africa, but also determined the conditions under which literature came to be produced, read, studied and theorized in the African context. From the early 1980s onwards, articles warning about the impending "book crisis" in
Africa began to appear,\(^1\) while many university departments experienced a veritable "de-institutionalization" of literature studies owing to the scarcity of books and journals and a general lack of funds. Ironically, this de-institutionalization in the African context coincided with the emergence of African Literature Studies as a new academic discipline at a number of North American (and some European) universities and its growing institutionalization in that context.\(^2\) As a result, a widening gap has opened between the "normal" workings of an academic discipline in "the West" and the situation of a beleaguered academic discipline in Africa whose autonomy is continually being challenged by economic pressures and political intervention.

Biodun Jeyifo has described this process as "the great paradox surrounding the study of African literature today: historic de-colonization having initially enabled the curricular legitimation of African literary study in African universities and schools, the equally historic arrest of de-colonization has swung the centre of gravity of African literary study away from Africa to Europe and America."\(^3\)

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1 See, for example, Michael Crowder: "Foreword - The Book Crisis: Africa's Other Famine". *Africa Bibliography 1985* (Manchester, 1986), pp.xvi-xxi.
