

REVIEW ESSAY

THE IDENTITY CRISIS REVISITED:
TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Charles Banner-Haley
Colgate University

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp. xi, 225. Cloth \$28.00; paper, \$14.95.

Gerald Early, ed. *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*. New York: Allen Lane (The Penguin Press), 1993. Pp. xxiv, 351. Cloth, \$23.50; paper, \$11.95.

When our students come into our history courses they bring with them the messy puzzles regarding who they are, what they want to be, and confusion over how to answer those questions. History courses indirectly become a means by which they find some solace, if not clues, as to who and what they are. For Afro-American students, black history courses can easily become sought after places in which to resolve identity crises. For white students, African American history courses can either be exercises in feeling guilty or studying blacks as some foreign people. Only when all students are shown that Afro-Americans make up an integral part of American history and that they can learn about themselves as much as about black people over time can the real business of teaching Afro-American history take place. Which is to say that African American history is not just mainly about Identity as much as it is about the courageous efforts of black women and men to free themselves from the mental and physical shackles of slavery and the removal of racism. The identity component of African American history is not just unique to black people, but given the nature of the Afro-American experience, it illuminates what should be the core of all American history: the question of what is an American.¹

The two books under discussion obviously would and should be included in any serious course on African American history whether in graduate courses or upper-level undergraduate courses focused on intellectual, political, or social histories of black people, and in a few cases general Afro-American survey courses. But these works should also be included in American history courses. Both of them, *Lure and Loathing* and *In My Father's House*, for different reasons, certainly belong in upper-level American history courses.

If the reconceptualization and integration of African American history into American history is to continue and be meaningful, then students in American history courses have to be exposed to the concrete history and the thinking of black people in this nation. This means that the traditional ways of approaching the nation's history

¹ I would like to thank those who took the time and patience to read through a much longer draft of this review essay: Eugene D. Genovese, Jay R. Mandle, Joan Mandle, Ronald Butchart, William Mugleston, Stephen Kneeshaw, Dernal Davis, Larry Greene, and Faye Dudden. Their suggestions and comments for revision were deeply considered. Of course they bear no responsibility for any errors in the final outcome.

has to be re-thought. Both of the books here go far towards initiating and carrying out that process. They are not flawless, but they make up for shortcomings by stimulating serious reflections. Because African American history courses are intimately tied up with the idea of Race and Racism as well as the question of Identity, the one book that I think all teachers of American and Afro-American history should tackle is Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*.

I use the verb "tackle" seriously, for this is a book that requires patience and a slow, careful reading. Appiah, a Ghanaian, teaches philosophy and Afro-American literature at Harvard University. *In My Father's House* puts forth what may be the most thoughtful description and analysis of racism currently available. Nonetheless, the reading can be tough going for anyone not well versed in the ethereal language of philosophy and literary criticism. While Appiah tries to keep a handle on this, he occasionally slips, especially in those chapters dealing with African literature. However, Chapter 1, "The Invention of Africa," Chapter 2, "Illusions of Race," and the "Epilogue: In My Father's House" are more than worth the price of the book and should be required reading for any graduate student wanting to teach African American history.

In the first two chapters Appiah lays out the arguments against racism. And in our political climate with regard to race, gender, and class studies on most college campuses today it is indeed a courageous analysis. Political dogmatists—those who are "politically correct" on the right or the left—are not going to be happy with Appiah's analysis, but they like everyone else owe it to themselves to give Appiah a respectful hearing.

What I have found in using Appiah in my African American history courses (I do not assign the book in my survey class but rather present the ideas in lecture/discussion form) is that teaching about Afro-Americans in the social sciences and the humanities over the last twenty years has sunk into a dangerously simplistic form of oppressor versus oppressed. And students, black and white, have thoroughly absorbed this formulation, in which racism is most definitely a white thing that black people cannot acquire. After all, racism is about power and since black people have no real power in the society, only whites, who do have power, can be racists. Implicitly and ironically African Americans are here being acted upon ("victims" is the standard term) and have little to say or do in resisting their status and becoming human actors in history. And when there is an attempt to remedy the situation, we who study African American history are faced with arguments for an Afrocentric view of history that calls for teaching the essence of "blackness."

