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A Conversation about Kwame Anthony Appiah's "In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture"

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A CONVERSATION ABOUT KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S
*IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE: AFRICA IN THE
PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE*

for Theresa Riffe

ONE MIGHT KNOW the name Kwame Anthony Appiah from a variety of contexts: as an anti-essentialist critic of “race”—(always in quotation marks); in association with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as an editor of critical essays on African American writers for the Amistad/Penguin series; as a philosopher and author of *Assertion and Conditionals* and *For Truth in Semantics*; as a book reviewer for *The New York Times*; or as author of the novel *Avenging Angel* and the forthcoming *Another Death in Venice*. Born in Ghana of an Asante father and English mother, educated in Britain, and employed in the U.S. academy, Appiah is an ongoing student of identity. Recently, he edited the *Critical Inquiry* issue on *Identities* rereleased in 1995 as a book. Identity—including Appiah's own—is mobile. For example, the Appiah of the 1992 *In My Father's House* is a diasporic western-trained African philosopher, but in an essay for the 1994 *Multiculturalism* collection from Princeton University Press, Appiah describes himself as an African American.

Six of us participated in this conversation about *In My Father's House*. Although our identities are no more essential than Appiah's, they warrant some mention. Mahoumbah Klobah and Mawuena Logan are natives of Togo. Dean Makuluni comes from Malawi. And Cherry Muhanji and Theresa Riffe, from Detroit and Des Moines respectively, are African Americans. All are or were pursuing graduate degrees at the University of Iowa. I (Barbara Eckstein) am white and teach in the English Department at Iowa. At my instigation these five people agreed to talk about *In My Father's House* on tape. They brought to life my desire to

Edited by Barbara Eckstein.

create a collective review of a book important for its challenges to prevalent ideas of “race,” pan-Africanism, and African philosophy.

Among its many venues, *In My Father's House* participates in a tradition of western-trained postcolonial philosophers questioning the uneasy relationship between that western training, European colonialism in Africa, and the traditional belief systems and practices of the various corners of Africa. In “*Que Faire? Reconsidering Inventions of Africa*,” Andrew Apter provides a useful history of the principal players and issues in this continuing debate. And indeed it does continue. In the spring 1996 issue of *Research in African Literatures*—brought to my attention by Dean Makuluni—four essays respond to *In My Father's House*. As do we, these scholars struggle with the reasoning and the politics of Appiah's arguments against African unity and transnational African-descended identity. They ask if agency can be located in what Appiah calls “tolerable falsehoods”—the “different interests [that] make different idealizations appropriate, different falsehoods tolerable” (Appiah “Tolerable” 79; quoted by Slaymaker 120) or in what Katya Gibel Azoulay defends as “strategic essentialism”—not “racial” essence but rather “experiential sources [of being black or being woman, for example] which can be drawn on without apology” (137).

Everyone who reads this book must face its challenges to claims for racial identity, African unity, and pan-Africanism. Similarly, all readers confront in Appiah's arguments the conundra of African intellectuals educated through colonial institutions and in colonial languages. These issues are two strands of our conversation. Another strand that emerges is, however, an uncommon but provocative interrogation of the role social class plays in framing identity and intellectual inquiry in Appiah's book.

Before we begin, we want to thank Cherry Muhanji, who transcribed some of, and Jason Mezey, who transcribed most of, our 360 minutes of oral dialogue. In consultation with the participants, I have edited 100 pages of transcript into its present form.

TAPE ONE

Eckstein: Can you say something about yourselves as readers of Appiah's work? What kinds of assumptions do you bring to the reading of a book like this?

Klobah: If I am walking to Old Capitol Mall, and two people hanging out address me, they will definitely address me as black. Am I to refuse the concept of race? I'm an African. I'm from Togo secondly. And then in Togo I'm from a region. And then in that region I'm part of an ethnic group. Although Americans locate my continent from my accent, they only know countries mentioned in the American media. They say, "Oh, is Togo around South Africa?" So when I say I am African, I'm cutting everything short. Or I have to draw the map and show where Togo is.

Makuluni: I discovered Appiah when I came here to Iowa in 1989, in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* [Autumn 1985]. I first saw the essay called "Topologies of Nativism" as "New Literatures, New Theory?" in *Mantatu* [7 (1990): 57-89]. I found myself disagreeing with him so much that I read other things: *Assertion and Conditionals* and *For Truth in Semantics*.

The central questions he raises are questions of identity: what does it mean to be African or black? One of your [Eckstein's] questions is whether it makes sense to have *us* have a conversation about this book. I don't know how else it could be done because this book affects us, black people. As much as I disagree with him, I find myself caught in so many contradictions—perhaps, some of the contradictions similar to his own. I am an African married to a white American woman. Can one claim a black identity when one is married to a person of the very race which is historically associated with the oppression of black people? I wanted to begin with this personal reference because it seems to me that Appiah's contradictions begin with something of this nature, his identity as the son of a black African man and a white English woman. In the United States there are very clear lines drawn between the races, so that the mere fact of having a bit of black blood is taken as meaning that the person is black. In Africa, at least the Africa I know, children of mixed racial heritage were not taken as black. They had to make an effort to declare their blackness, and not many saw advantages in declaring themselves black anyway. They were not considered white, but they were considered, or considered themselves, better than black.

