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

Kwame Anthony Appiah
Reith Lectures 2016

Lecture 4: Culture

New York City

SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to New York for the last in this year's series of BBC Reith Lectures.

This city is our lecturer's adopted home and we're in New York University's law school where he's Professor of Philosophy and Law. His subject in these lectures is identity, how do we decide who we are? So far he's guided us through our attitudes to religion, nationhood and colour. For his last lecture, he's tackling how we come to terms with something rather less precise: culture.

Here in America and across the Atlantic in Europe, we like to think of ourselves as products of something called "Western civilization", but are we? And if we are, what does that phrase mean? Big questions. Without more ado, please welcome the man who will try to answer them for us: the BBC Reith Lecturer 2016 Kwame Anthony Appiah.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Thanks, thanks very much Sue.

Like many Englishmen who suffered from tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor went abroad on medical advice, seeking the dryer air of warmer regions. Tylor came from a prosperous Quaker business family, so he had the resources for a long trip. In 1855, in his early twenties, he left for the New World, and, after befriending Henry Christy, a Quaker

archeologist he met in his travels, they ended up riding together through the Mexican countryside, visiting Aztec ruins and dusty pueblos.

Christy was already an experienced archeologist and under his tutelage Tylor learned how to work in the field. And his Mexican sojourn fired in him an enthusiasm for the study of faraway societies, ancient and modern, that lasted the rest of his life.

In 1871, he published his masterwork, *Primitive Culture*, which can lay claim to being the first work of modern anthropology. Over the decades, as his beard morphed from a lustrous Garibaldi to a vast, silvery cumulonimbus that would have made Gandalf jealous, Tylor added to his knowledge of the world's peoples through study in the museum and the library.

Primitive Culture was, in some respects, a quarrel with another book that had "culture" in the title: Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, a collection that had appeared just two years earlier. For Arnold, the poet and literary critic, culture was the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world."

So Arnold wasn't interested in anything as narrow as class-bound connoisseurship: he had in mind a moral and aesthetic ideal, which found expression in art and literature and music and philosophy.

But Tylor thought that the word could mean something quite different, and in part for institutional reasons, he was able to make sure that it did. For Tylor was eventually appointed to direct the University Museum at Oxford, and then, in 1896, he became the first Professor of Anthropology there. It is to Tylor more than anyone else that we owe the idea that anthropology is the study of something called "culture," which he defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

Civilization, as Arnold understood it, was merely one of culture's many modes.

Nowadays, when people speak about culture, it's usually either Tylor's or Arnold's notion that they have in mind. The two concepts of culture are, in some respects, antagonistic: Arnold's ideal was "the man of culture" and he would have considered "primitive culture" an oxymoron; Tylor thought it absurd to propose that a person could lack culture. Yet, in ways we'll explore, these contrasting notions of culture are locked together in our concept of Western culture, which many people think defines the identity of modern Western people. In this final lecture, I'm going to talk about culture as a source of identity, and to try to untangle some of our confusions about the culture, both Tylorian and Arnoldian, of what we've come to call the West.

You may have heard *this* story. Someone asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of Western civilization, and he replied: "I think it would be a very good idea." (*laughter*) Like many of the best stories, alas, this one is probably apocryphal; but, also like many of the best stories, it has survived because it has the flavor of truth. I have been arguing, in these lectures, that many of our thoughts about the identities that define us are misleading, and that we would have a better grasp on the real challenges that face us if we thought about them in new ways. In this last lecture I want to make an even more stringent case about a "Western" identity: whether you claim it, as many here in

New York City might, or rebuff it, as many in our radio audience around the world do, I think you should give up the very idea of Western civilization. It's at best the source of a great deal of confusion, at worst an obstacle to facing some of the great political challenges of our time.

I hesitate to disagree with even the Gandhi of legend, but I believe Western civilization is not at all a good idea, and Western culture is no improvement.

One reason for the confusions "Western culture" spawns comes from confusions about the West. We have used the expression "the West" to do many different jobs. Rudyard Kipling, England's poet of Empire, wrote, "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," contrasting Europe and Asia, but ignoring everywhere else. During the Cold War, "the West" was one side of the Iron Curtain; "the East" its opposite and enemy. This usage, too, effectively disregarded most of the world. Often, in recent years, "the West" means the North Atlantic: Europe and her former colonies in North America.

The opposite here is a non-Western world in Africa, Asia and Latin America—now often dubbed "the Global South"—though many people in Latin America will claim a Western inheritance, too. This way of talking notices the whole world, but lumps a whole lot of extremely different societies together, while delicately carving around Australians and New Zealanders and white South Africans, so that "Western" here can look simply like a euphemism for white.

And, of course, we often also talk today of the Western world to contrast it not with the South but with the Muslim world. Muslim thinkers, too, sometimes speak in a parallel way, distinguishing between Dar al-Islam, the home of Islam, and Dar al-Kufr, the home of unbelief. This contrast is the one I want to explore today.

European and American debates today about whether Western culture is fundamentally Christian inherit, as we'll see, a genealogy in which "Christendom" was replaced by "Europe" and then by the idea of "the West."

