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**Mistaken Identities:
*Creed, Country, Color, Culture***

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Reith Lectures 2016

Lecture 3: Color, Accra

SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the third of this year's BBC Reith Lectures. We're in Accra, the capital of Ghana, the country where our lecturer spent much of his childhood. He's a philosopher and his subject is identity, what are the forces that make us who we are?

In the first two lectures, he explored religion – or creed – and nationhood, country. In his third lecture, he moves onto race or – to keep the alliteration – colour.

As the son of an English mother and Ghanaian father, he knows at firsthand how the colour of your skin can affect the way you look at the world and, possibly more importantly, the way the world looks at you.

Our lecture is taking place at the British Council, an organisation that exists to build bridges between Britain and the outside world, but can building bridges ever close the gap between people who feel themselves to be different or are regarded as different simply because of the colour of their skin?

Even in countries that like to pride themselves on their tolerance, such as America and Britain, race is a constant and often divisive presence. These are tricky waters to navigate. As our lecturer has observed, the currents of identity can sometimes tug us excruciatingly in opposite directions.

To dig deeper into this complex issue, please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer 2016 Kwame Anthony Appiah.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Thank you very, Sue, and thank you all very much for coming. It's great to be here with so many familiar faces in the audience. I'm glad that I've got my family represented and I'm very honoured by the presence of my friend John Kufuor and so many others of you.

In 1707, a boy about five years old boarded a ship at Axim on the African Gold Coast, a long morning's drive west from Accra, where we meet today. The ship belonged to the Dutch West India Company, and after many grueling weeks, it arrived in Amsterdam. But that wasn't the end of the boy's long journey. For he then had to travel another 500 or so kilometers to Wolfenbüttel, a German town midway between Amsterdam and Berlin. It was the home of Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, who was a major patron of the European Enlightenment. The Duke's library boasted one of the most magnificent book collections in the world, and his librarian was the great philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibnitz, an inventor of the calculus and among the most powerful minds of his century.

This was a glittering, dazzling center of Enlightenment rationalism: what was this boy from Ghana doing there?

Well apparently, he had been "given" to the Duke as a present. We don't know what the boy's status was exactly: Had he been enslaved? Was he sent by missionaries for a Christian education? What we *do* know is that Duke Anton Ulrich took a special interest in him, arranging for his education, and conferring on him, at his baptism, both his own Christian name and that of his sons: so the young man came to be known as Anton Wilhelm Rudolph. For the Duke, the gift of an African child was an opportunity to conduct an Enlightenment experiment, exploring what would happen to an African immersed in modern European scholarship.

The young man from Axim received the family's patronage for three decades.

They were presumably aware of a similar experiment, which began a few years earlier, when Tsar Peter the Great of Russia took an African slave as *his* godson, naming him Hannibal. Hannibal became a successful Russian general, and was the great grandfather of Pushkin, the founder of modern Russian literature. They didn't know *that* was going to happen. (*laughter*)

But Anton Wilhelm wasn't content to be an object of inquiry; he had inquiries of his own to conduct. We're not sure when Anton Wilhelm started using his Nzema name, Amo: at his confirmation, the church records call him Anton Wilhelm Rudolph Mohre; Mohr, or Moor, being one of the ways Germans then referred to Africans. Later, though, he called *himself* Anton Wilhelm Amo Afer, using the word for African in Latin, the

language of European scholarship. So he wanted to be known, then, as Amo the African.

Nowadays, we might call Amo a person of color, and we know that Enlightenment Europeans could be rather unenlightened when it came to color. Immanuel Kant, the most influential European philosopher of the eighteenth century, once declared that the fact that someone “was completely black from head to foot” provided “distinct proof that what he said was stupid.” And, though it would be nice to report that such hierarchies of hue are merely of antiquarian interest, they have, of course, proved curiously persistent.

Consider the bestselling book on politics by a German author in the past decade, written by a then board member of the Deutsche Bundesbank no less, which suggests that Germany is being made less intelligent—“verdummt,” is the expressive German word—by genetically inferior Muslim immigrants.

In the United States, where I live, the color line is an unhealed wound. In the past year, while the Black Lives Matter movement has sought to draw attention to black victims of state violence, white nativists have found a Presidential candidate to rally behind.

And so questions arise: Why have the divisions of color proved so resistant to evidence and argument? Why did the Enlightenment spirit of rational inquiry fail to consign these hierarchies to the ash heap of history, alongside so many other discarded notions? What has gone wrong in the longstanding global conversation about color?

Let’s retrace our steps. The experiment with our young African, three centuries ago, looks like a success.

Amo, the Duke’s godson, educated with the children of the local aristocracy, clearly flourished at the local university, because he went on to study law at the university of Halle, then (as now) one of Germany’s leading centers of teaching and research. There, he wrote a thesis about the legal status of the “Moor” arguing that the European slave trade violated the principles of Roman law. He soon added knowledge of medicine and astronomy to his training, and a few years later, moved to the University of Wittenberg, in Saxony, where he became the first black African to earn a doctoral degree in philosophy. When the ruler of Saxony came to visit, Amo was chosen to lead the students’ procession in his honor. His Wittenberg thesis, published in 1734, makes important criticisms of Descartes’ views of sensation.