Logan: It was 1990 when I first came to look for one of Appiah's articles in *Critical Inquiry*. I feel uncomfortable when he talks about race. I find it very peculiar that he cannot actually place himself. He says that we don't fit into those racial categories, but, you know, he's talking about himself. He doesn't want to be called black or African or European or English or British. I can understand it, but at the same time, when you go out in the real world, you are still black.

Muhanji: I was first introduced to Appiah as a gay man at a conference: Queer Nations/Black Nations. That's when I first heard about this particular book. Personally I don't think this book is necessarily so much about race, as I think it's about class. It's very uncomfortable. The first chapters were elitist, and his take on African Americans—the little that he discussed them—is still talking about class. I identify very quickly as an African American; I just look at myself in the abstract race in America. I know that's different in other countries, but I know who I am and what my experience has been and he has a way of being philosophical and intellectual about all these things, and I think that's strictly class.

Riffe: I come to this from an anthropologist's viewpoint, and I wanted to read it like that, but I was having a hard time with it because of how he talks about race. My initial response was that it felt like a book about class because of his background. With this early image of his father in the barrister's wig, class and education in a British system just jumped right out at me. And then Appiah talks about his mother who had published a book. All these examples are more about class than race. And this is just in the preface. In the acknowledgments he says that he's gone to Cambridge; he immediately identifies Skip Gates as his runnin' buddy. Whoa, we are really talking about class here, but he's written a book under the rubric of race. It's the time for race books, not a time to write a book about class.

He doesn't know how he fits in racially. As a person who is multi-racial, I know that you have to make decisions, you cannot jump around, because when people see you on the street they say she's a black woman. I don't discount my Jewish grandfather or my grandmother who's a native. Those are things that people don't see. I understand the confu-

sion on Appiah's part. In some ways I identify with it, but as a black woman in the United States, I have some problems with this book.

Klobah: He raises the issue of class when he links himself with the Asante king, making us aware that his aunt is the wife of the Asante king.

Makuluni: But, look also at the last sentence of the first paragraph. "Near the center of the second largest city in Ghana, behind our hibiscus hedge, in the 'garden city of West Africa,' our life was essentially a village life." What exactly is a village life? Because from what I know of village life in Malawi and from the photographs I have seen and descriptions I have read of village life elsewhere in Africa south of the Sahara, this is not village life.

Klobah: Kumasi, where they lived, is not a village. This is a city, one of the largest in Ghana.

Makuluni: The difference between the town and the village tends to be one of class. Of course there are large working classes in the cities, but as soon as you mention town and village, the thought that comes up is class usually.

Logan: He is showing us a person who is actually invested in the culture of the Asante people, but at the same time, he's showing that he's class-conscious.

Klobah: He needs an extensive explanation of the matrilineal Asantes and the patrilineal British, so the reader will get to know exactly where he's coming from.

Makuluni: Yes, I come from a matrilineal society, but what's happened in the twentieth century, as far as I can judge, because my father left the village, went to a new town, in essence the way the family has operated has been more along patrilineal lines. Now, what's interesting is the very fact that this book is called *In My Father's House*—not the allusion so much . . .

Logan: If you go back to my culture, for instance, in the traditional sense, the man has the house; you have to have the house in order to get married and bring the woman inside the house. If the woman divorces she goes back to her parents because the house does not belong to her at all.

Klobah: If I get married, I wouldn't necessarily have to leave where I was born. I would build another house attached to my father's house, so the compound keeps on growing according to the number of men that you have in the family, you see? It was there before you were, before your father, even your great-grandfather. But when Appiah talks of "my father's house," it's clear that this is not part of his house. I mean, that's what I think about it: he has nothing to share with it.

Makuluni: In the society where I come from, it is usual for a man to introduce his wife as "the woman/mother of the house." The word used for woman is the same as that used for mother in this case. It's difficult to get the full sense of the local language into English here. The implication at one level is that the woman owns or is in charge of the house in which the man lives. It is an interesting, if misleading, gesture because it really points to the fact that the woman is responsible for the domestic things, like cooking, which happen in that house.

Logan: When I went home in December—my dad's house is somewhere maybe, oh from here to the union; my mom's is here—my friends said, "Are you at your dad's place or your mom's?" I used to live in my mom's house too when my dad wasn't there. My mom's house is the house of her father, her family. It has nothing to do with my father at all. My father's house is the house of my father's father, and my father's father's father. Those two houses are different and separate.

Eckstein: So that doesn't mean that your parents are divorced?

Logan: No, no. But my mom still has that house of hers because that's the family house, family ground, family terrain, and it's going to be there . . .

Makuluni: Forever.

Logan: ... forever, yeah.

Riffe: We have the family farm which belongs to all the family. Everyone can go there. It was my grandfather's family's. His father came on the Trail of Tears and built this house and then my grandmother brought everyone there.