For the Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, the world was divided into three parts. To the east was Asia, to the south was a continent he called Libya, and the rest was Europe. He knew that people and goods and ideas could travel easily between the continents: he himself traveled up the Nile as far as Aswan, and on both sides of the Hellespont, the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia. Herodotus admitted to being puzzled, in fact, as to "why the earth, which is one, has three names, all women's."

Still, despite his puzzlement, these continents were for the Greeks and their Roman heirs the largest significant geographical divisions of the world.

But here's the important point: it wouldn't have occurred to Herodotus to think that these three names corresponded to three kinds of people, Europeans, Asians, and Africans. He was born at Halicarnasus . . . Bodrum in modern Turkey. Yet being born in Asia Minor didn't make him an Asian; it made him, or left him, a Greek. And the Celts, in the far west of Europe, were much stranger to him than the Persians or the Egyptians, about whom he knew rather a lot. Herodotus only uses the word "European" as an adjective, never as a noun. For a millennium after his day, no one else spoke of Europeans as a people, either.

Then the geography Herodotus knew was radically reshaped by the rise of Islam, which burst out of Arabia in the seventh century, spreading with astonishing rapidity north and east and west. After the Prophet's death in 632, the Arabs managed in a mere thirty years to defeat the Persian empire that reached through central Asia as far as India, and to wrest provinces from Rome's residue in Byzantium.

The Umayyad dynasty, which began in 661, pushed on west into North Africa and east into Central Asia. In early 711, their army crossed the straits of Gibraltar into Spain, which the Arabs called Al-Andalus, and attacked the Visigoths who had ruled much of the Roman province of Hispania for two centuries.

Within seven years, most of the Iberian Peninsula was under Muslim rule; not until 1492, nearly eight hundred years later, was the whole peninsula under Christian sovereignty again.

The Muslim conquerors of Spain had not planned to stop at the Pyrenees, and they made regular attempts in the early years to move further north. But near Tours, in 732, Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, defeated the forces of Al-Andalus, and this decisive battle effectively ended the Arab attempts at the conquest of Frankish Europe. Edward Gibbon, overstating somewhat, observed that if the Arabs had won at Tours, they could have sailed up the Thames.

"Perhaps," he added, "the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet."

What matters for our purposes is that the first recorded use of a word for Europeans as a kind of person, so far as I know, comes out of this history of conflict. In a Latin chronicle, written in 754 in Spain, the author refers to the victors of the Battle of Tours as "Europenses," Europeans. So, simply put, the very idea of a "European" was first used to contrast Christians and Muslims.

Now, nobody in medieval Europe would have used the word "Western" for that job. For one thing, the coast of Morocco, home of the Moors, stretches west of all of Ireland.

For another, there were Muslim rulers in the Iberian Peninsula—part of the continent that Herodotus called Europe—until nearly the sixteenth century. The natural contrast wasn't between Islam and the West, but between Christendom and Dar al-Islam, each of which regarded the other as infidels, defined by their unbelief.

Starting in the late fourteenth century, the Turks, who created the Ottoman Empire, gradually extended their rule into parts of Europe: Bulgaria, Greece, the Balkans, and Hungary. Only in 1529, with the defeat of Suleiman the Magnificent's army at Vienna, did the reconquest of Eastern Europe begin. It was a slow process. It wasn't until 1699 that the Ottomans finally lost their Hungarian possessions; Greece became independent only in the early nineteenth century, Bulgaria even later.

We have, then, a clear sense of Christian Europe—Christendom—defining itself through opposition. And yet the move from "Christendom" to "Western Culture" isn't straightforward.

For one thing, the educated classes of Christian Europe took many of their ideas from the pagan societies that preceded them. At the end of the twelfth century, Chrétien de Troyes, born

a couple of hundred kilometers southwest of Paris, celebrated these earlier roots: “Greece once had the greatest reputation for chivalry and learning,” he wrote. “Then chivalry went to Rome, and so did all of learning, which now has come to France.” The idea that the best of the culture of Greece was passed by way of Rome into Western Europe gradually became, in the Middle Ages, a commonplace. In fact this process had a name. It was called the “*translatio studii*”: the transfer of learning. And it was an astonishingly persistent idea.

More than six centuries later, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the great German philosopher, told the students of the high school he ran in Nuremberg, that

The foundations of higher study must be and remain Greek literature in the first place, Roman in the second.

So from the late Middle Ages until now, people have thought of the best in the culture of Greece and Rome as a civilizational inheritance, passed on like a precious golden nugget, dug out of the earth by the Greeks, transferred, when the Roman Empire conquered them, to Rome. Partitioned between the Flemish and Florentine courts and the Venetian Republic in the Renaissance, its fragments passed through cities such as Avignon, Paris, Amsterdam, Weimar, Edinburgh and London, and were finally reunited — pieced together like the broken shards of a Grecian urn, in the academies of Europe and the United States. This treasure is no doubt nestled somewhere here in the American Academy today; perhaps indeed in the university library just around the corner.