And Amo, who knew Dutch, German, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, went on to teach at two eminent institutions of higher learning, in Halle and in Jena. And in 1738 he published an academic text, which won eminent admirers. The great physicist and philosopher Gotthelf Loescher, who examined his thesis at the University of Wittenberg, spoke of the Gold Coast as “the mother ... of the most auspicious minds,” and added:

Among these auspicious minds, your genius stands out especially, most noble and distinguished Sir, seeing that you have excellently proved the felicity and superiority of genius, solidity and refinement in learning and teaching, in countless examples....

So I have said that Amo's education was an experiment. What hypothesis was it designed to test?

When the Rector of Wittenberg complemented Dr. Amo on his successful defense of his dissertation, he began by talking about his African background. He mentioned some of the most famous African writers from Antiquity, including the Roman playwright Terence, Tertullian and St. Augustine among the Christian Fathers, and he discussed the Moors who conquered Spain from Africa. All of these people (as the Rector would have known) were of Berber or Phoenician or Roman ancestry, so none of them would have had dark skin or the tightly-curved black hair that Amo had.

So our dukes were presumably interested in a question not about Africans in general but about black people, about Negroes, about the Moor. But what could you learn from a single experiment with one black man? Did Anton Ulrich and his friends conclude that any black child, taken at random and given Amo's education, would have ended up as a professor of philosophy?

And if Amo had not passed the exams, would they have concluded that this somehow showed something about every black person?

Three centuries later, we are bound to see Amo's story through the prism of race. Not so in his day. Then, everyone agreed there are what I called "peoples" in the last lecture, which was about nationalism; that is to say groups of human beings defined by shared ancestry, real or imagined, as there had been since the beginnings of recorded history. But the idea that each people shared an inherited biological nature was not yet the consensus of European thinkers. For one thing, most of them believed in the Biblical story of creation, and that meant that every living person was a descendant of Adam and Eve, and each was also a descendant of Noah. For another, the idea of distinguishing between our biological and our non-biological features was still in the intellectual future.

When Leibniz wrote about – that's the librarian at the place where Amo was educated – when Leibniz wrote what distinguished one people from another, he thought what mattered was language. And if you read contemporaneous accounts given by European travelers and the thinkers who read them, the great debates at that time were about the role of climate and geography in shaping color and customs, not about inherited characteristics.

Indeed, the very word "biology" wasn't invented until about 1800. Until then, the discussions took place under the heading of Natural History. And it's only with the

Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus, who was Amo's contemporary, that scholars began to think of human beings as part of nature in a way that meant that we could be classified, like other animals and plants, by genus and species. And it was Linnaeus who first called us *Homo sapiens*, and who placed us alongside monkeys and apes in the natural order.

As he wrote to a colleague, "I seek from you and the whole world what the generic difference is between men and apes that follows from the principles of Natural History. Very certainly, I know of none."

Beginning in the years that Amo was in Europe, a contest developed between this older Biblical understanding of the nature of humanity and a newer one that grew with the increasing prestige of the scientific study of mankind. In Amo's day, as I said, almost everyone would have agreed that, since all human beings had to be descended from the sons of Noah, the different kinds of people might be different because they descended from Shem or Ham or Japheth. The basic division of humankind suggested by this typology was threefold:

first, the Semites, descendants of Shem like the Hebrews and the Arabs and the Assyrians; second, the darker-skinned people of Africa, including Egyptians and Ethiopians; and, third, the lighter-skinned people of Europe and Asia, like the Greeks, or the Medes or the Persians. That gives you three races: Semites, Blacks and Whites.

But the travels of European scientists and explorers revealed the diversity of modern human beings, which didn't fit this framework. To begin with, there was the absence from the Biblical picture of East Asians—like the Chinese and the Japanese—or of Amerindians. Some thinkers even began to wonder if all the people in the world were really descendants of Adam.

Such findings might have encouraged intellectuals to question how deep these divisions of humanity really were.

Instead, for the most part, natural historians just sought to expand the categories and continued to ground hierarchies of color in the natural order of things.

There were, however, notable forces of opposition. The Abbé Grégoire, the great French revolutionary Catholic priest and anti-slavery campaigner, published a survey of the cultural achievements of black people in 1808, less than two decades after the storming of the Bastille. He subtitled it, "researches on their intellectual faculties, their moral qualities and their literature," and he offered up Amo, among others, as evidence for the unity of the human race and the fundamental equality of black people.

He sent a copy of this book to Thomas Jefferson, who had remarked in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that he could never "find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration." Grégoire, with Amo in hand, urged him to think again.

Yet what did Amo's example demonstrate? No one ever thought that because Plato or Descartes was a European, every European was capable of works of philosophical genius. Amo's relevance in Grégoire's argument derived largely from the fact that, for black people, the racial essence was thought by many to *rule out* real intellectual capacity. Hence Kant's rather foolish remark that a black man could only say stupid things. Amo's existence did refute *that* view. Still, skeptics could insist that Amo was just an exception.

