

# RESTORING OUR OTHERNESS – REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF EUROCENTRISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE

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"Not in innocence, and not in Asia, was mankind born. The home of our fathers was that African highland reaching north from the Cape to the lakes of the Nile. Here we came about – slowly, ever so slowly – on a sky-swept savannah with menace."  
(Robert Ardrey: *African Genesis*)

To come to terms with the meaning of Eurocentrism and its effects on South African culture is crucial at a time when we stand at the crossroads of our lives and of our country. It is particularly rewarding in the quincennial year of Columbus' 'discovery' of the 'new world'. This event has given rise to new books, numerous articles and strident arguments. For some, Columbus' journey was the first step in a process that spread Western civilization to two continents and that produced a daring experiment in democracy. Others regard his arrival as fatal to the place he reached. "The indigenous peoples and their cultures were doomed by European arrogance, brutality and infectious diseases. Columbus' gift was slavery to those who greeted him; his arrival set in motion the ruthless destruction, continuing at this very moment, of the natural world he entered. Genocide, ecocide, exploitation – even the notion of Columbus as a 'discoverer' – are deemed to be a form of Eurocentric theft of history from those who watched Columbus' ships drop anchor off their shores" (*Time*, 7 October 1991: 50).

Western culture was fundamentally enriched and altered by the encounter, the European imagination was galvinised as never before. According to Samir Amin (1989:73), 1492 marks not only the discovery of the 'new world', but also the beginning of the Renaissance and of the culturalist phenomenon known as Eurocentrism. The Renaissance is "the point of departure for the conquest of the world by capitalist Europe", and the Europeans "develop a sense of absolute superiority, even if the actual submission of other peoples to Europe has not yet taken place" (Amin 1989: 73). They make the first true maps of the planet and learn about the people who inhabit it. Cultures thousands of years old are ignored, exploited and destroyed.

In the 1400s both religious and secular scholars knew that the world was round, but they thought that its lower half was uninhabitable except for weird, deformed creatures, such as giants with a single huge foot, head-

less but not faceless denizens, rare animals and sea monsters. Around the equator lay a 'torrid zone' where the sea was boiling hot. Spiritual maps presented Jerusalem as the centre of the world; on the secular ones, only the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East and the top part of Africa had any detail. Maps by Islamic cartographers relegate Europe to the periphery. 14th-century Europe was indeed backward with respect to the Islamic world, a condition which the Arab traveller ibn-Batuta attributed to the inhospitable climate (Amin 1989: 96). The rediscovered maps of the second century astronomer and geographer, Ptolemy, which were printed in book form in the 1470s, changed a lot and helped Columbus decide to attempt the trip. After the 'voyages of discovery' myths were cast aside, but Europe never stopped believing that it was the centre of the world.

It is difficult to define Eurocentrism, because its roots, manifestations and effects pervade our daily lives at every level. According to Amin (1989: 90) it is "a prejudice that distorts social theories." It presents "itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time" (Amin 1989: vii). Its slogan is: "Imitate the West, the best of all possible worlds" (Amin 1989: xii). Amin situates the phenomenon within the overall ideological construct of capitalism with its miracle prescriptions of market-place and democracy (Amin 1989: xii) and with its project of homogenization through imitation and catching up (Amin 1989: 111). "In capitalism the centre/periphery contrast is defined [...] in economic terms: at one end are the dominating, completed capitalist societies; at the other end are the dominated, unfinished, backward capitalist societies. Economic domination (and its complement economic dependence) is the product of the worldwide expansion" (Amin 1989: 8).

The 'eternal West' was invented, a dominant culture unique since the moment of its origin. Integral to the protection of this arbitrary and

mythical construct is the myth of its Greek ancestry – the Greek ‘miracle’ as outlined by racial theorists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The cradle of Western civilization is to be found in Greek and Roman times, or perhaps even farther back, we are told, to the Caucasus mountains in the Indo-Soviet region; the delusion continues in the reference to white people as *Caucasian*.