There are many ways of embellishing the story of the golden nugget. But they all face a historical difficulty; if, that is, you want to make the golden nugget the core of a civilization opposed to Islam. Because the classical inheritance it identifies was shared with Muslim learning. In Baghdad of the ninth century Abbasid Caliphate, the palace library featured the works of Plato and Aristotle, Pythagoras and Euclid, translated into Arabic. And of course, as the last of the major Abrahamic faiths, Islam combined this attention to the pagan classics with an engagement with the traditions of Judaism and early Christianity. In the centuries that Petrarch called the Dark Ages, when Christian Europe made little contribution to the study of Greek classical philosophy, and many of the texts were lost, these works were preserved by Muslim scholars.

Much of our modern understanding of classical philosophy among the ancient Greeks we have only because those texts were recovered by European scholars in the Renaissance from the Arabs.

In the mind of its Christian chronicler, as we saw, the battle of Tours pitted Europeans against Islam; but the Muslims of Al-Andalus, bellicose as they were, did not think that fighting for territory meant that you could not share ideas. By the end of the first millennium, the cities of the Caliphate of Cordoba were marked by the cohabitation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, of Berbers, Visigoths, Slavs and countless others.

There were no recognized rabbis or Muslim scholars at the court of Charlemagne; in the cities of al-Andalus there were bishops and synagogues.

Racemondo, Catholic bishop of Elvira, was ambassador from Muslim Cordoba to the Christian courts of the Byzantine and the Holy Roman Empires. Hasdai ibn Shaprut, leader of Cordoba’s Jewish community in the middle of the tenth century, was not only a great medical

scholar, he was the chairman of the Caliph's medical council. He advised the Caliph to translate a Latin medical text into Arabic, marking the start of Cordoba's history as one of the great centers of medical knowledge in Europe. And where had the text come from? It was a gift from Emperor Constantine, the Christian monarch in Byzantium. The translation into Latin of the works of Ibn Rushd, born in Cordoba in the twelfth century, began the European rediscovery of Aristotle. Ibn Rushd was known in Latin as Averroes, or more commonly just as "The Commentator," because of his commentaries on Aristotle.

So the classical traditions that are meant to distinguish Western Civ from the inheritors of the Caliphates are actually a point of kinship with them.

The golden-nugget story starts to fragment. It imagines Western culture as the expression of an essence—a something—which has been passed from hand to hand on a historic journey. And we've seen the pitfalls of this sort of essentialism in these lectures again and again. In the first lecture, we saw how the scriptures of a religion were supposed to determine its unchanging nature. In the second, it was the nation, bound together through time by language and custom. In the last lecture, it was a racial quiddity shared by all blacks or all whites.

In each case, then, people have supposed that an identity that survives through time and space must be propelled by some potent common content. But that is simply a mistake.

What was England like in the days of Chaucer, father of English literature, who died more than 600 years ago? Take whatever you think was distinctive of it, whatever combination of customs, ideas, and material things made England characteristically English then. Whatever you choose to distinguish Englishness now, it isn't going to be *that*. Rather, as time rolls on, each generation inherits the label from an earlier one; and, in each generation, the label comes with a legacy. But as the legacies are lost or exchanged for other treasures, the label keeps moving on. And so, when some of those in one generation move from the territory to which English identity was once tied—move, for example, to a *New* England—the label can even travel beyond the territory. Identities can be held together by narratives, in short, without essences: you don't get to be called "English" because there's an essence that this label follows; you're English because our rules determine that anyone appropriately connected to the place called England is entitled to that label.

So how did we in New York get connected to the realm we call the West, and gain an identity as participants in something called Western culture?

It will help to recognize that the term "Western culture" is surprisingly modern—more recent certainly than the phonograph. Tylor never spoke of it. And indeed he had no reason to, since he was profoundly aware of the internal cultural diversity even of his own country. In 1871 he reported evidence of witchcraft in rural Somerset. A blast of wind in a pub had blown some roasted onions stabbed with pins out of the chimney. "One," Tylor wrote, "had on it the name of a brother magistrate of mine, whom the wizard, who was the alehouse-keeper, held in particular hatred ... and whom apparently he designed to get rid of by stabbing and roasting an onion representing him." Primitive culture, indeed.

So the very idea of the "West," to name a heritage and object of study, doesn't really emerge until the 1890s, during a heated era of imperialism, and gains broader currency only in the twentieth century.

When, around the time of the First World War, Oswald Spengler wrote the influential book translated as “The Decline of the West”—a book that introduced many readers to the concept—he scoffed at the notion that there were continuities between Western culture and the classical world. During a visit to the Balkans in the late 1930s, Rebecca West recounted a visitor’s sense that “it’s uncomfortably recent, the blow that would have smashed the whole of our Western culture.” The “recent blow” in question was the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683. If the notion of Christendom was an artifact of a prolonged military struggle against Muslim forces, our modern concept of Western culture largely took its present shape during the Cold War. In the chill of battle, we forged a grand narrative about Athenian democracy, the Magna Carta, Copernican Revolution, and so on. Plato to Nato. (*laughter*)

Western culture was, at its core, individualistic and democratic and liberty-minded and tolerant and progressive and rational and scientific. Never mind that pre-modern Europe was none of these things, and that until the past century democracy was the exception in Europe, something that few stalwarts of Western thought had anything good to say about. The idea that tolerance was constitutive of something called Western culture would have surprised Edward Burnett Tylor, who, as a Quaker, had been barred from attending England’s great universities. To be blunt: if Western culture were real, we wouldn’t spend so much time talking it up.