Kwame Anthony Appiah will have none of this. "Racialism," he states "is at the heart of nineteenth-century attempts to develop a science of racial difference" and racialism is "a presupposition of other doctrines that have been called 'racism' and these other doctrines have been in the last few centuries, the basis of a great deal of human suffering and the source of a great deal of moral error." (p. 13) Those doctrines of racism to which Appiah refers are "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" racism. It is here that Appiah's analysis is especially fresh and illuminating. For he sees racism as having intellectual, physical, and moral properties that must be broken down and looked at carefully in order to eradicate them. Appiah, not wanting to use the term racism loosely, seeks precision when determining who is a racist. And when that determination is made it may well be that there are black racists as well as white racists.

The essentials of Appiah's analysis are three. First is the idea that Racism is an historical construct. It has changed over time and, even though it is still a problem today, it surely is not the same as it was in say 1954, 1884, 1854, or 1754. Second, Appiah is right about Racialism being at the core of nineteenth-century thinking: See for example Kenneth R. Manning's excellent historical overview "Race, Science, and Identity," in *Lure and Loathing*. Thus the nineteenth-century northern free Afro-American intellectuals who analyzed the problems of society and put forth solutions were as caught up in and tainted by the racist dilemma as everyone else. Finally, Appiah's studied analysis of Alexander Crummell and W.E.B. Du Bois and their thinking on race offers a challenge to anyone who would use racism as a moral "us against them" cudgel in teaching African American history. In Appiah's considered judgment, Alexander Crummell was an intrinsic racist, for he believed in a racial essence that decreed black people to be morally, intellectually, and physically superior to all other races. The solution to the problems of his time was for blacks in America to free themselves from slavery, recapture their glorious heritage and essence, and take their rightful place as leaders and rulers of human civilization from a Christianized, Western-enlightened Africa. W.E.B. Du Bois was a fervent admirer of Crummell, but he came to a very different conclusion concerning race, one that Appiah finds more agreeable. Du Bois saw race as an historical construct and, owing to his shift from an idealistic to a materialistic analysis of history in the thirties, felt that racism was a tool of those who had power to keep people divided so that the world's resources could be controlled by the few. But Du Bois was also concerned, as were all nineteenth-century American thinkers, with what one's identity was about, whether within the group or on a national scale.

In 1903, Du Bois put forth his ideas on racial identity in the classic book *Souls of Black Folk*. More than any other intellectual work in twentieth-century Afro-American and American history, this one goes to the heart of what it means not only to be an Afro-American but also what it means to be an American. But Du Bois was also working out a theory of Pan-Africanism that would seek to give a sense of racial solidarity to those Africans in diaspora. Appiah provides an excellent exegesis of Du Bois's thought on Pan-Africanism and, by turns, Zionism. In doing so, Appiah demonstrates the trap that Du Bois was caught up in using racist theories and deconstructs the notion of a Pan-Africanism based on racial solidarity. He sees Zionism as having been caught in the same dilemma despite some significant differences between the two movements. Both were immersed in the conventional race theories of the day and were working towards the same end: the attainment of land and the resolution of a divided identity. Appiah concludes: "The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all that we ask race to do for us." (p. 45)

Thus Gerald Early's collection of original essays that explore the Du Boisian Theory of Dual Consciousness is must reading, for it focuses attention on not only what that theory means to African American intellectuals but also on what they mean by being American. For black people, the idea of dual consciousness has been a thorny problem and black intellectuals continue to wrestle with it. But now we are living in the Post-Civil Rights Age where the easy labels of racism do not easily explain the critical conditions that the majority of black people find themselves in and where the

fruits of integration have become bittersweet for those who have entered the middle class. That is not to say that racism does not exist or that white America has finally accepted black people as citizens and equals. Racism is alive and well. But it is now about more than black and white.

A look at the way blacks and Asians face each other in New York or Los Angeles provides one stark example. Even more startling is that a young Japanese exchange student could be shot to death and the white killer acquitted by a jury on the grounds that his property was invaded. The resurgence of antagonism between blacks and Jews has also resurfaced and touched off violent confrontations as seen in the Crown Heights, Brooklyn, episode in 1992. And the steady immigration of Afro-Caribbeans, poor Asians from Southeast Asia, and Latinos from Central America causes friction among Afro-Americans, who perceive these groups as destroying their neighborhoods and taking away jobs that, they feel, Americans should have first call upon.

