Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Madison
On the Death of Professor Tejumola Olaniyan

Tejumola Olaniyan, Louise Durham Mead Professor of English and African Cultural Studies, as well as Wole Soyinka Professor of the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, passed away suddenly at his home in Madison on November 30, 2019. He was 60. A member of the UW Faculty for 18 years, Olaniyan was a world-renowned scholar whose long career of decolonial scholarship, inspired teaching, and institution building greatly enhance the national as well as international reputation of the humanities at UW-Madison. He is fondly remembered and widely admired by colleagues around the world and the many students he tirelessly mentored.

As an expert in the discipline of Anglophone literatures and cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora, as well as postcolonial literary and cultural studies, drama and theatre theory and criticism, and popular culture studies, Olaniyan both embodied and extended the domain of humanist inquiry. His particular acumen—evident in the nine books he either authored or edited—was in understanding how human symbolic expressions, in a variety of media, are created to make sense of the world as well as transform it. He brought an urgent ethical sensibility to his scholarly and pedagogical pursuits by emphasizing not only the conditions with which the people of Africa and the African Diaspora cope, but the ways in which they operate under, thrive within, and shape those conditions. These areas of emphasis were evident in his first monograph, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African American and Caribbean Drama* (1995), which examines the dominant preoccupation with refashioning a collective cultural self in the drama of peoples of African origin cross-culturally and cross-continentially. That preoccupation began as part of a general project of cultural decolonization in the early twentieth century, and picked up steam with the wave of anticolonial independence of the erstwhile colonies and African American civil rights struggles in the United States. Olaniyan’s innovation was to read the transcontinental passion of several key playwrights as an all-consuming quest for the manufacture of a dramatic and cultural identity against the decivilizing claims of the European racist archive going back to the eighteenth-century. His second monograph, *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (2004) is widely recognized as a major work of interdisciplinary African cultural studies, combining methods of musicology, performance studies, and media archaeology. The late Nigerian musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, was for over two decades the Black world’s most militant and most controversial popular political star, playing an inventive “afrobeat” sound that took the last five hundred years, from slavery to post-independence and civil rights, as its thematic and stylistic inspiration. Olaniyan’s book about his life and music created a new model of scholarly inquiry that has influenced many subsequent studies. It has been widely reviewed, and conference panels continue to be organized around it. The book was selected as a finalist for the 2005 Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ASRC)’s Best Research in World Music Award.

Olaniyan’s commitment to decolonial scholarship also exhibited a collective ethos, made manifest by the six anthologies he edited or co-edited. Recognizing his location in fields in need of material resources to aid in the production and dissemination of original interpretive insights, Olaniyan made major investments in time and intellectual energy, building the infrastructure to ensure that such scholarship happens sustainably into the future. The fruits of that effort include *African Diaspora and Performance* (2004), *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2007)—which is by far the most well-known across continents wherever African literature and criticism are taught—*African Diaspora and the Disciplines* (2010), *Audible Empire* (2016), *State and Culture in Postcolonial Africa: Enchantings* (2017), *Taking African Cartoons Seriously* (2018). Related to these edited books is his extensive work with journals. Olaniyan was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the African Literature Association*. He also edited seven special issues (not counting one that became
Olaniyan was a scholar of the first order, but he was also unique as a field institutional builder. He was an elected board member of the African Studies Association (ASA), and president of the African Literature Association (ALA). He served on the Award Committee of the Netherlands Prince Claus Fund. He compiled an online digital encyclopedia of African cartoons and cartoonists, africacartoons.com. Indeed, he can be said to have enacted a generous and generative understanding that decolonial research and scholarship requires sharing and collaboration.

This intellectual generosity was put into practice more locally at UW-Madison in Olaniyan’s work with students, collaboration across departments, and administrative program building. Working across two departments at UW-Madison, he was the director of 22 doctoral dissertations, 1 Master’s thesis, and 4 undergraduate theses. In addition, he was a member of another 40 dissertation committees across 11 departments. Related to this work with students was his consistent scholarly collaboration with colleagues across a vast array of disciplines from art to English, geography, evolutionary biology, and archeological chemistry, all in furtherance of cutting-edge postcolonial, African and African diaspora scholarship. He was head of the African Diaspora and the Atlantic World Research Circle (ADAWRC) and he served as Interim Director of the Institute for Research in the Humanities (IRH) in 2011-2012. And he served as Chair of the Department of African Cultural Studies from 2015-2018.

Born in Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria, Olaniyan went on to graduate top of his class in Dramatic Arts at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, and earned a Master of Arts in the same field before coming to the United States in 1987 to undertake his doctoral studies at Cornell University. He taught at the University of Virginia before moving to UW-Madison in 2001. His wife, Mojisola Olaniyan is Assistant Dean and Director of Academic Enhancement in the UW-Madison Law School. His daughters, Bolajoko and Olabimpe both attended UW-Madison and Bolajoko currently serves as Program Director for Wisconsin-in-Washington, in the UW-Madison International Division.

Olaniyan may have been as accomplished as any humanist scholar can be, but he is perhaps best remembered as an incredibly humble collaborator, mentor, and institution builder, all of which he accomplished through a unique blend of dogged perseverance, high standards, humor, and friendly warmth. UW-Madison is abundantly fortunate to have benefited from his talents and sincerity; his absence is deeply felt.

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