And once Western culture could be used as a term of praise, it was bound to become a term of dispraise, too.

Critics of Western culture, producing a photonegative emphasizing slavery, subjugation, racism, militarism, and genocide, were committed to the very same essentialism, even if they saw a nugget not of gold but of arsenic.

Talk of “Western culture” has had a larger implausibility to overcome. It places, at the heart of identity, all manner of exalted intellectual and artistic achievements—philosophy, literature, art, music, the things Arnold prized and we humanists study. But if Western culture was there in Troyes in the late twelfth century when Chrétien was alive, it had little to do with the lives of most of his fellow citizens, who didn’t know Latin or Greek, and had never heard of Plato. Today in our country the classical heritage plays no greater role in the everyday lives of most Americans. Look around you, here in New York City, which must count as a center of Western civilization if anything does.

Are these Arnoldian achievements that hold us together? Of course not. What holds us together, surely, is Tylor’s broad sense of culture: our customs of dress and greeting, the habits of behavior that shape relations between men and women, parents and children, cops and civilians, shop-assistants and consumers. Intellectuals like me have a tendency to suppose that the things *we* care about are the most important things. I don’t say they don’t matter. But they matter less than the story of the golden nugget suggests.

So how *have* we bridged the chasm here? How have we managed to persuade ourselves that we’re rightful inheritors of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant, when the stuff of our existence is more Justin Bieber and Kim Kardashian? (*laughter*) Well, by fusing the Tylorian picture and the Arnoldian one, the realm of the everyday and the realm of the ideal. And the key to this was something that was already present in Tylor’s work.

Remember the famous definition I quoted: it began with culture as a “complex whole.” What you’re hearing there is something we can call *organicism*. A vision of culture not as a loose assemblage of disparate fragments but as an organic unity, each component, like the organs in a body, carefully adapted to occupy a particular place, each part essential to the functioning of the whole. The Eurovision Song Contest, the cutouts of Matisse, the dialogues of Plato are all part of a larger whole. As such, each is a holding in your cultural library, so to speak, even if you’ve never personally checked it out. Even if it isn’t your cup of tea, it’s still your heritage and possession. Organicism explained how our everyday selves could be dusted with gold.

But look: there just isn’t one great big whole called culture that organically unites all these parts.

Spain—in the heart of the West—resisted liberal democracy for two generations after it took off in India and Japan in the East, the home of Oriental despotism. Jefferson’s cultural inheritance—Athenian liberty, Anglo-Saxon freedom—did not preserve the United States from creating a slave republic. At the same time, Franz Kafka and Miles Davis can live together as easily—perhaps even more easily—than Kafka and his fellow Austro-Hungarian Johann Strauss. You will find hip-hop in the streets of Tokyo. Something like this is true of cuisine: Britons once swapped their fish and chips for chicken tikka masala; now, I gather, they’re all having a cheeky Nando’s. (*laughter*)

Once we abandon organicism, we can take up the more cosmopolitan picture in which every element of culture—from philosophy to cuisine to the style of bodily movement—is separable in principle from all the others; you really can walk and talk like an African American *and* think with Matthew Arnold and Immanuel Kant as well as with Martin Luther King and Miles Davis. No Muslim essence stops—none has stopped—individual inhabitants of Dar al-Islam from taking up anything from Western Civilization, including Christianity or democracy. No Western essence is there to stop a New Yorker of any ancestry taking up Islam.

The stories we tell that connect Plato or Aristotle or Cicero or Saint Augustine to contemporary American culture have some truth in them, of course. There are self-conscious traditions of scholarship and argumentation. The delusion is to think that it suffices that we have *access* to these values, as if they’re tracks in a Spotify Playlist that we have never quite listened to.

If these thinkers are part of our Arnoldian culture, there’s no guarantee that what is best in them will continue to mean something to the children of those who now look back to them, any more than the centrality of Aristotle to Muslim thought for hundreds of years guarantees him an important place in Muslim cultures today.

Values aren’t a birthright: you need to keep caring about them. Living in the West, however you define it, being Western, provides no guarantee that you will care about Western Civ. The values European humanists like to espouse belong just as easily to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European. And by that very logic they *don’t* belong to a European who hasn’t taken the trouble to understand and absorb them. The same is true, naturally, in the other direction. The story of the golden nugget suggests that we can’t help caring about the traditions of “the West” because they are ours: in fact, the opposite is true. They are only ours if we care about them. A culture of liberty, tolerance, and rational inquiry: that *would* be a good idea. But these values represent choices to make, not tracks laid down by a Western destiny.

In the year of Edward Burnett Tylor's death, what we've been taught to call Western civilization stumbled into a death match with itself: the Allies and the Great Central Powers hurled bodies at each other, marching young men to their deaths in order to "defend civilization." The blood-soaked fields and gas-poisoned trenches would have shocked Tylor's evolutionist, progressivist hopes, and confirmed Arnold's worst fears about what civilization might mean. Arnold and Tylor would have agreed, at least, on this: culture isn't a box to check on the questionnaire of humanity; it is a process you join, a life lived with others.