Meanwhile, the nation as a whole is in economic difficulty and throughout the land there is anxiety about just where America will be heading in the next century, culturally, economically, and politically. The African American intellectuals in Early's collection, while ostensibly writing around the theme of Du Bois's idea of dual consciousness, are grappling with this anxiety. In the best tradition of Afro-American intellectual thought, they offer us some much needed reflections and critiques. From Glenn Loury's opening essay on personal identity and its meaning in the black community to Darlene Clark Hine's closing reflections on race, gender, and class and re-thinking the Du Boisian theorem in the light of those constructions, the intellectuals and artists provide the reader with the most diverse, multi-layered, and expansive view of Afro-American thinking today. This book very much reminds me of Rayford Logan's important book *What the Negro Wants*. Indeed Gerald Early's collection could well be read as an update of that 1944 collection of essays.² The authors in Early's collection view politics in relation to age and gender range. What is missing, however, are any thoughts from those African Americans who are gay and lesbian. The Du Boisian Dual Consciousness Theorem surely has an impact on those whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual.

But aside from this omission, this is a serious work that will last well into the next century. It deserves a wide reading by teachers and students as well as serious discussion. Since there is so much that is good in this work, teachers might want to make a few selections at certain intervals in their courses (I would recommend this as a text for an upper-level Afro-American history course or seminar) and take the time to go through the essays thoroughly. Thus Glenn Loury's essay could be paired with Molefi Kete Asante's essay, in order to show students how the Du Boisian paradigm can be viewed from one side or the other. Another suggestive pairing would be to look at James Alan McPherson's piece entitled "Junior and John Doe" and Itabari Njeri's "Sushi and Grits: Ethnic Identity and Conflict in a Newly Multicultural America." These two essays alone should go a long way towards getting students to think clearly

² Rayford W. Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

and seriously along the lines of America as being a racial and cultural mosaic. As Njeri wonderfully and pointedly puts it:

As we approach this mine-laden social-psychological terrain, among the questions we should be asking is, What does it mean to be African American at the end of the twentieth century? In the same breath we should ask, What does it mean to be American? These questions are at the heart of the unresolved tension in discussions about cultural pluralism: balancing what is perceived to be universal with ethnic pluralism. (p. 33)

James McPherson, quoting from an interview with Ralph Ellison, one of our more perceptive intellectuals, has Ellison provide this important reflection:

I think that we're polarized by the very fact that we keep talking about "black awareness" when we really should be talking about black American awareness, an awareness of where we fit into the total American scheme, where our influence is. I tell white kids that instead of talking about black men in a white world or about black men in a white society, they ask themselves how black *they* are because black men have been influencing the values of the society and the art forms of the society. (pp. 175-76)

In an age when most rap records are bought by young white males and sports heroes such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson are looked up to, it is words such as Ellison's that merit closer and deeper analyses. It should be noted, by the way, that the above quote was taken from an interview McPherson had with Ellison in 1970. Here it is 1994 and the words are probably more meaningful than they were then when Ellison was under fire from black militants for being an "integrationist." The fact of the matter is that, then and now, the reality for African Americans is that they already are integrated into the society. Ellison's advice to be aware of where black Americans fit in the total scheme of the society and what their cultural and social influences have been has in recent years spawned academic work that is uncovering the deep and often times unconscious influence that the African presence has had on American writers, artists, and intellectuals.

Recent works by Toni Morrison and Eric Sundquist are not only showing us that influence but are also helping us, as teachers/scholars and citizens, to realize the extent to which African Americans are entwined in the American society. This in turn should open us to the understanding that this society is no longer (if it ever was in reality) a "white man's country."³

³ See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard/Belknap Press, 1993). In a similar vein are these two studies: Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

What the state of AfroAmerica will be in the twenty-first century will assuredly affect the course of America, but what direction the teaching and studying of Afro-American history will take depends upon how seriously we who teach and write about the African-American presence come to grips with the issues of identity, race, and racism as they have affected all of us in the past so that we may finally find meaningful ways to eradicate racism. Then, perhaps, future generations will study racism as a tragic and self-defeating way to create an identity. These works by Appiah and Early stand as signposts in that effort to understand more fully the question of identity, race, and racism in America.

* See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). In a similar vein are these two studies: Shelby Steele, *Black Man's Burden: Race, Revolution, and the African American Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Eric Foner, *The Black Reconstruction: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).