Makuluni: This book triggered some memories in my mind: two poems that I read several times as an undergraduate by Wole Soyinka—"Telephone Conversation" and another early, quite satirical poem about a westernized African man. He talked about how his civilization is sewn into the lining of his three-piece suit. This is the image which immediately came to my mind when I saw Appiah's opening description of his father. A suit is very uncomfortable in most of Africa because of warm weather. It is really remarkable that this is the first image of his father. He presents it as if with some innocence, which to me really shows a kind of arrogance.

Klobah: At the same time he does criticize people going to the metropolis, and taking on what they learned and taking it back to Africa.

Eckstein: If you think this is a book about class dressed up as a book about race, then how do you read his discussion of extrinsic and intrinsic racism? How does it reflect these assumptions about class you all seem to feel permeate this book?

Klobah: Let's go back: intrinsic racism means you don't look at someone's achievement. You'll support him due to links that you have with the person. And you try to attach yourself to that person. Now, if Appiah, in the beginning, tries to attach himself to the Asante king, establish that kind of class thing with the Asante king, and at the end, at the part when his father dies, he shows how important it is to be attached to the king and all the country—well, that's one confusion that I have. I mean, he sees that intrinsic *racism* continues something that is not productive.

Eckstein: So you're saying that the initial identification with the Asante king is intrinsic classism?

Klobah: Yes. West Africans know who the Asante king is. Right now he is very powerful even in the twentieth century. He was a very powerful lawyer in London, had to quit his job to go back to become a king, which shows that there is something there which is much more powerful than what he was doing in London. You see, and so Appiah's attaching himself to the Asante king gives him some kind of power.

Makuluni: In the title of this first chapter is his take on another work—*The Invention of Africa* [V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)]. Within Mudimbe's analysis of how European, western imperialist discourse in the age of colonialism invented Africa, Appiah goes a different route. He uses the same title to talk about how pan-Africanists responded to this, re-inventing Africa for themselves, but, he argues, in a racist manner of their own. And I have to say I have trouble with that.

Eckstein: Can any of you say more about the trouble you have with Appiah's calling [Alexander] Crummell's and [E.W.] Blyden's pan-African approaches nineteenth-century black nationalism and therefore, within Appiah's own terms, racist?

Makuluni: There are contradictions in the things Crummell and Blyden say because they don't know much about African civilization. But they're interested in making sure that that link with Africa is maintained, and that to Appiah, I think, is what is racist about it, that it's an association of black people.

Klobah: Crummell spent twenty years in Africa as a missionary. E.W. Blyden also emigrated to Africa but lived there for the rest of his life. Crummell came back. Even after twenty years, he could not identify with Africans.

Logan: Appiah says, "The 'exiles' of the New World could show their love of Africa by seeking to eliminate its indigenous cultures" (24). That's what those guys were doing. I think this is racist. I think Appiah considers that racist.

Klobah: My point is if Crummell is racist against Africans, who then is he identifying with?

Muhanji: I've been quiet because, I think, the construction of race often is different in the U.S. than other places. But I think Crummell is taking on the racist notions of whiteness. Even though his skin is black, his ideology is the product of where he's coming from. What Appiah's failing to see by using Crummell is how he is treated at home here. This man has been totally brainwashed that he's going to civilize Africans. In fact, he is seen as a savage in his own country by white ideology. But again, this is a class issue. Crummell feels he's leaving America as a man going to civilize. The man on the street is not going to civilize the natives in Africa.

Makuluni: I think that Appiah picks his pan-Africanist examples carefully. Marcus Garvey would be an interesting one.

Logan: He talks about pan-Africanism, he doesn't mention Marcus Garvey?! I looked in the index. There's no Marcus Garvey. And I said, "Okay, because he's not a DuBois, he is not a Crummell, he's not a Blyden, it's a class issue." I tell you, even "Africa for Africans," the first words of the epigraph here are Nkrumah—Garvey's words.

Eckstein: At the end of the chapter about Crummell and Blyden, he tells a story which I find appealing about someone who's lost asking a woman on the road how to get to a place, and she says, "first of all, don't start here." As I understand it, he concludes that we need certain kinds of political solidarity, but "race" is not the place to start to find that political solidarity. What would you say to him in response to that?

Klobah: One way of thinking of that question is to look at the children he talks about, his nieces and nephews. They're various shades or colors, but also, obviously, privileged children. Now, one could say here's an example of a group of children who have African blood, who have the possibility of some kind of solidarity, but I think that what is playing out in that is precisely the question of class. In his acknowledgments I find another example there of some kind of solidarity, with

Skip Gates, and so on. But what, in the end, are such similarities—class? They're personal friendships. What does that leave us?

Makuluni: What's happened over the years is there are more marriages among people of different races. I think that in most cases there's still a class element involved and one has to be aware of it. So, for example, to marry outside of Malawi, to a white American, I found that some people I knew would not talk to me because they assume, "Now he's important." It takes effort for me to say, "Come on, let's have a drink. We are good friends; this doesn't make me a higher person." Ah. But I don't sense that Appiah feels distant from everything else. He talks about a village life, but I don't get the sense of a village life.

TAPE TWO

Eckstein: I heard you saying that there *is* a common bond among African-descended people. Am I right? What is it?...I see you smiling.

