BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond Boundaries, beyond the Whale

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In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. By Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 225 pages. $29.95 (cloth), $12.95 (paper).

C. L. R. JAMES WOULD HAVE INSISTED THAT AMERICANISTS ASK THE question, "What do they know of America who only America know?"[1] The importance of asking this question is made clear in Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, which highlights the contribution of Africa to the formulation of ideas about culture. Such ideas, embodied in particular in the modern concept of race, prevail in both the global academy and American society. To comprehend the genealogy of these ideas, from their invention to their current stranglehold on American political discourse, an understanding of the interaction between Africa and America is vital. Only once such genealogies are delineated and the concepts (such as race) they generate are contested, can we hope to move beyond both the Western tradition whale, celebrated by William Bennett, and its antagonists, the advocates of ahistorical nationalisms, toward a multicultural and post-modern society. This book, then, is the essential guide to a world beyond essentialism.

Appiah is an excellent guide because, in his almost unparalleled ability to move back and forth between academic disciplines as wide ranging as

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philosophy, anthropology, history, sociology, literary criticism, and biology and in his access to a wide range of personal experiences, he can take us beyond so many boundaries. Besides being an allusion to a heaven where there is room enough for all peoples, the house to which Appiah refers in his title is that of his own father in Kumasi, capital of Asante, a kingdom in Ghana. Appiah's Africa is multilayered and encompasses many different worlds:

> Some worlds—the world of the law courts where my father went, dressed in his dark European suits, carrying the white wig of the British barrister . . .—some worlds we knew of only because our parents spoke of them. Others—the world of the little church—Saint George's, where we went to Sunday school with Baptists and Copts and Catholics and Methodists and Anglicans, from other parts of the country, other parts of the continent, other parts of the world—we knew inside and out, knew because they were central to our friendships, our learning, our beliefs. (vii)

His mother's family house is located in England, where much of Appiah's education took place. Now he resides in the United States and has become used "to seeing the world as a network of points of affinity" (viii). The author's ideas about culture emerge as he crosses back and forth over the boundaries demarcating center/periphery, colonial/postcolonial, traditional/modern, and national/transnational, among others. Like James's Caliban, Appiah "pioneer[s] into regions Caesar never knew."[2]

The opening essays, "The Invention of Africa" and "Illusions of Race," explore the role of racial ideology in the development of Pan-Africanism. In these pieces, Appiah focuses in particular on Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois, foremost among the African-American intellectuals who initiated Pan-Africanist discourse. Appiah finds that "the idea of the Negro, the idea of an African race, is an unavoidable element in that discourse, and that these racialist notions are grounded in bad biological—and worse ethical—ideas, inherited from the increasingly racialized thought of nineteenth-century Europe and America" (x). These men, in turn, contributed to the further entrenchment of such notions.

Crucial to Crummell's assessment of Africans—and something he shared with most of his African-American contemporaries (particularly the many African Methodists who traveled to Africa as missionaries for their church and with whose work I am familiar[3])—was an "essentially negative sense of traditional culture in Africa as anarchic, unprincipled, ignorant, defined by the absence of all the positive traits of civilization as 'savage'; and

savages hardly have a culture at all" (21). Providence, via the means of slavery in America, had brought many Africans in contact with both the English language and Christianity, and it was now the duty of the Negro to bring light to "darkest Africa" and, to use Phillis Wheatley's words, its "benighted souls."[4]

At the core of this vision, according to Appiah, was the concept of race. "Crummell's 'Africa,' " he writes, "is the motherland of the Negro race, and his right to act in it, to speak for it, to plot its future, derived . . . from the fact that he too was a Negro. More than this, Crummell held that there was a common destiny for the people of Africa . . . because they belonged to this one race" (5). In other words, he countered racism by accepting the category of race and by using it to his benefit. For Appiah, Crummell exemplifies the *intrinsic* racist; he differentiated morally among members of different races because he believed that each race had a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence (14). Regardless of whether evidence proved that the connection between race and moral capacity was false, he would have remained committed to his beliefs about race and racial destiny.

