

as is important for Sekyi-Otu, communism can be arrived at by an active and ethical choice, not simply by ways of some inagential scientific–Marxist teleology.

Second, this collective labour seems to me the likeliest source of some common ground upon which the appeal of such an ethical choice might be persuasively posed, and heard. Latent in Sekyi-Otu’s prerogative to honour humanity, to defer to difference, and to cultivate the commons, is the recognition or establishment of some kind of community – some kind of space in which radical, ethical judgement can be voiced and engaged with. Says Simone Weil, another vernacular Kantian who was particularly engaged with that cultivation described by Sekyi-Otu, named in her output *enracinement*:

Art has no immediate future because all art is collective and there is no more collective life (there are only dead collections of people), and also because of this breaking of the true pact between the body and the soul... It is therefore quite useless for you to envy Leonardo or Bach. Greatness in our times must take a different course. (*Gravity and Grace*, 151)

Which is to say: I think Sekyi-Otu is right, in his recuperation of the universal, of the normative, of the individual, and the enigmatic. But it is not enough to be right; one must also be persuasive, because survival, if survival is what we want, is contingent upon collective action. How do we call the collective into being, how do we make ethical claims upon it in a way which it will hear? Time is running very short.

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Rethinking the Center from the Left: Postcolonial Humanity and Universalism in Ato Sekyi-Otu’s *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*

Left Universalism, Africentric Essays is unpretentious in its aim: to defend universalism from an Africa-centered purview. Ato Sekyi-Otu’s critical move lies in severing the ties that situate universalism as a Eurocentric logic of imperialism while disavowing the nativist relativism often attributed to postcolonial studies in what he calls, “postcolonial

humanity” (274). This term becomes a crucial anchor for the author’s proposition of universalizing certain African thoughts as they pertain to the *human* condition on a global scale. Steering clear of the desire for the “declarative power of dogma” (274), Sekyi-Otu invites the reader to a universal leftist response to the conundrum of contemporary history, which is at the core of the postcolonial African world.

Each chapter pursues universalism from the granular level of the human condition, based on the idea of an ethical imperative of the *in-common*. He locates the ideal of communism in moral judgment, ethical commitment and a political argument that proclaims the centrality of Africa from an interstitial standpoint. Sekyi-Otu’s argument simultaneously denies both nativist relativism and particularity, and the Eurocentric logic of universalism. Simply put, the book is a triumphant demonstration of how to at once disavow two ends of the same theoretical rope to prioritize the middle. The theoretical rope is, at one end, universalism, as generally construed in Western politico-philosophical stance. The other end is the resistance to its conceptual notion in non-Western, particularly, African intellectual discourse. Thus, the middle, in this sense, becomes the interstice where both ends converge without contradiction to serve a different purpose. From this location, Sekyi-Otu notes in the preface, the book’s focus on the “social universal of class”(x) and the “injuries”(x) and “pathologies” (x) it causes and perpetrates and engenders as a task for the moral agent to take up in deciphering human conditions and their possibilities in history. The author strikes a balance by using these pathologies of social universal of class as what is applicable to understanding the human condition regardless of temporal, spatial or historical variations. To emphasize this point of view, he creates a canvas of an intertwined, convoluted world in the age of globalization, and proceeds to critique it from an African worldview.

Sekyi-Otu’s foundational claim, inspired by left thinking, is to universalism that is inherently Africentric in its ethical compass and that may resonate universally regardless of epoch or culture. He addresses various arguments about the “universal” and takes on the task of finding it in the African particular that is not beholden to elsewhere other than the notion of “*our way, the way*” (27). He insists that it is in this particular declaration that we may read the assumption of the universal in praxis, even though it is meant to speak to a particular culture, and context. The introductory chapter, based on the Akan saying, “Is s/he not also a human being?” and its Luo declarative, “We too are human beings” (17), send the reader on a journey through the political, the philosophical and the social theories and thoughts of the human. The author pursues this line of thought with a view for the possibility of social regeneration. This trajectory draws attention to the kind of distinctive universalism the author defends. Sekyi-Otu makes a compelling case by situating his various postulations in current socio-economic and political African milieu, even as he looks into the past in retrospect. I consider this move a significant strength that lends legibility to the dense prose. The book takes the reader from the near-abstraction of theoretical concepts to concrete examples in a not-so-distant present-past.