Makuluni: I think that in spite of himself Appiah subscribes to a notion of that sort too. I know he does in the sense that his writing is about Africa or black people in the New World. And he's editing with Gates this series, collecting criticism of African American writers. Isn't he promoting something to do with black people? My suspicion is that in spite of himself he also subscribes to such a notion. But I think he also dismisses the important questions of the historical experience of black people: colonialism and slavery.

His deconstruction of race is based to a large extent on the fact that the original black theorists of pan-Africanism appropriated ideas of identity from nineteenth-century European and American thought and used them to build something. Is it possible then to rethink the category of race without going through that nineteenth-century conception of race from the Western world?

Logan: Can we actually think of an oppositional idea for an Africanism that isn't any kind of discrimination against black people? Why did people—Crummell and DuBois—come up with this idea of pan-Africanism? That past discrimination is based on race, on common ancestry. Bad or good, that's what actually made DuBois and other people

use the idea of pan-Africanism because it was used first to actually discriminate against them—a sense of false Africanese all over the world.

Makuluni: Appiah wants to deny the history of discrimination, a common history. He asks, why can't DuBois just as easily trace himself to his Dutch ancestors? Ah, the point is that DuBois is in a category: a man who certainly had black blood. However elitist DuBois might be, he tried to do something about racial discrimination. In all fairness.

Muhanji: It's almost as if Appiah is saying that what's happened to the African and the African Americans isn't as grave as we've been led to believe. I know the danger of this. When *The Slave Community* by John Blassingame first came out, the charge was that he was saying somehow that slavery wasn't as detrimental to African Americans as we have been led to believe. It's true the African American experience is in the West, but it's a particular experience that has been oppressed by the West. Somehow I get shoved—more than I'd like to be—under the rubric of West.

Logan: I think he is leading us to conclude that if Africans cannot come together because the subject of Africa has been invented, don't even think about African Americans linking to Africans. He is displaced himself; he cannot see any bond in Africans.

Makuluni: He raises some really disturbing questions about African intellectuals in the chapter "Topologies of Nativism." I don't know that I can disagree with him.

Muhanji: What is this about writing in European languages? Talk to me about that?

Riffe: He points out how the Congolese writer, Sony Labou Tansi, is ambivalent about using French. "Raised first by his Zairian kin in the (Belgian) Congo and then sent to school in (French) Congo-Brazzaville, he arrived at his formal schooling unfamiliar with its (French) language of instruction. He reported with a strange mildness, the way in which his colonial teachers daubed him with human feces as a punishment for his early grammatical solecisms; then, a moment later he

went on to talk about his own remarkable work as a novelist and playwright in French” (53).

Makuluni: This is a major issue in African writing because how fluent you are in the western language of the former colonizer is to a large extent in the African context a mark of where you are in terms of class. And Appiah is saying that African intellectuals are, to a large extent, Europhone.

Klobah: But is Arabic an African language? And Swahili? Swahili is not an authentic African language. It's a mixture of Arabic language and then the local languages of the area which form Swahili. If Appiah had given *these* two examples of non-Europhone languages used extensively in the northern and eastern sectors, we would see that these too have some historical background. Arabic came with the Arab invasion of north Africa. Swahili came because the Arabs began slavery in north and east Africa. The second point is that if we try to use African languages, that is where we would know that Africa is not homogenous. My country, Togo, has about four to five million people. We have fifty-two different languages.

Makuluni: You are just talking about fifty two! Now in Malawi . . . !

Consider how influential Ngugi has been in his position about language. I heard a story that once at a conference, after Ngugi had finished making a presentation on his position on language, the South African writer and critic, Lewis Nkosi stood up and said something in Zulu. So many people in the room started asking each other what Nkosi had said that Nkosi proclaimed his point had been made. Ngugi counters this challenge with a call for translation, something which publishers seem to feel comfortable with when dealing with an established writer like him.

The usual argument made against Ngugi since he decided to write only in Gikuyu is that he can still maintain the audience which has followed his work faithfully since he began publishing fiction in the sixties. Writers who have not yet established reputations in western languages would not have much of an audience if they wrote in their native tongues. Apart from the problems of publishing, which are cer-

tainly more than severe in Africa, not many people would want to translate a little known writer. But Ngugi responds that if his high profile gives him advantage, why not use that to promote an African language.

Logan: On page seventy-six Appiah says, "For Africa, by and large, this authenticity is a curiosity: though trained in Europe or in schools and universities dominated by European culture, the African writers' concern is not with the discovery of a self that is the object of an inner voyage of discovery. Their problem—though not, of course, their subject—is finding a public role, not a private self." We should write for the public because of a sense of African conscience that you work for the community, but there are only a selected few that are reading this. How do we get out of it?

Klobah: Ousmane Sembene made a point some time ago about why he started to do films on his novels; he made it clear that he loves literature/writing more than film, but he was forced: the writer must be for the public, not the private self.

French is used in the parliament of Senegal and yet the parliament is for people who don't speak French. A member said, "Why don't we talk in Wolof when we come here?" The president of the assembly said, "I wouldn't understand you when you speak Wolof." Then the guy said, "I don't speak French, but you speak French." It's easier for them to speak a language which is foreign than to choose one Senegalese language over the other because that raises a political issue.