Creed. Color. Country. Culture. As I hope I've shown in the course of this year's Reith Lectures, all these things can become forms of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones. But that's not to deny that they can also give contours to our freedom. Social identities connect the small scale where we live our lives alongside our kith and kin with larger movements, causes, and concerns. They can make a wider world intelligible, alive, and urgent. They can expand our horizons to communities larger than the ones we personally inhabit. And our lives *must* make sense at the largest of scales, as well. We live in an era in which our actions, in the realm of ideology as in the realm of technology, increasingly have global effects. When it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon.

We live with seven billion fellow humans on a small, warming planet. The cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity. And in encapsulating that creed I can draw on someone who's a frequent presence in courses on Western Civ., the dramatist Terence: a slave from Roman Africa, a Latin interpreter of Greek comedies, a writer from classical Europe, who called himself Terence the African. I don't think, in other words, that I can make the point better than Publius Terentius Afer, writing more than two millennia ago. "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto." "I am human, I think nothing human alien to me." Now *there's* an identity worth holding on to

Thank you very much.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Many thanks. Many thanks indeed, Professor Appiah.

Now we turn to our audience here at New York University to put our lecturer's thesis to the test. So let me have our first questioner, please.

HENRY COHEN: Hello. My name is Henry Cohen. I'm a student, a film and TV student at NYU. What do you make of the concept of cultural appropriation and complaints by minority groups that their culture can be co-opted by a majority? Thank you.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Good question, which means hard answer. (*laughter*) Look, I myself, as you have seen, believe in the cross-pollination of culture, believe in borrowing and, if necessary, stealing from other cultures in order to create the things that I think are most precious to all of us. If Basho, the great haiku poet, Japanese haiku poet, had been denied access to Chinese and Indian culture, he wouldn't have had access either to writing or to Buddhism, both of which were very important to him. If people had said to Basho well you're appropriating Chinese culture when you write or you're appropriating Indian culture when you appeal to Zen Buddhism, then that would have left him with nothing of the sort that he was best at to do. So my basic

tendency is to think that as long as one respects reasonable intellectual property regimes and so on, you should take what you can wherever you find it useful and work with it. But look, there are ways of using the culture of other people that express disrespect for them and it's bad to express disrespect. So I think that what people are worried about very often when they're talking about cultural appropriation isn't actually an issue of property; it's an issue of respect. And I have some sympathy with the arguments about respect, though not – as you see – very many positive feelings about the idea of cultural objects belonging to one ethnic group or one nationality or anything else like that.

SUE LAWLEY: *(to Henry Cohen)* Do you want to come back on that?

HENRY COHEN: I agree. *(laughter)*

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Excellent. Let's go on like this. *(laughter)*

SUE LAWLEY: No, no ... no, no, we don't want to go on like this. Okay I'm coming to a question here.

JOSH GLANCY: Hi there. My name's Josh Glancy. I'm a journalist in New York. Let's say we accept your argument about abandoning the concept of Western civilization. But you also point out that the stories and narratives we tell ourselves are incredibly powerful, in fact that's how we bind our societies together, so what do we replace it with?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well I think we need all kinds of identities. I'm not sure that we ... as it were the disappearance of the idea of yourself as a Westerner doesn't leave a hole that has to be filled by something else because you have other things to appeal to?? So I don't think I need to offer you an alternative. I just need to point out to you that you have your British – or perhaps English, I don't know which you care for most – national identity. But you have that, you have your profession as a journalist. We have many identities to draw on. When we have identities that we are drawing on that aren't doing good work, I think it's better to abandon them and develop others. So I would urge you and everybody else to think about other ways of affiliating ourselves with people across the world. I - as you know, as you saw from what I said - have great interest in many of the things that are associated with Western Civ courses – I'm perfectly happy to talk about Herodotus or Plato or Kant or any of those folk. I just think that we should be more generous in thinking about who they can belong to and perhaps a bit more stinting in granting them to the followers of Donald Trump, for example.

SUE LAWLEY: But what holds us all together are the things that you've sought to praise of course - liberalism, human rights, rule of law, all those things. That gives us a right to choose, it gives us control over who we are because we can choose. There are people across the world, most particularly in Islamic countries, who don't have that kind of choice.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes, I'm not sure most particularly in Islamic countries. I mean the two largest countries in the world are China and India and I'm not sure that I think of China as a home of freedom and that has nothing to do with Islam; and, on the other hand, fragile as it is, Indian democracy is a real thing and that involves several hundred million Muslims. But I agree with you that there are too many places in the world where the things I do care about - not because they're Western but because they're immensely valuable ...

SUE LAWLEY: But they *are* Western.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well they've become identified with the label Western right now, but ask Herodotus how many democracies he knew, in the West; ask Kant how many democracies he knew; ask the historians who wrote ... Ask Gibbon how many. I mean I'm thinking of people that I quoted. So I think these are values worth holding onto. Some of the most stalwart defenders of liberalism and democracy now are not Westerners, thank God.

SUE LAWLEY: Question over here.