While Du Bois transcended such moral fallacies, he was unable to transcend race altogether; he was an *extrinsic* racist, who made moral distinctions among members of different races because he believed that racial essences entailed certain morally relevant qualities (13). Du Bois moved away from current biological explanations of race toward socio-historical explanations. In the process, he returned Hegel to the standing position by inverting Marx: "the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races" (28). In this history, Du Bois wrote, "races have a 'message' for humanity, a message that derives, in some way, from God's purpose in creating races. The Negro race has still to deliver its message, and so it is the duty of Negroes to work together through race organizations so that this message can be delivered" (30). Appiah's rendering of Du Bois is consistent with *The Souls of Black Folk,* published in 1903, in which the latter placed the Sorrow Songs alongside the works of European poets from Shakespeare and Schiller to Whittier and Mrs. Browning in the pantheon of cultural achievement.[5]

But, Appiah contends, Du Bois's attempt to "revalue" the race and to counter oppression with an "antiracist racism" is both theoretically and practically unproductive. The concept of race "is a hierarchy, a vertical structure, and Du Bois wishes to rotate the axis to give it a 'horizontal'

reading. Challenge the assumption that there can be an axis, however oriented in the space of values, and the project fails for loss of presuppositions" (46). More practically speaking, while the attempt to highlight certain race abilities might lead to a more equitable estimation of the different contributions of the "races," "it might just as easily lead to chauvinism or total incomprehension" (94). Stereotyping, defining African Americans as natural athletes, musicians, and so on, would be just one by-product of such an approach. Much like an ideology of separate spheres, then, it would leave the system of oppression unaltered.

Having established these origins for Pan-Africanism in Euro-American concepts of race, Appiah moves on to consider postcolonial directions in African literature and philosophy. In the process, he contests the Afrocentric ("Egyptian") reconstruction of Africa with its vision of African literature as "an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literature [with] its own traditions, models and norms."[6] For Appiah, the boundaries between literatures have been crossed by imperialism and by diasporas, so that it is no longer possible to turn the clock back, even if we wanted to. "For us to forget Europe," he writes, "is to suppress the conflicts that have shaped our destinies; since it is too late for us to escape each other, we might instead seek to turn to our advantage the mutual interdependencies history has thrust upon us" (72).

With such a perspective in mind, Appiah prescribes reform for both African and American academies. In the African academy, the need is to identify the modern African text as a product of colonial encounters, to stress that the continuity between precolonial forms of culture and contemporary ones are nevertheless genuine, and to challenge assumptions of the cultural superiority of the West (70). In the American academy, Appiah asserts that

> the reading of African writing is reasonably directed by other purposes: by the urge to continue the repudiation of racism; by the need to extend the American imagination—an imagination that regulates much of the world system economically and politically—beyond the narrow scope of the United States; by the desire to develop views of the world elsewhere that respect more deeply the autonomy of the Other, views that are not generated by the local political needs of America's multiple diasporas. (70)

To Appiah's list, one must also add the need to move beyond a vision that only one "American imagination" exists. After all, in a country whose history has included "multiple diasporas," the development of a privileged

"American" narrative has led to the denial of the many others within. In short, the study of African literature may also teach us the tenuousness of our own imperial assumptions.

Even when Appiah seems to leave America behind entirely in a discussion of the intricacies and complexities of African culture, as in the chapter entitled "Myth of an African World," the analysis still has resonance for the Americanist. He argues that "many African societies have as much in common with traditional societies that are not African as they do with each other" (91) and that "what is distinctive about African thought is that it is traditional" (104). As such, the colonial interaction between Western and African discourses takes on the air of a confrontation between religion and magic or a Thompsonian confrontation between industrial capitalism and the "moral economy."[7]

While this formulation replicates that of the old modernization model, Appiah rejects the pessimistic, Weberian outcome to this saga. "The beginning of postmodern wisdom," he writes, "is to ask whether Weberian rationalization is in fact what has happened" (145). Appiah invites his reader to use the continuing confrontation between the traditional and the modern to raise questions that seem long buried in Weberian pessimism about the inevitability of the modern world to crush any nonbureaucratic, nonmonetized, non-Western future; he invites us to swim free of the whale.[8]

In contrast to both Crummell's and Du Bois's approaches to Pan-Africanism, Appiah considers the way forward to lie in moving beyond race altogether.

> The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us. As we have seen, even the biologist's notion has limited uses, and the notion that Du Bois required, and that underlies the more hateful racism of the modern era, refers to nothing in the world at all. (45)

Appiah is very persuasive on this point and methodocially discredits all racial rationalizations. But, we are left in a quandary. While race may not exist, belief in its existence is pervasive, just as it was in Crummell's and Du Bois's day, among both proponents and opponents of racial equality. What is the proper response to racism in a world of such political realities? Can racism be fought through race in the manner attempted by Du Bois?