Makuluni: This is precisely why Swahili has been quite successful in East Africa, because nobody can claim it to be their language. There is a very substantial literature written in Kiswahili.

One year Festus Iyayi from Nigeria, author of *Violence*, was here in the International Writers' Program. The question of language came up in heated discussions in the Seminar on International Writing and in responding to that question Iyayi talked about how small his ethnic group is, how less powerful it is in relation to the larger groups in Nigeria: the Yoruba, the Hausa, and the Igbo. But when we use the western languages, there's that neutralizing factor at work. At the same

time there are also the kind of problems in terms of relating to the old community which Appiah talks about. It is a rude dilemma. It's something definitely very, very uncomfortable, when you can speak a western language; you are obviously located above the "people," those who cannot speak the western languages. It's power.

Logan: I was listening to Aristide when he went back to Haiti, speaking in French, Creole, and English. When he came to Creole—wow. If you know the French language, the way they turn this around is very interesting.

Muhanji: It's the same thing with language in the inner city. If you're not of it, you do not know it. It changes radically.

Makuluni: Yes, the intellectual might be able to participate in pidgin, but the pidgin speaker doesn't necessarily access the intellectual discourse. So the position of the intellectual is still up there. This is something we struggle with every day.

Klobah: The intellectual does not say, I am superior to you, but the fact that he speaks the European language makes people think that he is superior, so that he unconsciously assumes that superiority. I speak pidgin with Logan. Why don't we speak French, or speak one of the languages that we know we speak in common in Africa? We speak pidgin because that is what makes us feel comfortable.

Muhanji: Wait a minute. If *I* go home with this academic language, they will take me down like that. They will correct me and say, what you mean is this. So it's not that they don't necessarily understand what I am saying. What they will charge me with is arrogance.

Makuluni: Appiah says on page fifty-five: "language here is, of course, a synecdoche." Language is standing for something larger here. Even if you can speak the same language that the common people can speak, what Appiah is saying about the African intellectual is that you are still nevertheless carrying a lot of baggage from the western world.

Muhanji: You carry the baggage back, and it doesn't necessarily mean that you're trying to be arrogant, but a lot of times the words slip in. Then they will take me down in a minute: "Girl, what you need is this." So the intellectual doesn't have that space, you know what I'm saying?

Klobah: Yes, I understand what you're saying. Your situation is that back home the people are sick and tired of people telling them that they are useless and they can't even understand the white man's English language. But then *Dean* is saying when you go home, you have to fight to let them treat you as equal.

Makuluni: Somebody like Ngugi presumably has fought to say, "I'm the same person." He wears this simple-looking jacket. If you had never seen his picture, you would probably say, "that's a commoner there, eh?" Nevertheless, the positions have been defined for too long. Sometimes it just seems that that common dress is in itself interpreted as yet another mark of intellectual arrogance.

Logan: Appiah says on page seventy-six: "The African asks always not, 'who am I?' but, 'who are we?' 'My' problem is not mine alone, but 'ours.'" What's your take on that?

Makuluni: You know so many stories like this: you come from a village in Africa where sometimes even neighbors contribute money for you to go to school. You are going to school on behalf of everybody. When you're finished you're supposed to be everybody's person. You're supposed to get everybody a job, give everybody money and all that, eh? African intellectuals are confronted with this kind of situation, but at the same time they also seem to believe that they can deal with a question of the type "who am I?" You see? They're caught in between the two.

Klobah: But what of when Appiah criticizes Soyinka? Soyinka might fit into this "who are we" situation here. Soyinka is talking about the Yoruba culture. Appiah feels that Soyinka should be saying clearly, "Look, I'm an expert in the Yoruba culture but not the African culture because African culture, the African continent, isn't homogenous."

Makuluni: There's a lot of literature—not just Soyinka's—which takes its culture for granted. If the resulting literature is interesting enough, as a reader you go and look for the kind of information that will expand your reading. And I think that Soyinka is interesting enough. Appiah would say there is no metaphysical African essence. Nevertheless, if we talk about specific aspects of cultures, you will find *similarities*. Soyinka himself talks about something he sees in Greek culture that is similar to the Yoruba culture. And I see many African similarities. For example, the story of [the play] *Death and the King's Horseman*, that idea of having a king's horseman, was a very widespread idea in my part of the world. In southern Africa, this ritual of the servant's expected suicide in order to accompany the dead king was well-known. It was a phenomenon called "the king's pillow." The story "The Night of Darkness" by Malawian writer Tiyambe Zeleza is about a king's pillow who escapes.

Logan: But Appiah said that he was told stories by travelers coming to the house for that purpose. So you see, I think he's very distanced from common African culture. Yet you talk about the same thing in Malawi, in Ghana, and in Soyinka's world too. Appiah wants to deny that kind of African identity or common-ness in African culture.

Klobah: That brings back the issue of village. If Appiah learned stories about his own people from travelers, then you need to ask, "What type of village was that?"