So Grégoire not only assembled a dozen such counterexamples in his book, but he reported on visiting a group of black children brought from Sierra Leone to a school founded by William Wilberforce in Clapham, and concluded that, so far as he could tell, "there exists no difference between them and Europeans except that of color." You couldn't tell much about what black people were capable of by seeing what most of them achieved in the appalling conditions of New World slavery, Grégoire (*needs accent on e*) felt. As the freedwoman Harriet Jacobs put it somewhat genteelly later, there was reason to excuse enslaved people some "deficiencies in consideration of circumstances." Who knew what would happen if all black people were offered the education of Anton Wilhelm Amo?

As Grégoire's activism suggests, the background to the debate about the capacity of the Negro was the explosion of African slavery in Europe's New World colonies in the Americas. In Amo's years in Germany, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was rising to its mid-eighteenth-century peak, when nearly 200,000 people a year were transported in shackles from Africa to the New World. Many historians have concluded that one reason for the increasingly negative view of the Negro through the later eighteenth century was the need to salve the consciences of those who trafficked in and exploited men and women. As Grégoire put it, bleakly but bluntly, "People have slandered Negroes, first in order to get the right to enslave them, and then to justify themselves for having enslaved them ..."

It is, perhaps, worth insisting that even if you could show that every single Negro wasn't much good at philosophy, it would not have justified black slavery. As Thomas Jefferson said, in responding to the Abbé Grégoire, "Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore the lord of the person or property of others." The slanders against the Negro race may have salved some Christian consciences: they could never have justified what had been done in enslaving millions of black people.

But ideology—enlisted by forms of domination from slavery to colonization—does help explain why, at a time when scientists were discarding notions like phlogiston, supposedly the substance of fire, they made extraordinary efforts to assert the continuing reality of race.

There were the physical anthropologists, with their craniometric devices measuring skulls; there were the ethnologists and physiologists and the evolutionary

theorists, who, discounting Darwin, propagated notions of race degeneration and separate, “polygenic” origins for the various races. One illustrious discipline after another was recruited to give content to color. And so, in the course of the nineteenth century, out of noisy debate, the modern race concept took hold.

Its first premise was that all of us carry within us something that comes from the race to which we belong, something that explains our mental and physical potential. That something, that racial essence, was inherited biologically. If your parents were of the same race, you shared their common essence.

Its second premise was that this common essence had profound intrinsic importance—and that many of the characteristics of individual human beings were a product of their race. People might be assigned to the Negro race on the basis of their skin color and hair, or their thicker lips and broader noses. But these visible differences, though important for classification, were only the beginning of a catalogue of deeper differences. The great African-American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, theorist of the “color line,” insisted that the deeper unities of a race are “spiritual, psychical ...—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.” In speaking in this way, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Du Bois was reflecting a scientific consensus that he had learned as a student, first at Harvard and then at the University of Berlin, each of them the greatest university in its country in that day.

We might call this idea—that almost everything important about people is shaped by their race, conceived as a heritable, biological property—the *racial fixation*. By the late nineteenth century in the world of the North Atlantic, the racial fixation was everywhere: scientists leading the way, humanists rushing to keep up.

In the 1860’s, for example, the English critic Matthew Arnold wrote, “Science has now made visible to everybody the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in race ...” Physiologists, Arnold says, can contribute to understanding the nature of races by cataloging the physical differences between them, but the literary critic must consider the “data ... afforded by our literature, genius, and spiritual production generally.” Because each race *has* a specific genius, a spirit which shows up in its literature. Here is what he thinks the “data” show, for example, about the Celtic race, with apologies to anybody Welsh, Scots or Irish in the room:

The Celtic genius [has] sentiment as its main basis, with love of beauty, charm, and spirituality for its excellence, ineffectualness and self-will for its defect.

Hippolyte Taine, the French literary historian, writing about English literature a decade later, says,

A race, like the Old Aryans, scattered from the Ganges as far as the Hebrides, settled in every clime, and every stage of civilization, transformed by thirty centuries of revolutions, nevertheless manifests in its languages, religions,

literatures, philosophies, the community of blood and of intellect which to this day binds its offshoots together.

Taine was one of the most influential historians of his era; Matthew Arnold was perhaps the most distinguished English literary critic of the nineteenth century. For both of them, literary history was part of the scientific study of race.

By their day, then, race was a central preoccupation not only of Europe's social and natural scientists but, as I said, of its humanists, as well. And their thinking was guided by what you might call the *typological assumption*. Everyone was a representative of a racial type; each of us provided a window into our race. And the typology of race explained not only our physical but also our cultural type.

The racial assumptions of the nineteenth century had a moral dimension, too. People properly had a preference for—indeed they had special obligations to—their own kind.

And while the race concept may have been propelled by imperial dreams of domination, it's important to note that it was adopted by those who sought to resist domination, as well. Edward W. Blyden, a founder of Pan-Africanism, who was born in the Caribbean but moved to Liberia as a young man, expressed this thought as well as any in a Sierra Leonean newspaper in 1893. Abandoning "the sentiment of race," he wrote, was like trying to "do away with gravitation."