The next four chapters are distinct yet connected essays. Each of them takes the reader through a series of polemical arguments on a whole lot of ‘isms’ and theoretical assumptions. These arguments pertain to the foundational framework of a leftist universalism in response to issues pertinent to Africa in the twenty-first century. Sekyi-Otu pushes the boundaries of so many theoretical givens and historicity to demonstrate

the possibility of a different way of reason and vision that positions Africa as self-referential for the universal. The reader gets an acerbic critical mass that enlightens on concepts ranging from racial construction of difference and abjection to inequities and moral judgment. He takes on the nature of multiculturalism in lived experience; ethical communism as conceived in African thought; and the notion of individualism, which uses and revisits Frantz Fanon's writing as the sounding board for a contemporary update. The book ends with a carefully mapped out argument that takes African literature and criticism to task on the question of the universal.

The author shows a commitment to reevaluating and repositioning Africa as an enigma whose postcolonial condition is "an exercise in rediscovery" rather than a destination (270). He contends with certain uncritical relativist nativism that defines the existential landscape of Postcolonial Africa in response to universalism. He argues that such "fundamentalist urge" (247) prevents reconciling African literary texts with what he claims to be the universal mission of literature—"the exploration of the *human* condition" (237). He posits that African literature has more to teach the world about the human condition apprehended in history. Once the African literary texts cease to function within the acts and texture of self-referentiality that sees the postcolonial condition as an end in itself, instead of a process of rediscovery, locating the universal from an African specificity will be more evident. Sekyi-Otu tackles a view that sees universalism as an imperial verdict of erasure of the non-Western literary culture on the strength of what Chinua Achebe calls, "the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe" (237). The author identifies how this line of argument resonates with several other perspectives in the wake of decolonizing African thought. He argues against such binary differentiation, particularly, Wole Soyinka's charge that Black Africa should avoid "universal-humanoids" (238), attempting to impose "*their*" ways as "*our*" way in the name of universalism. In his counter-argument, Sekyi-Otu engages Ayi Kweh Armah's oeuvre and several other African writers and poets to calibrate the Africentric universalism from what he calls "visionary foundationalism" (273). This idea implies a self-originating agency to "found form," and "forge it out of matter made resistant by history" (272), as the composite enunciation of "the way," which explains the universal from an African particularity.

Like any other book that presents itself as a foundational text in positioning Africa at the center of discourse, there will be arguments challenging the veracity of the claims. I entirely agree with a lot of the refreshing ideas the author posits. I mainly lean toward the interstitial poetics in the ethical philosophy, which inform Sekyi-Otu's thought and agenda but my concern with the book is in twofold.


First, the book does not seem to grant the audience easy access to the complexity of thought and the work of theory it does in its prose style, which sometimes obfuscates the pathway the author conceptualizes. The first chapter, in particular, presents very dense prose and sprawling sentences that send the reader on a search for the pin in a haystack of philosophical thoughts and political theory. There seems to be an assumption that the readership is in on the conversations that inform the book's trajectory. I will admit that the essays' fascinating webs of connections and multiple entry points into the debate on universalism is a significant strength—the copious signposts to multiple references in political, philosophical and social theory all head

to the same destination that claims universalism for the African world. The strength is, however, a bit undermined by the difficulty of the prose. I find myself powering through a tightly packed, fast-paced, run-on sentences that do not leave room for adequate processing of a barrage of information the author deploys to make his argument. Simply put, there is an information overload, which in itself is not a bad thing, but it somehow impedes comprehension and makes the pleasurable trip to the core of the argument tedious and almost obscurantist. Maybe in anticipation of this critique, the author seems to fall back on repetition and specific examples and indexation of local contexts—as evident in the postscripts to two of the chapters—to assist the reader for clarity on the emphasis of the book's argument.