TAPE THREE

Makuluni: Last time I think we gave him a bit more rub than was necessary. African culture as it exists now is much more complex. In a rural area you might easily find kids or grownups talking about Michael Jackson. Yet this kind of example also makes clear what Appiah is ignoring: in spite of what Michael Jackson might look like now, Africans are interested in Michael Jackson because here is a black kid making a big name. When I was a kid, we spent a lot of time listening to African American performers—James Brown and Wilson Pickett—quite a few, precisely because they were black. I am thinking that maybe this is one

way of responding to one of those questions you had last week about how we think about identity without the kind of classifications that Appiah challenges.

Klobah: I agree. When an African football team is playing a team outside, the African team might have played your country and have beaten your country seriously, but the moment they move—like Cameroon coming here to play in the World Cup—they represent the whole of Africa. African spectators sit, their heads and noses on the TV, just waiting for Cameroon to win. Someone was telling me everyone knows about O.J. Simpson in Africa now. They are interested in it because his skin color is black.

Makuluni: But you see, there is an element beyond that. In the sixties and seventies, a lot of people in my country identified with African Americans, the rhythm and blues, blues. Now there has been quite a shift, so that if you go to Malawi or to Chipata or Lusaka in Zambia, and you are walking about in the market, you might think that you are in Jamaica. People are shouting to each other and saying we are the “sufferers,” and they are not saying this in English. They are saying it in the vernacular. The reggae singers talk about black people as sufferers, about slavery, and are rebels against an oppressive system, which is called Babylon. Sub-Saharan Africans appropriate such language. There is a big market for reggae in Africa, for stars ranging from the late Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, Burning Spear, Bunny Wailer, to the Ivorian Alpha Blondy and the South African Lucky Dube. If you are competent in both the local languages and English, you will hear that appropriation of words like “sufferers,” that identification. Appiah talks about the racialism, about questions of identity, but there’s this level which is missing from the book. Bob Marley’s a big idol. People now come to know words like “sufferers.” And those who know the English language explain the English lyrics, and it makes him even more appealing. What does that mean?

Klobah: You can link what is happening in Zimbabwe with Bob Marley’s presence in Zimbabwe during the Independence: he sang about Zimbabwe before they had independence; he was invited. Now we have reggae bands erupting from Zimbabwe like the Bhundu Boys.

Logan: In that sense, Mugabe is ahead of a lot of African heads of state. He's an intellectual, but he also sees the diaspora. Bringing Bob to Zimbabwe in the 1980s was a very big step, a kind of awakening of a new intellectual who might be somebody who's hardly got to high school but because of Marley's message, the political message, he makes a connection.

Eckstein: What can oral cultures assert and accomplish artistically, politically, and what can the single-authored written text accomplish? African philosopher Hountondji suggests that orality is inconsistent with the liberating of the individual mind, that you can only have this in a single-authored text, that the individual mind speaking to and resisting other written texts is the way philosophy has worked. In another place, Appiah suggests a value of literacy is that, of course, something that's printed can be reproduced exactly. That's not true of an oral text and in that way oral texts are inconsistent. On the other hand, he says that oral culture is tied to the authorities of the community, and therefore is less likely, in fact, to question that authority. Inconsistent in this way but authority-bound in this way. Can orally produced texts—what we're doing here even—can they function in resistance? In what ways are they authority bound, and in what ways are they not?

Riffe: When I was reading, I kept going back to the music that slaves used because it was in direct opposition to what the masters had allowed them. They didn't really have the language in the beginning, but they did have the songs: they were sending messages. The oral culture of Africa is, to a certain extent, resistant. I think Appiah is proposing that these traditions have to be written down for them to become philosophy.

Muhanji: When I was growing up, one of the things in the African American community, when we would pass along stories, you could never tell the story the same way. You could memorize, 'cause we were into memory, so it wasn't as if you could not tell it, but your effectiveness as a person in the community, your ability to participate, meant that you had to change it. The object was to tell the story differently, so

there was a sense of resistance to the established story. Jazz is the same way. Now maybe when we're talking about norms, the morals of the community, it's different. But even that, in the African American community, there was always this outside chance that they were wrong. There was room in there for that movement.

Logan: There is room for change within certain, if not all, traditional cultures. In my culture, what is the role of the poet? Among my people there's a group of poets: they sing praises and then they criticize the society and that's called *halo*. Those people are telling the traditions. They are not outcast. And then you also come across songs during a dance and the poets are questioning political things by telling stories. They might not go to the chief or to the ancestors and say, "Okay, you have to change this rule." The role of those poets who sing is to challenge the traditions, bringing to people another perspective on issues and actually broadening their perspective that this could be otherwise. To say that those oral traditions Appiah has mentioned do not leave room for change or do not actually criticize the norms or the traditions of society because of this authority is pushing it too far. Everybody doesn't have the same kind of tradition even if a single blockhead is never going to change.

Makuluni: What is philosophy and what is African philosophy is a question which comes up in very interesting ways in chapters five and six. For him, attempts to answer the kind of questions that philosophy has been concerned with may be found in any society, but he will argue that in the western tradition, philosophy is critical reflection on those kinds of problems and that all cultures do not have that kind of critical reflection. If it's philosophy just in the western sense, do we need that? Of what use is it to us? The implication is that there's no possibility of group critical reflection.