In reality, quite evidently, the history of the world shows that hatred and warfare is as common within the so-called races as it is between them—*more* common, in fact, since conflict requires contact. There was nothing racial in the fifth century BCE conflicts among China's warring states, or between Ashanti and Denkyira in West Africa in the early eighteenth century, or among the various Amerindian states of Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish.

Still, this dialectic, where the idea of race becomes the common currency of negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance, would prove dauntingly difficult to withdraw from, even as its intellectual foundations started to crumble.

Over the past century, with the rise of modern genetics, race and science became untethered from each other. Once you grasped the new theories, you could start to see that the idea of a racial essence was a mistake. There was no underlying single something that explained why Negroes were Negroes or Caucasians Caucasian. Their shared appearance was the product of genes for appearance that they had in common. And those genes played no role in fixing your tastes in poetry, as Arnold thought, or your philosophical ideas, as Taine thought. The picture that Arnold and Taine had presented no longer had a foundation in the sciences. There was no longer a theory to support what I called the racial fixation.

It also became clear that the vast majority of our genetic material is shared with all human beings, whatever their race. And much of the variation that does exist doesn't correspond to the old racial categories.

Almost all of the world's genetic variation is found within every one of the major purported racial groups.

Every element of the older view was thus put in doubt: the racial fixation and the typological assumption made sense if there was a racial essence. But if there wasn't, then each human being was a bundle of characteristics and you had to have some other reason for supposing that Amo the African told you anything more about another black person than he told you about a white person with whom he would also share most of his genes.

It's true that if you look at enough of a person's genes you can usually figure out whether they have recent ancestry in Africa or Asia or Europe. But that's because there are patterns of genes in human populations— that is a fact about groups—not because there are particular sets of genes shared by the members of a race, which would be a fact about individuals.

And a great many people in the world live at the boundaries between the races imagined by nineteenth-century science: between African Negroes and European Caucasians there are Ethiopians and Arabs and Berbers; between the yellow races of East Asia and the white Europeans are the peoples of central and South Asia. Where in India is there a sharp boundary between white and brown and black?

There is little doubt that genes make a difference, along with environment, in determining your height or the color of your skin. Some people are cleverer or more musical or better poets than others and perhaps genes play a role there, too. But those genes are not inherited in racial packages. And so, if you want to think about how the limits of individual human capability are set by genetic inheritance, it won't help you to think about races. Race is something we make; it is not something that makes us.

So why has the racial fixation proven so durable? Think about the lost-wax method by which gold weights are cast here in Ghana. The nineteenth-century race concept is the lost wax: the substance may have melted away, but we've carefully filled in the conceptual space it created. In the United States, the so-called "alt-right," racial conservative groups spawned by the web, aims to define the country in terms of color and creed (namely, white and Christian). On the other side of the color line, the persistence of material inequality gives a mission to racial identities, for how can we discuss inequities based on color without reference to color? If black lives are disproportionately burdened, don't we have to insist that Black Lives Matter?

Still, shouldn't we feel at least a fleeting anxiety at the fact that racial authenticity can now be coded in cultural terms that sound pretty much like Taine or Arnold?

In our day, as in theirs, cultural traits are often cast as inalienable racial possessions. Until two years ago, the British government required adoption agencies to take account of a child's "racial and cultural origins." In universities in America today, there is much color-coded talk of cultural appropriation, which one law professor defines as "taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission." Often enough that "someone else" turns out to be defined by race. We are asked, in short, to look askance at Justin Bieber's dreadlocks, and to insist that the color line is also a property line. In Cape Coast, when African-Americans arrive at the slave castle to do their heritage tourism, they are claiming a racial inheritance.

I speak of these developments neither to commend nor to condemn them; I speak of them to show how race has become a palimpsest, a parchment written upon by successive generations where nothing is ever *entirely* erased. Often with the most benevolent of intentions, but sometimes, alas, with the least, we keep tracing the same contours with different pens.

As Anton Wilhelm Amo Afer knew, even benevolence has its limits. Reaching middle age, he decided that it was time to go home, and, in 1747, he made his way back to the Gold Coast, to the Nzema villages of his birth. It was a bold move.

Someone who'd been raised in the heartland of the European Enlightenment and had built a scholarly career in some of the most prestigious seats of European learning, was now turning his back on the grand experiment he embodied and resolving to make a life in a land he'd last glimpsed as a small child. We can only guess why. There is some suggestion that increasing color prejudice in this period in Germany—the early stirrings of Europe's racial fixation—may have caused him discomfort: a satirical play was performed in Halle in 1747 in which Astrine, a young German woman, refuses the amorous advances of an African philosophy teacher from Jena named Amo. "My soul," Astrine insists, "certainly cannot ever love a Moor." This work demonstrates that Amo was a famous figure in Halle.

But the rejection of the Moor is Astrine's, not the author's; and some will conjecture that what drove him off was not racial prejudice but a broken heart.