In an epoch-making book, *Black Athena* published in 1987 with the subtitle, *The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, Volume 1: The fabrication of ancient Greece 1785-1985*, Martin Bernal reassesses the two models of Greek history. According to the ‘ancient model’, which was the accepted one in Hellenistic times, Greek culture had arisen as the result of colonization, around 1500 BC, by Egyptians and Phoenicians who had civilized the native inhabitants. In the evolution of their culture, the Greeks continued to borrow heavily from their neighbours. The ‘Aryan model’, which views Greece as essentially European, developed only during the first half of the 19th century. It denied the Egyptian settlements and questioned those of the Phoenicians. In its extreme form, which “flourished during the twin peaks of anti-Semitism in the 1890s and again in the 1920s and 1930s” (Bernal 1987: 2), even the Phoenician cultural influence was denied. The ‘Aryan model’ tells the story (which we all know and accept) of an invasion of Indo-European speakers from the North (unreported in ancient times), which had overwhelmed the local ‘Aegean’ or ‘Pre-Hellenic’ culture. Bernal (1987: 2) challenges and compels us, not only to rethink the fundamental bases of ‘Western civilization’ but also to recognize the penetration of racism and ‘continental chauvinism’ into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. The ancient model had no major ‘internal’ deficiencies, or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For the 18th- and 19th-century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe, but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore the ancient model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.

It was as bad as learning that all that white marble was once covered with bright colours, that the abstract purity of Greek architecture was embellished with reliefs of powerful narrative. Furthermore, “the opposition between Indo-European and Semitic (Hebrew and Arab) languages [...] constitutes one of the best examples of the lucubrations required for the construction of Eurocentrism” (Amin 1989: 95).

A characteristic of Eurocentrism is phallocentrism, according to which those sexual and social attributes which are regarded as feminine are despised and denigrated (Witzling 1991: 7). Significantly the Renaissance marks not only the beginning of Eurocentrism and the conquest of the world by capitalist Europe, it also gives birth to the “myth of the artist as a heroic (male) figure who struggles to create” (Witzling 1991: 6), while the woman becomes the Other, the individual whose experiences are relegated to the margin. A woman’s place was in the private sphere, with access only to the so-called minor art forms – quilting, embroidery – that are regarded as lying outside the ‘high’ art tradition, in other words, women’s work, or craft.

Christianity, which became the foundation of European identity, itself presented some tricky questions for the Eurocentric construct (Amin 1989: 98): “Since Christianity was not born on the banks of the Loire or the Rhine, it was necessary to assimilate its original form – which was Oriental, owing to the milieu in which it was established – to Eurocentric teleology. The Holy Family and the Egyptian and Syrian Church Fathers had to be made European. Non-Christian Ancient Greece also had to be assimilated into this lineage by accentuating an alleged contrast between Greece and the ancient Orient and inventing commonalities between these civilized Greeks and the still barbaric Europeans.”

The Holy Family became blond, and the progression of Western history from Ancient Greece to Rome to feudal Christian Europe to capitalist Europe became accepted as the truth. As intimated above, the construct needed a counterpart – the Other – the Orient. According to Edward Said (1985:15), author of *Orientalism*, “the Orient is a negative of Europe, conforming to the profile of what Europe thinks Europe is *not*; the opposition is therefore diametrical, producing a single, symmetrical Other”. The Arabs in turn considered Africa as almost nothing, except for the area around Carthage. The rest was called *Maghreb*, meaning Occident (Miller 1985: 13). And so Africa becomes “the Other’s other [...] the third part of the world”, the void, the null (Miller 1985: 16). This leads to the master text of 19th century racial thinking, Joseph de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55) and the division into three, of the black, the yellow and the white.

Since the dawn of Western literature in Homer, there has been a continuous, ambivalent profile of an object which is not Western and which was variously called ‘Ethiopia’, ‘Libya’ or ‘Africa’ (Miller 1985: xi). Ethiopia and Libya are Greek terms, while Africa is Roman. Ethiopia was used as late as 1540, in editions

of the maps of Ptolemy, to describe the whole continent, Africa only around Carthage (Miller 1985: 8). The term Ethiopia was not a geographic one; the word means 'burned-faces', the sunburnt races. The place is thus named and defined by outsiders of lighter complexion, by the appearance of its people and "by the single characteristic that sets them off [...] the darkness of their skin" (Miller 1985: 8).

Homer describes *Aithiopes* as furthest of mankind, but blameless and "beloved of the gods" (Miller 1985: 28). They are divided by Herodotus into two main groups, a straight-haired race and a woolly-haired race, dwelling respectively to the east and the west. In later classical times *Aithiopes* are the inhabitants of the kingdom of Cush, with its capital first at Napata and then at Meroe (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 8: 790). Cush was strong enough to conquer a degenerate Egypt in the middle of the 8th century BC and to establish there the 25th dynasty, which inspired a flowering of culture and which ruled until expelled by the Assyrians in the 7th century BC. Thereafter the Egyptian-inspired monarchy of Cush continued to rule the mixed population of the Nilotic Sudan (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1:294).