CHRIS ANDERSON: Chris Anderson. I run an organisation called TED devoted to sharing ideas across cultures. It's become shockingly clear in the last year or so just how deeply threatened many people are by other cultures – threatened, angry, fearful. Why has that happened and what would you say to someone to diffuse that anger and fear?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: So if I had a little booklet or a pill or something that would do that, of course I would spread it widely around the planet. Look human beings, we evolved as a social species in a context where competition among groups was important and so we have a psychology that does very easily produce “them” and “us” structures that bonds us strongly to the “us” and makes us antagonistic to the “them”. Social psychology is full of experiments in which this can be done in an afternoon with a classroom full of kids or you know over a weekend. So that's a deep feature of our psychologies. And because we now know that it's there, it's tremendously important not to engage it in dangerous ways, and one of the most dangerous kinds of people in the world today I think are people who go around mobilising “us-es” by stigmatising and demonising “thems”. It's easy to do, it works, but then you're stuck with the results and the results are that you can't turn it off, you can't turn it off. And so you mobilise Serb identity in the Balkans, you can't turn it off. It's a deep feature of our psychologies. It's one we can escape. We don't have to feel like this. We can make distinctions in our beliefs and in our religions and in our national affiliations without organising them in a way that leads to hatred.

SUE LAWLEY: (*to Chris Anderson*) Do you have an answer to your own question, Mr Anderson? I mean you must have heard people ... Running TED Talks, you must have heard people pontificating on this many, many times?

CHRIS ANDERSON: I mean there's many theories and you know people talk about trying to get visibility of each other, trying to do things that develop empathy, to tell a story that puts you in someone else's shoes. And you know for a long time technologists would have said that just the sheer connectedness of the world, the fact that we can all see each other, connect with each other on Facebook or Twitter or whatever is a force for good, basically for fundamentally driving a slow but steady progress towards a sort of global you know identity of sorts or at least of that being one of our identities, but definitely the events of the last year have challenged all those views quite strongly.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: If you raise people in groups of mixed identity where they're doing useful things together in circumstances of equality and mutual dependence, it's very hard for bigotry against the groups that are represented in those encounters to develop. And I mean that's just a piece of social ... It has a name, the contact hypothesis in social psychology, but I think it's a really important point and it explains why, for example, in a multicultural society it's really

important to have public schools that are ... in which everybody is represented and so on because that's a bulwark against the other kind of negativity. It doesn't guarantee that it won't happen, but it makes it much less likely.

SUE LAWLEY: Okay.

LUCIA SADA (ph): Hi, I'm Lucia ... Over here.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Oh there you are.

LUCIA SADA: I'm Lucia Sada. I'm a graduate student in journalism here at NYU. And I'm wondering, since you talk so much about culture and identity, I'm wondering how you envision these ideas to make their way into the classroom – specifically in the teaching of the humanities?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well I have students of mine in this room who I hope feel that I'm communicating something useful to them about these ideas of ethics and cultural identity. Look one of the things – in terms of the humanities – one of the things we can do is to have an education which points to the truth about many of the objects that I anyway care about most – like haiku poetry – which is that they are the product of hybridisation and so on, and then to study those processes. They're very, very interesting. It's very interesting to figure out how the sonnet entered English from Italian in such a way that Shakespeare could write sonnets that I very much enjoy and admire. It's very interesting to think about how the narratives that Shakespeare chooses to tell come out of Roman history and out of Holinshed and so on. I mean these are interesting processes to study. Once you start studying them, you see how the things we most care about in the arts in the Arnoldian sense of culture, those things, are not the product of people who are hoarding stuff. They're the product of people who are engaging with one another across all kinds of difference - not just national and religious difference, but all kinds of difference.

SUE LAWLEY: Question there.

ALVIN HALL: I'm Alvin Hall - writer, broadcaster, teacher. How do you define a cultured person today?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well of course in the Tylorian sense everybody's a cultured person, everybody has a culture. In the Arnoldian sense, it's anyone who is interested in the best that has been thought and read "in the world" remember Arnold said. So it's not a matter of hoarding yourself ... I mean Arnold's own tastes were perhaps limited, but that was a mistake on his part. Arnoldian cultural lives are grounded in language and things that ... in respect of which human beings differ and so my relationship to Basho is obviously different from the relationship of a Japanese person who understands and can read Japanese. But what I don't think is that you should only care about the ones that are in some sense assoc... I think you can't be a civilized person if you only care about the culture of one place, one class, one gender for that matter.

SUE LAWLEY: But the modern contribution that Western civilization is making as we speak surely to the culture of the world is the media, for example – television, cinema? What about football? You know the iconic premier league football clubs are a kind of lingua franca across the world. These are Western contributions ...

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well except that ...

SUE LAWLEY: I'm still batting for the West here.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes, I know. And you know you can think of them that way if you like, but the fact is that soccer ... *(laughter)*

SUE LAWLEY: How else do you think of them?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well let's take soccer, which I'm going to call soccer here because if you call it football you may be misunderstood; and whereas I'm willing to defend soccer, I'm not willing to defend what is called football in the United States. *(laughter)* But look ...

SUE LAWLEY: I'm talking about Manchester United, let's face it.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I'm talking about Man U. Look soccer is a perfect example of something ... No doubt the rules were invented somewhere in England or somewhere or France or Ger... I don't know where they were invented. I don't *care* where they were invented actually. But the most elegant soccer players in the world today, even the ones in Man U, don't all come from countries in the European Union. Many of them come from ...