We know a little more of what happened to him. A Dutch ship's doctor met him in the mid-seventeen fifties at Axim. "His father and a sister were still alive and lived four days' journey inland," the doctor reported. He also reported that Amo, whom he described as "a great sage," had "acquired the reputation of a soothsayer." Both European sage and African soothsayer: Amo claimed the inheritance of the Enlightenment *and* an Nzema legacy.

Sometime later, he moved from Axim and went to live in Fort St. Sebastian, near the town of Shama, where he is buried. Today, we are bound to wonder: What did the soothsayer say he had learned from his long sojourn in the north?

And how did he explain his decision to leave behind everything he had built there? It's impossible not to wonder whether his was a flight from color consciousness, a retreat to a place where he would not be defined by his complexion. A place where Amo the African could just be plain Amo again. Indeed, his odyssey asks us to imagine what he seems to have yearned for: a world free of racial fixations. It asks if we could ever create a world where color is merely a fact, not a fate. It asks us to contemplate another bold experiment — one in which we gave up our racial fixations and abandoned a mistaken way of thinking that took off at just about the moment when Anton Wilhelm Amo was a well-known German philosopher at the height of his intellectual powers.

Thank you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Thank you very much indeed, Professor Appiah.

Now here at the British Council in Accra, we have an audience of some 250 people here and I know they're bursting with questions following your lecture. So here's a question here.

SABNA AMOIS: My name is Sabna Amois. I'm an investment banker. When we look at the tribal issues among people of the same colour, so take Ghana, we have lots of differences and discriminations based on what we call "tribes". So without the colour question, when you look at – and it's similar across other African countries and even among white people whenever there's some discrimination among people of the same colour - is it that humans when they choose to oppress another group just pick the easiest solution or just pick the easiest difference, whether it's against Jewish people or whether it's an Ashanti versus another person or whether it's between a Hutu or a Tutsi, is that ... from a philosophical point of view when you try to understand human nature, is it that when we choose to hate or discriminate or treat someone badly, we pick one excuse versus another and it's not necessarily a matter of the colour of your skin or the shade of skin colour you are?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Right. So there's a general tendency of human beings to engage in ... the word academics use for this is "othering". It's not a very attractive word. But ...

SUE LAWLEY: Translate it for us.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Creating boundaries between self and other and defining the other in a sort of negative way. And colour is only one of the many ways in which we do it. In fact colour is only one of the ways in which racial othering occurs because the Jews in Germany were conceived of in racial terms and it wasn't because of the colour of their skin. So the word 'racism', by the way, was coined to describe the attitudes associated with national socialist Germany. It wasn't in fact

coined to talk about white/black racism; it was coined to talk about anti-Jewish attitudes. But it's perfectly natural, as you suggested, to transfer it from between these cases because they have much of the same psychological sub-structure. I would only question maybe a little bit one thing you said, which is that these identitarian conflicts, these conflicts between people of different identity, usually have at their base something other than the identity itself. They have competition for resources. If you look ... The paradigm - a wonderful example of this because it's a horrible thing that happened but it's an intellectually useful example - is what happened with the collapse of the state of Yugoslavia. All these people had been getting along perfectly well, but when the economy collapses, there's competition over very, very scarce resources, people use - as you said - whatever forms of alliance they can in order to engage in that competition, and in that case they settled into ancient, ethnic categories which had rather lost their meaning but were easily turned back into something significant, and also to some extent a racial category - so Muslim versus Christian, Orthodox Christian versus Catholic and so on. All these categories, they'd been there all along but they weren't doing much work in social life. Then there's a great conflict over resources and people mobilise these things in those difficult conflicts.

MENIPAKAI DUMOE: Thank you. I'm Menipakai Dumoe. I work for a political party in Liberia. Liberian law assumes that it would be wrong for the races to mix. Therefore in our constitution, we barred citizenship to non-Negroes. If you're of Negro descent, you'll be just fine, so you could be a Liberian citizen too. So do you think that politics is perhaps the problem with the racial debate? Are we hampered by politics and political necessities?

SUE LAWLEY: Anthony?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well so Liberia, as you know better than I do, was created as a refuge for freed slaves from the New World to return to Africa, and it's natural that they brought with them ideas about identity that came from the New World where they had suffered so grievously. But what they came back with, I think, was one of the bad ideas from Europe and North America, a bad idea in two ways: first it's a bad idea because it's based on mistakes about how things actually work in the world and in the human body; and also I think bad because it creates the wrong kind of thinking about how we should in fact conduct - and now I get to your question - our political lives. If you want to build a nation, want to build Liberia, you want to build it around something that ... you don't want to assume that everybody's already on the same side. You've got to build national solidarity. And one problem with the old racial way of thinking was that it's assumed that if everybody was a Negro well they'd already be on the same side. Well the history of Liberia shows that that's not true; the history of the world shows that that's not true. So I think yes politics is as it were the problem in the sense that, in the case of race, so much of the history of the way people have thought about race was shaped by processes of colonisation, domination, enslavement - a lot of really unpleasant social political forces.

