



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture by Kwame Anthony Appiah
Ivan Karp

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money versus nature, it is an extraordinarily significant contribution.

Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature. *Arnold Krupat*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 288 pp.

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This is both a frustrating and belated book. Indeed, there will be things of interest in it for anthropologists: a chauvinistic account from the side of literature of the convergence of ethnography and literature in recent years; an interesting placement of Franz Boas within the trope of modernist irony; and yet another righteous complaint about James Clifford's inability to escape a Western idiom when offering his "pseudo" form of ethnography. But, otherwise, this book is so full of hedges, pretensions, positioning moves, and tortured, self-righteous concerns about the dreaded "political correctness" that it drives a reader to distraction. These are all telltale signs of a story of academic politics that, while guiding this work, is not being told by the author.

Exhibit 1: an example of tortuous hedging. Krupat is sensitive to the current "informed" position about the need to avoid dwelling on "victimizing" when dealing with subaltern peoples, but makes the following statement:

One may grant that not all Euramericans were rapacious, genocidal monsters, and that not all Indians were, in the purest and most absolute sense, their hapless, innocent victims: nonetheless, it seems to me beyond question—all things considered—the indigenous peoples of this continent, along with African Americans, women, and many other groups, have overwhelmingly been more sinned against than sinning. If this is so, to construct one's discourse on such a premise is not necessarily to engage in the revisionist allegory of victimism. Some people *have* been hurt by others and if that is not the only and the most interesting thing to say, it most certainly remains something that still, today, can probably not be said too often. [p. 21, emphasis in original]

Exhibit 2: the keyword "Ethnocriticism." This is the emblem term of the volume, which because of its two components is, I suppose, an attractive neologism, since it evokes a combination of concepts that many scholars in

contemporary cultural studies would wishfully like to see combined. But, in Krupat's hands, ethnocriticism turns out to be nothing more than a restatement of a theoretical ideal of scholarly practice that has great currency these days (p. 26): "Thus, ethnocriticism, as I have said, is concerned with differences rather than oppositions, and so seeks to replace oppositional with dialogical models." But what denies Krupat's formulation any power, and renders his guiding construct a phantom throughout the volume, is his repeated pessimism about his ability to actually practice ethnocriticism; for example: "Obviously all of this is easier to imagine, even to articulate, than it is to put into practice. But, as I have said, imagining and articulating it, so far as one can, is already to contribute, however incipiently, to its practice and the practices it may found" (p. 28).

Exhibit 3: the curious marginalization in this book of the substantial and impressive literature, scholarship, and experiments by contemporary Native American writers like, for example, Gerald Vizenor and Greg Sarris, among many others. Indeed, Vizenor gets the most sustained treatment, but in an ambivalent, and, finally, patronizing way. Embedded in the book is Krupat's construction of a radical and fruitless "postmodernism" in dissociation from which, like so many other contemporary writers, he tries to establish his own virtuosity. Ultimately, he does this in the name of "science" (associating himself with the practices of such anthropological scholars of ethnopoetics as Donald Bahr and Dennis Tedlock). Vizenor, through his trickster motif, is made to be a part of this bad postmodernism, and is improbably linked with the arch-trickster Steve Tyler. Then, Krupat suggests how Vizenor might be redeemed by improving him within Krupat's vision of ethnocriticism.

There is obviously a broader account in Krupat's maneuvering of Vizenor's work of the former's relationship to contemporary Native American writers that is sorely missing from this work. For, how in the name of ethnocriticism and the dialogics it promotes can such an important contemporary dimension of the field in which Krupat participates be so elided?

In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. *Kwame Anthony Appiah*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 242 pp.

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In My Father's House combines philosophy, literary criticism, cultural studies, and autobiography to produce an overlapping series of essays that both critiques the idea of an "African" identity and argues for the emergence of a contemporary form of pan-Africanism. This provocative work resists classification into the standard genres of scholarly production; it spans as many disciplines as it does cultural boundaries. Appiah's purpose is to examine the different contexts and media in which ideas and experience about shared identity in Africa and its diaspora have been articulated. These range from what he learned in his father's house to the early writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and others on race and identity. Appiah examines Wole Soyinka's construction of an African mythos as well as recent work in African philosophy and systems of thought that criticizes the confusion of cultural idioms with self-conscious philosophical debate. At the end of the book Appiah returns to his father's house again—this time for the debate over identity provoked by his father's funeral.

In the course of this journey Appiah also considers the relationship between the idea of the postcolonial and the postmodern, political stability in independent African states, and ideas about cultural diversity and identity as well as the role of the observer in the construction of social analysis. This heady brew is held together by Appiah's insistence that scholarly abstractions must be grounded in social and political realities. Appiah's book is not a tract in philosophy and literary criticism; it relates philosophy and literary criticism to such problems of everyday living as how to manage multiple and contradictory identities derived from systems in conflict, the role of the intellectual in contemporary African society, and how conflicting loyalties and demands can be resolved in a fashion that is ethical for the parties concerned.

Appiah's essays confront a central preoccupation of much contemporary African writing. They seek to locate grounds on which to evaluate the multiple and complex cultural forms, inappropriately labeled "African" and "Western," that are used to organize African life. Appiah's splendid arguments reject the idea of a romantic African essence found in all African cultures across time and space, yet he also repudiates the notion that there are no shared cultural attitudes and historical experiences that bind Africans together in

the world. Appiah chooses neither the Afrocentric idea nor the relativist point of view. Instead he argues that African identity is one of many possible identities made available by shared historical experiences and emergent forms of international organization that arise out of the shift from the colonial to the post-colonial period. African intellectuals and artists are virtually obliged to engage in cultural criticism, to make judgments about the relevance of culture and "tradition" for constructing a viable and ethical society.

There is much else to be gained from this excellent book, even when one disagrees with specific arguments. Appiah's classification of racial attitudes and arguments is compelling. His discussion of the notion that he calls "intrinsic racism" is an important account of how fellow feeling combines with exclusionary attitudes to create a formation that is impervious to argument. Appiah's contention that the everyday give-and-take of life in society is not conducive to more distanced contemplative accounts of how systems work is presented in an original way that contributes to the literature on structure and agency and challenges contemporary cultural anthropology's overblown fascination with resistance and colonialism.

At the beginning of the book Appiah fondly recalls his father's house as a center of Asante culture. By the end he is engaged in a debate with the most potent representatives of "tradition" over his father's last wishes. His book is an outstanding intervention in contemporary debates over identity—in Africa and elsewhere.

Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans. *Karen Isaksen Leonard.* Asian American History and Culture Series. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992. 346 pp.

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This study examines the flexible ethnicity of a "community" composed of two-generational, Punjabi-Mexican families in southern California. The "community" is made up of Punjabi men married to Mexican or Mexican-American women living with their children in more than half-a-dozen geographical communities. The different cultural traditions of husbands and wives, and those of the children, who perceive themselves as different from both parents, make this study unique.