Appiah proposes that racism be fought by the denial of race. But the danger, which he sees clearly, is that this approach may reinforce the status quo. "It is certainly true," he writes, "that there must be contexts

in which a statement of . . . truths is politically inopportune. I am enough of a scholar to feel drawn to truth telling, *ruat caelum*; enough of a political animal to recognize that there are places where the truth does more harm than good." But Appiah does not feel that we need to choose between these two impulses. "There is no reason to believe that racism is always—or even usually—advanced by denying the existence of races; and, though there is some reason to suspect that those who resist legal remedies for the history of racism might use the nonexistence of races to argue in the United States for example, against affirmative action, that strategy is, as a matter of logic, easily opposed." After all, he continues, "the existence of racism does not require the existence of races. And, we can add, nations are real however invented their traditions" (175). These last two statements seem, to me at least, to create difficulties for Appiah. While affirmative action may be redressing past discriminations based upon racism, some who use Appiah's analysis might claim that it also contributes to the continued reification of race as a category (the same argument made about scheduled castes in India). Moreover, if nations can be realized through the invention of traditions, might not races also be?

The problem persists, "as old as political philosophy itself, of when to endorse the ennobling lie" (175). Having rejected the work of the "Egyptianists" for endeavoring to root Africa's modern identity in an imaginary history and having rejected Du Bois's "revaluation of the race," little space remains for the academic philosopher to employ an "ennobling lie." More's the pity. Because invented traditions, so fundamental to the longevity of Appiah's "other house," the Anglo-American imperium, might be contested both by the invention of competing traditions and by questioning the legitimacy of traditions altogether. But taking the former route ends in difficulties. Today's political exigencies may become tomorrow's dogma. To celebrate and endorse "those identities that seem at the moment to offer the best hope of advancing our other goals . . . and to keep silence about the lies and the myths" is to depart from the academic imperative from which "societies profit" (178–79). Further, intraracial differences—gender, class, regional, religious, and even color conflicts, which are of great significance in their own right—will be downplayed in the service of racial unity.

That counter-myth cannot be used is a pity also because the chances of making advances toward genuinely multicultural societies through the rejection of race seem so slim: "We would need to show not that race and national history are falsehoods but [that] they are useless falsehoods at

best—at worst—dangerous ones: that another set of stories will build us identities through which we can make more productive alliances" (175). But, if we cannot ground our responses to racism, such as affirmative action, on bases other than race, how should we proceed? For, if the imperium remains, and the American economy and military maintain their position in the world, can we not expect those who are excluded from the "new whale order" to want to be swallowed by it on whatever terms, racial or otherwise, that it offers? Will they not profit by doing so? As such, a Pan-Africanism, which Appiah wishes to see founded on an understanding of Africa's "multifarious communities [and] local customs" (180) and not on a yearning for a single African state, is likely to remain elusive. Instead, Africa will remain the province of the "Egyptianists." Even if the imperial center should crumble, hopes for reassessment of Africa and race may be lost in the Balkan-style conflicts that emerge.

In short, my underlying concern is that, for all his "reasonableness" on the question of race and his great optimism for a postmodern future, Appiah's ideas as yet do not have a constituency. Reading Appiah, I am reminded of the words of another postmodernist optimist:

> The truth is there is no whale. . . . However much we may wish to return to the womb, we cannot be unborn. So we are left with the straightforward choice. Either we agree to delude ourselves, to lose ourselves in the fantasy of the great fish, for which a second metaphor is that of Pangloss's garden; or we can do what all human beings do instinctively when they realize that the womb has been lost for ever—that is, we can make the devil of a racket. . . . Where Orwell wished quietism, let there by rowdyism; in place of the whale, the protesting wail.

The wars, cultural and otherwise, rage on; Rushdie remains in hiding. All we can do is resort to "the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible."[9]

NOTES

1. C. L. R. James poses the question, "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" in *Beyond a Boundary* (New York, 1983), ix.
2. Ibid., ix.
3. See John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York, 1982); and Adelaide

Cromwell Hill and Martin Kilson, *Apropos of Africa: Sentiments of Negro American Leaders on Africa from the 1800s to the 1950s* (London, 1969).

4. Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John Shields (New York, 1988), 18.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York, 1989).

6. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Enugu, Nigeria, 1980), 4. Quoted by Appiah on page 57.

7. E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56–97; and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971). See Appiah's page 122.

8. Until recently, the whale as metaphor was generally associated with the Cold War status quo. See George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Middlesex, 1979), 9–50; and E. P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale" in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978), 211–43. With the end of the Cold War, Jonah's whale takes on more of an imperial manifestation. See Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London, 1991), 87–101.

9. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands,* 99.