SUE LAWLEY: But there is a problem, isn't there Anthony, with self-reinforcement? I mean, if you like, take the organisation Black Lives Matter. That is an organisation that pulls together black people, so it forces segregation, and then other people say well *all* lives matter or American police say *blue* lives matter.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: This all of the time reinforces segregation, but to that extent it's unhelpful.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: First of all, it turns out to be a multiracial movement in the United States. That is, it's joined by people black and white. And its thesis of course, the thesis that black lives matter is the claim not that black lives matter more than anybody else's, but that in the United States black lives have been treated as if they *didn't* matter and so saying black lives matter is a way of ... is, in the context, it's a way of saying that *all* lives matter. I think many of the reasonable supporters of Black Lives Matter would agree that blue lives matter, would agree that the lives of the police matter. We kill too many police.

SUE LAWLEY: But you take my general point?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. No, no, I think ... So here's the problem - that this is true not just about racial identities, but about all the identities that I've been talking about - they're going to have pluses and minuses. When an identity is used as a source of solidarity in order to help people resist oppression, for example, it also creates boundaries with people outside who might want to be friendly with you because they're not in favour of your oppression, and so you have to think as time goes on about how to modulate the different roles that identity plays in our lives.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to go to a question here.

SOLOMON HENBATAYTE: My name is Solomon Henbatayte . I'm a poet. Until 1967, it wasn't legal to marry someone from another race in America, so I want to know if interracial marriage has helped cull racial prejudice? Thank you.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I'd have thought that the direction of causality had been mostly the other way round; that is to say it's the decline in racial prejudice that makes interracial marriage more likely. In fact interracial marriage in racist societies tends to produce enormous anxiety. The family whose case before the United States Supreme Court led to the decision that it's no longer possible for an American state to ban interracial marriage – and marvellously enough they were called the Lovings, Mr and Mrs Loving – the reason they got into trouble was because people hated the fact – the people in authority in their community in Virginia – hated the fact that they had engaged in what they regarded as a terrible form of ghastly inter-marriage. So it didn't help at all in that community, their marriage. It led to a decade of tension in that community and so on. But there's a sort of natural ... if you like a sort of – dare I use a

philosopher's word – a sort of dialectic here: as racial prejudice declines, interracial marriage becomes more likely; and as interracial marriage becomes more frequent, it becomes less threatening, and so there's a kind of positive reinforcement cycle that can occur. But you want to be clear that - I know because my sister and I can both tell you about letters we read written to my parents when they married – that a lot of people were made extremely mad, angry by the marriage of a white woman to a black man in the 1950s in England.

SUE LAWLEY: This was 1953, your father and mother – yuh.

WALE EDUN: Thank you. My name is Wale Edun from Nigeria. I'm an economist and an investment banker. You've taken us, Professor Appiah, through the thinking about race in the past right up to the present. What do you think will be the thinking and the evolution of thinking about race in the future?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Part of the reason why I chose this topic is because I do think that the future is sort of open in a certain way. I think things can get better and worse in these dimensions and I'm very much hoping of course that they'll get better. And I think that part of getting better, it isn't that one should abandon the idea, these racial categories – they have a social ... they have a historical significance – but we should at least remember that there's the risk of them turning us against each other in ways that are horrendous and I think we should be more as it were relaxed about the boundaries. Some of the most difficult questions of race are arguments within racial groups about who's really in, right? There can be colourism among black people as well. And I think that trying to think clearly about these things, trying to raise our children with sensitivity to the risks of over identification on the racial ground, raising them with knowledge about the fact that race doesn't determine everything in the way that some peoplethis is all a very important part of trying to build a future that is positive in the domain of race. I don't think that it's ... You know people sometimes say to me do you think that in the United States the category black will disappear or do you think it *should* disappear? Well, first of all, on the 'should' question, it's not up to me; it's to be decided by Americans discussing with one another about what they want to do. But on the 'will' question, I think that whether it does or not – and I think it's going to take a long future, if it does – it's going to depend in part on whether new meanings can be given to black identity that are positive, as has happened of course. I mentioned Dr Du Bois. He's one of the heroes of the process of turning black identity from the very negative thing it was in the United States into something very positive, and we Ghanaians can be proud of the fact that Dr Du Bois, who was born an American, chose to die as a Ghanaian. I mean he didn't choose to *die (laughter)*, but he died having chosen to be a Ghanaian. *(laughs)*

SUE LAWLEY: But these revolutions take generations. I mean moral revolutions take much longer than political revolutions. And I mean from my own experience in the UK, I think I would say that my parents were intrinsically racist because they were very suspicious in the fifties and sixties when Caribbean people came to the UK. They were suspicious. They might even have been a bit frightened. My

children find it deeply uncool to be racist, deeply uncool, and their children – my grandchildren – will presumably be colour blind?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I don't know if they'll be colour blind, but the thing about uncool is really important.

SUE LAWLEY: But just answer my point about the progression, the progress actually.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: *(over)* Yes there's been enormous progress. So part of the point of the Amo story, right, is that we begin in a time when the racial fixation has not occurred. Europe is not yet obsessed with the racial difference. So it's possible for a black kid from Axim to come and be a professor of philosophy and get a PhD and teach and be leading processions, student processions, and being turned down by girls who he is attracted to?? Then there's this very interesting process which occurs with the rise of slavery and so on and the changing ideas in the nineteenth century and then race gets really, really entrenched. And part of the point of insisting that it wasn't always there is to remind us that if it wasn't always there, it doesn't have to be there forever in the future as well ...