From Homer to Herodotus and Pliny and the French and the English, the myths and speculations about Africa grow, as do the polarized evaluations of the continent – of monstrosity and nobility, of remoteness and delight, of realism and allegory. What about the name 'Africa'? Miller conducts a fascinating and complex research into the sources and etymologies of the word. The results are always the same – Africa was void and nothing until an outsider arrived. It was "unformed prior to its investment with shape and being by the Christian and Islamic outside" (Miller 1985: 13). He shows Africanist discourse to be "pitted against an otherness that appears to have no 'actual identity', that refuses to be acquired and domesticated"; Africa remains "the blank slate on which the West projects its fears and imaginings" (Miller 1985: 23).

Nikos Papastergiadis argues: "The eurocentric dream of arcadia could only be realised as long as another space existed: an unknown, uninhabited space, a space that only knew the time of nature, one which could be re-made with new co-ordinates: a new time given to it: the time of culture" (*Third Text* 14, Spring 1991: 50). He sees one of the manifestations of this planning of cities in the 'new world', where a gridiron of 'rationality' and 'progress' is superimposed in a manner which was never achieved in Europe or Britain. The consequences of the development models of civilization were disastrous, "Science, Reason, Progress and Development [...] do not bring only better prosperity, happiness, freedom

and life any more, but also poverty, suffering slavery and destruction" (*Il sud del mondo*, 1991: 13). The writer continues: "The crisis of development, in the Third World, does not only question the methods best suited to establishing and implementing western type of development: it increasingly questions, from the point of view of non-western civilisations careful to safeguard their identities, the pertinence of a model that can only be set up by ruining traditional cultures and disintegrating archaic ones. Let us recall that development, in the West itself, came about in and through cultural destruction and human suffering."

Thus the European dream was "built on the putative invisibility of the indigenous people" (*Il sud del mondo*, 1991: 50). And the realization of the dream meant the destruction of those who resisted its spread. "This 'heart of darkness' responds not only with silence or inertia. It defends itself, first with its distances, its difficult voyages, the strangeness of its ways. Against the guile of outsiders, Africa presents a screen of unintelligibility" (Miller 1985: 20).

In the history books there is silence about the devastation, silence about the elaborate organization of structures and systems which existed long before the Europeans arrived, about the art, architecture and material culture which the colonisers found. The resistance to European penetration of the continent, to colonisation and the slave trade is not presented as heroic and extraordinary, but as barbaric and unreasonable. There is silence about the disastrous impact of Western civilization on the ecology of the cradle of humankind, and of the exploitationist ethic which has decimated much of the cultural and natural history.

When history begins is crucial. Ptolemy's map, which was used well into the 15th century, designates the southern part of the African continent as 'Terra incognita'. The arrival of the Europeans brings an end to the prehistoric period; but it means the exclusion of all the history – prehistoric man first appeared some 2,5 million years ago and the oldest known fossils of modern human beings are at least 90,000 years old – and all the images of precolonial Africa. Colin Richards writes (*Third Text* 16/17, Autumn/Winter 1991: 107): "From here the familiar plot ensues, a plot which sets the holy alliance of history-culture-civilisation, against the calamitous combination of prehistory-nature-primitive. This plot manufactures identities and otherness as suspect as they are endemic to Western culture. The plot thickens in the representation of African culture cheek by jowl with dinosaurs in a museal ambience of Natural History as opposed to Cultural History, the privileged domain reserved for white settler cultures."

But what to do with the civilizations and the extraordinary flowering of art and culture on the darkest continent? Gobineau had a problem with the civilization of the dark-skinned Ethiopians (Miller 1985: 18). Since the 16th century European travellers had compared the palace complex at Benin to their own great cities. In the process of its destruction by the British in 1897, the palace – made of wood – was burnt to the ground, but the brass plaques, the sculptures and the ivories from the altars survived. They were confiscated, loaded into warships and taken to London whence they were sold by the British Foreign Office to defray the costs of the Benin Punitive Expedition. The works went to public and private collections throughout the world. Felix von Luschan, a Belgian expert who bought a substantial number for the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde said: “These works from Benin are equal to the very finest examples of European casting technique [...] Benvenuto Cellini could not have cast them better” (*The Economist*, 6 June 1992: 113). Yet this art became known as ‘Primitive’.

By the early years of this century a curious phenomenon had occurred. Other cultures were regarded as primitive and inferior; yet artists were turning to them for inspiration, indeed for the renewal and regeneration of European art. Both artist and establishment agreed that African art was ‘primitive’, but for the artist this meant an alternative to establishment values and culture. As a result of Picasso’s interest in and appropriation of African art, perceptions slowly changed. But not without serious difficulties. How could the masterpieces of the art produced on the African continent – which were on a level with the Western tradition – be reconciled with the fact that the makers were savage, primitive, backward, culturally inferior? Roger Fry (1920: 100) wrote: “We have a habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements. It seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it.”