Second, for a book that claims universalism with Africa at the center, some of its interlocutors may find it is hard not to notice the preeminence of Kant, Marx, Hegel, Rorty, Badiou, Nietzsche, and so many “Western” or “Western-leaning” ontological and epistemological frameworks. Africanist scholars who still share nationalist perspectives on universalism as a Eurocentric notion of erasure, targeted at non-Western cultures, are bound to notice that African reference and frameworks are less prominent. The more established “Western” scholarship on the universal seems to take center stage in the author's arduous process to position an African particularity of universalism. At times, Sekyi-Otu seems to be working outside the Western models he simultaneously contends with and sometimes conscripts, in framing the Africentric position. The author seems not to have adequately addressed his would-be readers' concerns on his method of centering Africa. Some readers may ask: can Africa imagine its notion of the universal within its philosophical, cultural and social contexts without the Western thoughts as foundational reference points? The answer to this question is evident in the author's insistence on doing away with any form of differentiation in his epistemological framework. Sekyi-Otu seems to have registered this idiosyncratic process by insisting that as long as the end is to “place Africans at the center” of discourse, “the syntax of cultural imperialism” is inconsequential (13). The author's angle suggests that the “borrowed” tools of Western ontology of universalism are a means to an end. One may, in his defense, examine the Akan question of moral outrage, “Is s/he not also a human being?” or, *Beebi ara ani*, “This-is-Everywhere” (268) as rallying points for the book's humanist universalism. However, establishing a link between these Akan sayings and Western notion of universalism as polemical buffer still doesn't immune Sekyi-Otu's position from being accused of recuperating “imperialist Eurocentric hoax.” The push back will definitely not be on the merit of his argument's plausibility for an Africentric universalism. Instead, it would be on his method of critiquing the existential human condition in the postcolonial milieu. If, as the author suggests, the aim is to affirm that the universal always speaks in a native tongue, then, one will agree with him that Kant may well speak to an African particularity of the universal, as it relates to the human condition. Be that as it may, I don't think the author has done enough to convince the nationalist relativists in the postcolonial literary tradition to easily warm up to an idea of reading that suggestively elevates “Riffaterre's austere yardstick of literariness”(240) over the project of “liberation” from “reductive historicism” (240). Some of the author's interlocutors may find themselves retreating to the binarist differentiation the author

argues against, on the grounds of his immense reliance on Western orthodoxy to universalize African humanist thoughts.

No doubt, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* is a timely, multivocal intervention that opens up a wide range of issues that cuts across disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach and vast intertextual references make the book an invaluable asset. It would serve as a great introductory text on methodology for drawing on a wide range of disciplines to create a niche and multiple sites of contestations for scholars in the social sciences and the humanities. Ato Sekyi-Otu has produced a highly cerebral book that will arguably set in motion other areas of research that seek to position Africa as the center of value. I will be revisiting how I think about Afropolitanism, my current area of research, from this notion of universalism.

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“A Surreal World”: Enigmatic Hermeneutics and the Ethical Turn in Left Universalism, Africentric Essays

Ato Sekyi-Otu’s *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* poses a provocative question: is it possible to outline an African universalist metaethical system based on the preexisting structures of African social, political, and economic life? In this book, Sekyi-Otu addresses this possibility and traces a universal system of values that has its origins in the local, indigenous practices of African peoples but that is, *a priori*, transcultural in its scope. In spite of its rather modest title, it mounts a methodical and often times polemical defense of universalism and its attending family of concepts with an emphasis on the culture and values of Africa as a postcolonial space. The text’s mission is ambitious, and at times the exposition a bit unwieldy, but Sekyi-Otu’s theoretical breadth, which encompasses a vast archive of philosophy, political science, sociology, postcolonial studies, Marxism, critical theory, and literary studies, is marshalled towards a radical act of retrieval—the left retrieval of universalism—in order to theorize a new foundationalism capable of addressing the realities of postcolonial life. Sekyi-Otu’s “visionary foundationalism” (26) seeks to uncover the preexisting universalism which undergirds the African ethical life, to combat the view that universalism and its attendant concepts are merely an “imperialist Eurocentric hoax” (viii) imported to the Continent. Further, the book underscores the necessity of this kind of foundationalist ethical positioning in any radical, future-oriented politics, thus reviving and recasting debates within and about African socialism from the 1950s and 1960s. Addressing his defense to both the Western academic modes of ethical thinking grounded in Rortyan anti-foundationalism and postcolonial schools of thought stemming from deconstruction, Sekyi-Otu underlines the necessity of (re)turning to a