SUE LAWLEY: *(over)* Sure.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: ... and I think we've seen a great deal of progress. Obviously because of the thing ... the issue raised about the way identities are mobilised in conditions where you have competition for resources - if things go badly in certain countries at certain times, even if progress has been made, there's the possibility of the risk of going backwards.

SUE LAWLEY: So progression isn't a wonderful straight line graph ...

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: *(over)* Right, we have been ...

SUE LAWLEY: ... but it is inexorably upwards – i.e. progress, huh?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. I think Dr King used to say ... Dr Martin Luther King used to say "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards progress". *(laughter)*

SUE LAWLEY: Coming to my female questioner at the back there. Yeah?

MJIBA FREHIWOT: My name is Mjiba Frehiwot and I'm a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies here at the University of Ghana. So my question is can you please draw parallels between racial disparities and class based disparities?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: One of the most interesting connections I think between race and class is that racial systems and class systems tend to associate

dishonour, the lack of respect, lack of entitlement to respect with the people who are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and they grant as it were undue respect, excessive respect to people at the top of the hierarchy. So that if you think about the British class system in the eighteenth century when Amo was in Europe, dukes and their families just got treated with massive deference by everybody however stupid they were, however wicked they were, and what they would have called the “lower orders” – ordinary working people – were treated without respect much of the time. And similarly of course in the United States, under Jim Crow, black people were denied respect. Even black people with resources and higher class standing were denied respect. And so I think that one of the most interesting questions about identity is how questions of identity interact with questions of respect because you mentioned class and race, but again one of the most challenging sets of issues about respect and identity has to do with gender, has to do with the fact that we have historically in most societies denied equality of respect to women. And part of the point of modern feminism and also of other modern movements of gender reform is to try and balance out the respect, so that you don’t lose respect simply by being a woman - as you shouldn’t lose respect simply by not being a duke, and you shouldn’t lose respect simply by not being white.

SUE LAWLEY: I’m going to go to a question here.

ATUKWE OKAI: My name is Atukwe Okai, the Secretary General of the Pan African Writers’ Association.

SUE LAWLEY: And, if I may interrupt, one of Africa’s literary giants.

ATUKWE OKAI: Thank you.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes indeed.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

ATUKWE OKAI: It is an honour and a privilege to listen to Professor Appiah, a proud son of Ghana and Africa. Anton Wilhelm Amo. We learnt about some ten years ago or more that Professor ...

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Willie Abraham.

ATUKWE OKAI: William Abraham ...

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yeah.

ATUKWE OKAI: ... was working on research about him, working on a book. Are you in a position to say how far he got with it?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I’m not, but I will say that I mean obviously for those of us who do philosophy with a West African or even more specifically a

Ghanaian connection, the discovery that there was somebody at the heart of the European Enlightenment – a little boy who played in the library where Leibniz was librarian – has been a source of excitement all along. And Professor Abraham was the first person I think to draw our attention to this, but since then other philosophers, including other Ghanaian philosophers, including Kwasi Wiredu, for example, have written about him and we know more about him than we did when Professor Abraham first started talking about him.

SUE LAWLEY: What happened? Why did he suddenly turn??

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well it's a very good question why he disappeared essentially between the Abbe Grégoire (*needs accents on 'e'*) in the early nineteenth century and the late part of the ... the second half of the 20th century, and I think that part of it is that that was a period in which the idea of the African intellectual, the African thinker who could sort of spar with Descartes was not comfortable for an awful lot of people because they had the view that that wasn't ... they had the racial fixation; they thought that what you could do in these dimensions and domains had to do with your race and so he was a sort of standing counterexample. I should say another reason is that some of his work has disappeared. The most depressing thing, I think, is that he was the first person, so far as I can tell, of African descent to write about the law of slavery, and unfortunately we don't have that thesis. We do have some of his other work. We don't have that. It would be fascinating to see what someone in his circumstances thought in a philosophical way about the basis of enslavement since he came from the Dutch West India Company to Europe. And even if he wasn't enslaved, for example his brother was. His brother ended up as a slave in Suriname.

SUE LAWLEY: Coming to the question here.

KAJSA HALLBERG ADU: My name is Kajsa Hallberg Adu.. I'm a lecturer at Ashesi University here in Ghana. I'm also a blogger and the co-founder of Blogging Ghana. But I want to ask this question as a mother. My daughter, who's five years old, has a Ghanaian father and me, a Swedish woman, as her mother, and she was discussing this issue of how the racial categories vary with me earlier today. She was saying "My classmates, they think I'm white, but I'm really light brown." So I wanted with that to ask about your personal experiences and how they informed this lecture.