Logan: I'd rather agree with page eighty-six: he says, "Since I do not wish to prejudge the issue of what should count as African philosophy, I shall not assume, as Hountondji does, that it has to be written."

Klobah: When he gives the example of Negritude, the origins of the argument are intelligible and it's somehow healthier than the view that black men should give the intellect over to whites in this world, that it is their special property. But if he has problems with the Negritude movement and he doesn't agree with Hountondji, where does he stand?

Makuluni: One of the moves he makes is to use as an analogy to ethnophilosophy the case of the Greek Sophists. If you look at what is happening in western philosophy today, whether continental or American, pragmatism or analytical, there's not a relationship, he argues, between that and those first pre-Socratic attempts. So those first early attempts should not even be taught. The fact is that if you have taken courses in philosophy—which I did—these were the first things we had to do. The Sophists, huh? We had to do that pre-Socratic philosophy. I think this is the problem: he thinks that the early attempts are dismissable and that ethnophilosophy is similar to those early Greek attempts. But I think that we'll need to go back to those early attempts.

Klobah: I support what you're saying. Appiah gives an example of a spirit *Ta kwesi*—although the funny thing is that he gives an example of a white person who has written about *Ta kwesi*.

Makuluni: What he does with that ritual which he takes from [R.S.] Rattray, the colonial anthropologist, and which he presents as hypothetical at the beginning is he works through and ends up actually showing that science works in a similar manner: you have to take a lot of things at face value and that which contradicts what is known is pushed under the carpet. This is one of the ways in which he works this issue of traditional versus modern. He gives that example of someone—is it a missionary?—explaining to villagers that children are dying from parasites, and the villagers don't get that. There're tiny animals in the water. So he says, well, there are evil spirits in the water, and then they listen. The effect is the same: they boil the water. What is it that we think about when we talk about the traditional? Using Achebe's question, should somebody travel 4,000 miles just to tell the traditional person, "you are wrong"? What is wrong about it as opposed to the modern? Appiah's beginning to think about this question,

and he's moving us through materials which are not easily accessible to straight black and white analysis. This is something that will carry him through the postcolonial and the postmodern discussion.

TAPE FOUR

Logan: You know, my great-uncle is very sick. Whenever I come back home from school he'll say, "Oh let me teach you these things before I die." He's a medicine man. Europeans are there all the time, and he doesn't even charge you before he performs. When you are satisfied, you can bring him something. People come back with goats or whatever. A lot of people. And here I am, I don't even know anything about what he's been doing.

Klobah: In a family, you don't all become medicine men or women. One person inherits the vocation. To choose a successor, a medicine man studies all the members of his family. Carefully, I mean. Similarly, the grandfather always shares family secrets only with a trusted member. If he says, "Oh you kids. Nowadays you kids are not to be trusted," be alert. He's coming to tell you something and testing whether you are ready to prove to him you can be trusted. If you don't, you lose, you see? You might be asked to go to the bush and fetch the bark of a particular tree for medicinal purposes. You are told *almost* everything about the medicine. The rest is a secret you have to prove worthy of knowing. There is some kind of trust required. This happens in the West too. The pharmaceutical companies will not tell the general public how they produce medicines. It's a business secret.

Makuluni: Clearing space: this is a very interesting point he makes about postmodernism, that it has been greeted with the same kind of enthusiasm that modernism was greeted with, that the main elements sometimes don't seem to make it too different from modernism. So Appiah's idea that these postmodernist claims are space-clearing gestures is a very interesting one. It's academia and one is expected to clear some space so you can say, "Hey, I'm doing something here."

Klobah: "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" is an intellectual piece, a very convincing chapter. He's done a good job here. Then, boom,

you go to chapter nine, “African Identities,” and you become frustrated. It is much less convincing.

Makuluni: This was actually one of the first questions we dealt with. I remember I said and some others here too said that we believe he still believes in these kinds of identities, but he thinks that it is possible to sustain them without being racist. That is what he tries to articulate in chapter nine. This is the way to be black without being racist. Even though he is saying that, it just seems to me that he is still dealing with black people because he is black himself.

Klobah: If he talks about ethnicity as something that existed before all these racial categories, then why does he give the example of the Igbos? He quotes from Achebe’s interview in which he says Igbos never existed until the Civil War, because during the Civil War they had to come together under the rubric of being Igbo and then fight.

Makuluni: This question of ethnicity in Africa is much, much more complex. You still get the sense of an ethnic group as sort of having originary form or possessing the same chromosome, eh?, like family. So language, biology still sort of come into play, eh? That’s a problem. I come from Malawi myself. I am supposedly Chewa, but the fact is that the name Makuluni doesn’t exist among the Chewa. It exists in a different ethnic group. We tend to think about ethnic groups as belonging in certain areas as if they originated, as if they grew like a plant in that area, when, in fact, there have been a lot of movements of peoples.