SUE LAWLEY: Sure.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: ... of course from Africa, Latin America. Not so far huge numbers of them from Asia, but that'll happen. So now the question is it's diffused in this way. Is the fact that it's diffused and that people in Brazil now think of football as their game, is that a bad thing because they're not acknowledging that it's Western or is it a wonderful, good thing that they have taken it up as Brazilian as well as acknowledging that it came from somewhere?

SUE LAWLEY: Well of course it's a good thing, but that's the point, isn't it – it unites the world? I mean we all want civilization, we all want culture. You just don't like the fact that we put the Western in front of it.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Well the reason ... But that's because ... That's good, that's a good way of putting the question. A little bit of the intellectual history here might sort of help clarify this. Civilization as it was used in the time of Arnold and Tylor, that word was a process through which every society was going and everybody was somewhere in the process of becoming civilized and there was then a singular notion of what it was to be civilized.

SUE LAWLEY: Which was Christian and white?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Which was Christian and ... No you didn't have to be white. Christian, scientific - I mean whatever, various things. What's wrong with that picture is that it'll still be the case for the foreseeable future, but there will be lots of ways of being civilized. They will be different from one another and we should think of cultures, therefore, not as a thing where everybody's placed in one ladder of culture, but rather - as my hero Herder did - as a plural thing. There are cultures but they should be in dialogue with one another.

SUE LAWLEY: And as far as football is concerned, they are ...

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: They are.

SUE LAWLEY: ... as far as television is concerned, they are; as far as cinema is concerned, they are?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. Though again these are all contexts in which the transmissions are often rather unequal and uneven. Hollywood is better known than Nollywood and Nollywood is quite interesting. *(laughter)*

SUE LAWLEY: Question here.

DAVID REMNICK: David Remnick from The New Yorker magazine. I would like to hear what you think that the lines of opposition are to what you're talking about – to cosmopolitanism, to this notion that Western civilization is not a useful term at this point? What political forces are allied against what you're really not just talking about but fighting for?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Yes. It's back to these questions about how you imagine Europe or the United States. Do you imagine it as a kind of embattled West claiming the legacy of Plato to Nato, regarding everybody else in the world as stuck with whatever you think of their tradition? You probably don't know very much about their traditions, but you think they probably have some them and they're stuck with them, we're stuck with ours and we should defend ours against them. In practice what this leads to is a politics of exclusion, it leads to a politics in which your immigration policies are like the white Australia policy of the twentieth century or the Chinese Exclusion Act policies of the United States in the early twentieth century and so on, in which you're trying to bring in people who are as it were already guaranteed to be like you. And I suppose part of my point is nothing guarantees that anyone's going to be like anyone. We have to make choices in this area and where you come from and who your grandparents were is not going to fix it. If you want to care about Plato, you have to study Plato. And you don't own Plato. Plato belongs to us all. So that leads at one level to these exclusionist, unpleasant, xenophobic policies, but at the other level it leads to a kind of cultural laziness in which you think that because you're an inheritor of Western civilization, you don't have to do any work.

SUE LAWLEY: David Remnick, do you want to come back?

DAVID REMNICK: Maybe the lines of opposition to cosmopolitanism are more obvious on the right, or do you find that there's opposition to it coming from the left as well?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Sure. Failures of respect are pervasive across the political spectrum and including failures of transcultural respect. I think that there are elements of the international human rights movement, which is very much centred in the North Atlantic world, that are profoundly disrespectful of the cultures that they're criticizing. And part of the reason why that form of disrespect is bad is because first of all it leads them not to understand the things that they're trying to criticize and so makes them very ill placed to do anything about them; and, second, it makes them look very unappealing to the people that they're trying to convert. So yes, I think the sense that oh well we've already got it all, which is part of one of the Western Civ narratives, that's not very helpful either. There are things to be learned. That's one of the cosmopolitan thoughts.

Even if you had the good fortune to be born in Athens in the fifth century, there were things you could have learned by listening to the Persians and the Egyptians and even the Celts. *(laughter)*

SUE LAWLEY: Question here.

GALA PRUDENT: Hello, I'm Gala Prudent. I'm a high school student. So there's been a lot of debate about Colin Kaepernick's decision to sit during the national anthem and some people say that his decision to protest has been disrespectful to American culture. So I'd like to hear how you interpret the relationship between nationalism and culture.