SUE LAWLEY: How did you answer her before Anthony answers? (*laughter*)

KAJSA HALLBERG ADU: Yeah, no I actually responded because when we travel to Sweden, there she's black, so I think this is very interesting.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Good, yes good. Well out of the mouths of babes and sucklings cometh truth. I mean you know she's making the point, she's recognising the arbitrariness of the classification and she's inviting you to explain why the grown-up world can't see what she can. My experience of colour was profoundly shaped by the fact that I was raised in circumstances of enormous privilege. Both my mother's family and my father's family you know were very privileged families and so a

lot of the buffeting that we might have experienced, especially as a result of not being white in England, we were protected from that by a very elaborate armature of class privilege. In fact ...

SUE LAWLEY: But, nevertheless, at your boarding school you would have been ... You went in the 60s??

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: You would have been one of the few non-white faces in that school.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. Well my father was very good at organising things, so actually by the time I got to my secondary school in England, he had arranged for somebody else to send a son there, so there was already a Ghanaian head boy. *(laughter)* But that's what I mean by privileged. No I mean I obviously ...

SUE LAWLEY: Are you saying you never suffered from racial prejudice?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Oh no, no, no. No of course I've been called nasty names and so on, but very, very rarely. But I'm making this point not really to make a point about me, but to reinforce the point I was making about the contextual character of these things and about the interconnections between different kinds of identity and different kinds of honour and dishonour. We were protected. In the archives of my grandmother is a letter, a stern letter that she wrote to the headmaster of my first English school basically saying if anything bad happens to my brown grandchild, I will have you killed. *(laughter)* I mean she didn't quite say killed. *(laughs)* She did not. She was not ... The threat was subtler.

SUE LAWLEY: I hope so. *(laughter)* Anthony, let me ask you one last question. I read that one of your great philosophical heroes is David Hume, the great libertarian genius of the eighteenth century Enlightenment; that you have a picture of him on your study wall in the States.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I do.

SUE LAWLEY: You quote him at the top of your lecture. It's the sort of quote that people don't hear because you don't read it out. He wrote in 1742 "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion." Why is this man your hero?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Because I'm a very forgiving character. *(laughter)* So I didn't read that out, but at the top of each of the lectures I've got a little quote for my own edification. It's really important to remember that great philosophers can be extremely foolish and in particular in this period they could be very, very foolish about race. I do not admire this side of David Hume. I don't think that this is one of his

better moments. I say that not just because we don't think it's a sensible thing to say, but fortunately he was criticised at the time by other people in the Scottish Enlightenment who said that's a pretty daft way to think, after all, and then they did what the Abbe Grégoire did to Jefferson: they told him about a Jamaican poet, a black Jamaican poet, and he said you know you make this remark about all black people; we'll give you, we'll throw you a counter example. So yes, he's my hero. If I were not allowed to read philosophers who had said foolish things, I wouldn't be able to read most philosophers (*laughter*); and if I weren't allowed to read philosophers who'd said silly things about race, that would also limit my reading somewhat. The greatest philosophical logician arguably of the nineteenth century, Gottlob Frege, was a fanatical anti-Semite. This is a horrible fact about him, but it doesn't stop him having been the greatest philosophical logician of the nineteenth century.

SU ELAWLEY: I see there's a former president, a past president of Ghana sitting on the front row there: John Kofuor. Have you anything you'd like to contribute, sir? (*laughter*)

JOHN KOFUOR: Well I can't think of the matter of identity without thinking of evolution. And these days we all talk about globalisation, so I want to know from you whether - you being a very professional philosopher - you foresee times when the prejudices being borne out by various fixations and prejudices might tone down because more and more people are beginning to see that perhaps we are the same?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. So I do think that in many dimensions of identity - which I'll be talking about this ... I've been talking about race here, but I've talked about religion and nationality and I'll be talking about other forms of identity in New York in the last lecture - and in all of them I see hope because I think if we understand them properly, we can see that we do not need to be divided by religion, we do not need to be divided by nationality, we do not need to be divided by race and we do not need to be divided by culture, though nor do we need to abandon any of them. That is to say, the way forward in the racial domain isn't - as I'm afraid I used to think - just to sort of as if it were pretend that racial identities aren't there. It's to moderate them, it's to recognise that you can have profound friendships across races and nations and cultures and religions, and it's to stop the essentialisation where that means taking people of a certain sort and treating them as if they have some immutable, eternal, solid character which you can't do anything about - and usually by the way it's got something bad about it if it's not us: we're terrific, everything about us is wonderful but usually when we're othering people, when we're treating them as other, we're going to find fixed in their very nature something bad. And this is something that we can escape from and we need (speaking of children) we need to raise our children with the tools for resisting that. And so I'm hopeful. I'm a hopeful guy.

SUE LAWLEY: He's hopeful. Fascinating. Ladies and gentlemen, we have to stop it there. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you too to our hosts here at the British Council.

Next time, for the fourth and last lecture, we'll be in Anthony's adopted home city of New York to hear his critique of culture, identity and Western civilization.

In the meantime, do take a look at the BBC Reith website for transcripts, audio and all the other information that's on it. But for now, many thanks to our Reith Lecturer 2016 Anthony Appiah. And from Accra in Ghana, goodbye.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)