Logan: In the southern part of Africa, it gets more complicated. When I asked one South African Zulu woman, “Okay, what is the original location of the Zulu people?” she said, “God!”—she got frustrated, and maybe angry too—“Ho, you know, this is a question that Mandela is trying to solve now because people say, ‘You’ve got to leave this location because *our* ancestors used to live there. Now that apartheid is over, you gotta get out of there.’” But then people have been moving as you said. The Ewe people moved from Nigeria, and our location now is Ghana, Togo, and Benin. And no Asante people are going to come there and say that that’s their location. The Ewe have been there

for so many years and then the names, all those things. But then in some areas, the idea of ethnicity becomes more complicated. It's not just the location.

Klobah: When we talk of ethnicity linked with colonialism, we have to look at pre-colonial Africa first. Appiah talks about the indirect rule of the British: they looked at the country where they meant to settle and saw which groups were highly organized and had a powerful ruler who could dominate his people. Americans did that in Zaire. They gave Mobutu more power. In Rwanda, when you trace back, you see that the former colonists have to share part of the blame. They educated one group more than the other. They gave privileges to one group more than the other. After colonization is over, after independence, the group that was hired to succeed continues in the steps of the colonialist. The privileged ones are made to seem much more important, more human than the others, so that it goes on, on and on and on. When people get tired of being oppressed by their own countrymen, they take up arms and say, "No, we can't bear it anymore." That is the cause of most coup d'états in Africa. Liberia is an example.

Muhanji: It is a similar situation in the United States in the sense that they educated this bourgeois class of what we call high yellow blacks who got the advantages, and this stuff still works itself out in American racism. The only thing we haven't done is to take up arms, but it's been divided in so many ways that we argue among ourselves over skin color, so it's the same dynamics working.

Logan: You know, the Igbo *were* there as a group before the British, but the strategies that they used or the sense of oneness differed after colonization.

Makuluni: When Achebe talks about the Igbo ethnic identity as coming up post Second World War, that's exactly what he was talking about. Not that there were not people speaking Igbo, but the way they identified themselves, the way they actually created themselves as an ethnic group, seeing themselves as victimized—"If we are victimized, what should we do to people who are not Igbo who are living among us?"

Klobah: And how did they become victims? They are chosen because they are from a particular part of the nation. They speak a particular language.

Makuluni: In Malawi now, you get some parents saying, “You can’t marry that one because she’s from the North.” The children say, “Oh, come on. We are all Malawians, eh?”

Klobah: But your mom will say that it has been established that people from the North are backward, not educated. You look back, and you ask, “When did it become that people from the North are backward and are not educated?” You go back and you go back and you see that it started when the white man came.

Eckstein: When Appiah’s a child in a hospital and he’s looking out the window and there’s the Asante sword that supposedly can’t be drawn out of the rock and Nkrumah and the Duke of Edinburgh were trying to pull this sword out—what did you make of that story? And then at the end, in the last sentence, Appiah says that when he’s gone back the sword has disappeared but nobody . . .

Klobah: He’s talking about identity formation by using that analogy. [“Okamfo Anokye, the great priest of Asante, who with the first great king, Osei Tutu, had founded the kingdom two and a half centuries earlier” (172)] put the sword there. And he said that if someone takes it out, then the whole kingdom will fall apart. Appiah uses that analogy to tell us that the sword is gone, and if the sword is gone, then Anokye’s formation of that kingdom, of that identity, ethnicity, *was* an invention. It was created. And so it can be dispersed.

Makuluni: What’s interesting there is that he says that Nkrumah seems to be tugging at the sword half-heartedly. The Duke of Edinburgh was doing it with more conviction. It’s a moment which seemed to realize the dynamics of power between the former colonial authority, the Duke, and the new president of Ghana, who is also aware of the power of the Asante king, and knows that he shouldn’t really mess up this thing.

Klobah: Nkrumah believes in the African tradition. He knows that a human being can never take it out, so he wouldn't even try. I believe he's not thinking about the power of the Asante kingdom at that moment but rather thinking about himself, the belief system that he has as an African. But how can he explain his beliefs to this European aristocrat?

Makuluni: I think that that sword anecdote is an attempt to explain how one might look at Appiah's later outburst before the Asante king. What is at stake in his own Asante identity? Can he still claim an Asante identity, having gone against the king? Though the sword is not there, the implication is that the Asantes are still there. It is possible to have an Asante identity without this kind of symbol.

Klobah: I think so.

Makuluni: The way it plays out is that Jerry Rawlings, the Ghanaian head of state—comes in and now we have the Asante's power and the state: the state in this case represented by a hybrid person—Jerry Rawlings's father was Scottish.

Klobah: But the point here is that Appiah wasn't doing it his way or his mother's way; he was doing it his father's way, the man's way. His father knew, "This is the moment I have to let my kids fight for me because if not, then they're going to be lost." Because this woman, his wife, is British, so she doesn't have anything to say over there if the man dies.

Makuluni: But you see Rawlings takes us back to that first image of the lawyer in the wig and the dark suit. Here is the power vested in this man who is lying in a coffin. And here at the end Appiah talks more and more about our city. "Where is the village?" I kept saying, "where is the village now, eh?"

Logan: The villages are cleared, and we created a city: that's what he's saying.

Makuluni: Rawlings has come back into power how many times? Two times, eh?

Klobah: This is the third time.

Makuluni: So people in Ghana now know you can't really mess with Rawlings.

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