SUE LAWLEY: *(to Professor Appiah)* Can you explain that to us before you put the full answer?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: So this has to do with the game that I said I wasn't going to defend. *(laughs)* This is about an American football player who as a supporter of essentially Black Lives Matter has been kneeling or sitting during the national anthem rather than standing, which is what you're supposed to do. Short answer - you're not going to believe that, are you? - this is a way of showing that he is deeply patriotic. Maybe you don't like this way of showing patriotism, but it seems to me a perfectly appropriate way because it reflects this fundamental concern for the honour of your country, which as an acquired American, as someone who became American by choice, I profoundly feel both the pride and the shame, which is why I can claim to be patriotic.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

ALEXANDER NEHAMAS: Alexander Nehamas. I teach philosophy at Princeton University. It seems to me that people also have a need not only to feel connected with everybody else; they also have a need to feel different from other people. Not necessarily from everybody else though, from specific groups. And I was wondering whether ... For example, friends always define in opposition to somebody who is not their friend and so on. Do you want to account for those relationships in the same way that you did account for the large units of culture or whatever, or is there more of a kind of covert essentialism in those groups?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: That's an interesting question. I'm not sure I know what the answer to it is. But part of the question here is what the relationship is between the "us" and "them-ing" on the small, everyday scale and on the global scale. Here's one thought I've had about that. It's only be... The evolutionary processes that produce the "us" and "them-ing" have to have been small-scale. Human beings lived in groups of you know a hundred, a hundred and twenty, something like that, for most of our history - well pre-history - and so that's the context in which we evolved. But what's happened, I think, is that we've taken that piece of psychology which was evolved for doing this job in a small group and we've done this completely magical and mysterious thing: we've been able to develop sentiments of positive affiliation with groups on the scale of hundreds of millions. Three hundred thirty million Americans can feel something that connects them in this imaginary way using the psychology that developed for groups in which it was less imaginary, in which actually you know Aristotle said that you shouldn't get too big because then you couldn't know each other's character. Well it's too late for that. *(laughs)* But still fortunately there's enough of that psychology that works even on the grand scale that we can hold nations together, we can say - as Richard Rorty liked to say, a philosopher we both knew - that you should be able to persuade Americans that they should care about other Americans. Maybe it's hard to get Americans

or anybody to care about everybody in the world, but you should be able to say to an American about the life of someone whose life is lacking in the elements of dignity, you should be able to say to any American none of us should live like that, right? No American should live like that. And if that can be made to work for three hundred and thirty million people, that's kind of an amazing thing. So anyway that's my one thought about this topic.

SUE LAWLEY: Question here.

ALISON HORNE RONA : Hello. I'm Alison Horne Rona. I'm an architectural and interior design consultant. I'm thinking about the future of culture and we've only touched briefly on the internet and how it's like a tsunami breaking down barriers, and I recently read somewhere about the rise of intercultural relationships and interracial relationships just rising at a rapid rate and how that might change the world. I just wanted to hear about your ideas about the future with the internet.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: The great thing about the internet is that it allows people to explore options, especially people who don't have many resources. A huge number of people in Africa today have access to the web because they have a cell phone. That allows ... Here's an example of something that that allows that's really valuable. There are, despite what they say in Uganda, there are gay people in Africa. It's kind of hard to come out in a place where you might likely be beaten up, but you can find out and communicate with other gay people privately through your phone, through the web. You can come to ... And that gives a resource, a sense of ... and that's one of the reasons why there are people in Uganda who are resisting the homophobia of the Ugandan regime. I'm not picking on Ugandans particularly; this is a terrible problem all over Africa. One of the reasons why there are people resisting is because they have this resource that the web has given them. They can talk to other people – gay people in India and other parts of Africa and Europe and so on. So that's great. But look, it's also producing the tem... The temptation for those very people right is to stop there. It's just to talk to other gay people. And the temptation of libertarians in the United States or of liberals or of conservatives is ... - which the web enables - is to kind of ... is a sort of self-ghettoisation. So far from making links across things, it can risk pulling people into tighter and tighter communities, echo chambers of one's own self and one's own views. Nevertheless, as I say, there's good news as well and I think the good news is something that we should encourage. And we should encourage ourselves, all of ourselves. I don't feel ... Maybe I should you know spend more time looking at the Drudge Report. *(laughs)*

SUE LAWLEY: But what is the practical advice you can offer us? You know you've told us over the course of these four lectures how to think about colour, creed, country, culture, but you know that's just thought. How do we become ... Is there any practical hint you can give us as to how we become masters of our own identities, which is what we strive, what you're telling us we should strive to do?

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: I think I said at some point in discussion, in one of the earlier lectures, that I have a view about what philosophers contribute. My view is you shouldn't ask philosophers to tell you what to do. You should allow us ...

SUE LAWLEY: *(over)* Yeah but this is the last question of a series of four. *(Professor Appiah laughs)* I'm going to put you on the spot.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Okay just to say ... But I think it's very important that I *am* doing something in giving people tools for thinking about these things well. I can't live your life for you, I can't sort out your identity problems for you. There are seven billion and/or more of us and the identity challenges are very different for different people. But look, at the end I was urging on us a general spirit, which is not to lock yourself into any identity; not to take it to be a determinism, a fate, but to think of it as something to use as a resource to build a human life, and a human life among humans – that is a life which we share: our town, our village, our country and the planet. I think that's a useful ... it's a useful idea to approach the world in that way. If any prime minister or president wants to make me his or her counsellor to solve a particular identity problem, I will work on it. (*laughter*)

SUE LAWLEY: (*laughs*) Kwame Anthony Appiah, thank you very much indeed.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH: Thank you. And thank you all.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: My thanks too to our audience here and our hosts at New York University. If you want to find out more about his lectures and others, take a look at the BBC Reith website where there are transcripts, audio and so much more.

The Reith Lectures will be back next year with the best-selling author Hilary Mantel at the podium. For now, from New York, goodbye.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)