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, held in Paris in 1989, Bernard Marcadé entitles his essay ‘L’autre, ce grand alibi’. Indeed, the Other has been invented as the grand alibi for the West, in order to maintain the semblance of superiority. We are reminded of Mahatma Gandhi’s words when he was asked what he thought of Western civilisation. He said he thought it would be a very good idea.

Out of the binary frame of Western thought there emerged the concepts of centre and

periphery, of culture and nature, of superior and inferior, of male and female, of civilized and primitive, of rich and poor, of white and black. Miller writes (1989: 246): “We can assert with assurance that the relationship between Europe and Africa has continually been represented as simply North over South, light over dark, white over black: as an unmediated pairing of opposites.”

Into this scenario walks *Sudafricanus Imperialatus*, a subspecies (or so it believes) of *Caucasianus Imperialatus* (to borrow from Nourbese Philip, *Third Text* 14, Spring 1991: 76). For three-and-a-half centuries it subjugates and dominates all people of colour, it invents and implements as ideology and a system of oppression so devastating and abhorrent, that by the year 1990 its homeland, South Africa, is the pariah of the entire world. The subspecies associates itself with Europe, emulating in every possible way the ‘civilized values’, the ‘standards’, the ‘way of life’ and the art of a distant continent, while ignoring, neglecting and destroying not only existing cultural manifestations, but also ones emerging from a struggle for freedom. The majority of the people become the missing persons or the barbarians of the history of the land. But not forever. Culture becomes the site for that struggle and by the end of the 1980s the country is not only known for apartheid. In the words of Mongane Wally Serote (CASA 1989: 13): “It is also now known for the courage, determination and resoluteness with which the oppressed of that country seek, cherish and fight for freedom.” In an interview in *New Nation* (16-24 April 1992) Serote called for the fostering of “a new national consciousness”, for without it, the ‘new’ South Africa would remain an empty shell. One of the greatest obstacles in the way of developing a national consciousness and a national culture, and of moving towards cultural equity in this country, is the Eurocentrism which marginalises and which impedes the reconciliation of diverse and conflicting cultural viewpoints and aspirations.

In an address given at the Grahamstown Festival in July 1990, Barbara Masekela spoke of the “Eurocentrism of the old hegemony, which sees South African culture in terms of the emulation of models originated outside the continent – models, we may say, increasingly irrelevant even to the soul of a white community which has in some cases lived in Africa for almost two centuries. Eurocentrism sees South Africa’s cultural worth in terms of its ability to produce a *Die Fledermaus* which can rival the Vienna Opera, a post-structuralist novel which will rival Paris or acid-house music just like London’s. But just as – in the words of black Afrikaans poet Patrick Petersen – ‘black

experience cannot be a clone of white experience' – so, white South African experience cannot be a clone of the experiences of the USA or Europe. By aiming at an ersatz European high culture, we are ignoring our own rich heritage which has the potential to give us new forms and categories and an aesthetic which is uniquely South African".

So far, acknowledgement and support for the arts by the State have been exclusively to the benefit of white South Africa, and Eurocentrism and elitism have been its driving force, particularly with regard to the performing arts. The population of this country has been deprived and denied in two ways: in the first place, our educational system is such that there is no access to the cultural traditions of the West or of Africa; secondly, the efforts of the so-called masses to express themselves culturally have been negated or actively opposed. Art forms and cultural manifestations which rise from the people pose no threat to the serious pursuits developed by and for an élite group: Shakespeare is not endangered by protest literature or theatre; the exclusivity of classical music cannot be touched by the syncretised sounds of Africa; the paintings of Picasso and Irma Stern are not diminished by art in transition or by people's parks. But the notion that Western music, dance and visual art forms are superior to that which have been and are being produced by Third World societies has to be called into question. They may be different; they are not inferior.

I am not asking for the suppression and elimination of art and art forms inspired by and dependent on European traditions. I am saying that we should no longer be suffocated and entangled by those traditions. As we move away from elitist and Eurocentric aspirations, we begin a process of exchange of skills and traditions, of inclusion rather than exclusion. And we escape the stultifying vicious circle of our own hackneyed repertory.

Little or no credit is given in establishment circles to the extraordinary cultural development which South Africa has experienced in the last decade or so. The power and diversity of the visual arts astound visitors from abroad; plays by Athol Fugard, Paul Slabolepszy, Pieter-Dirk Uys and Nicholas Ellenbogen have contributed to the emergence of a new identity for South African theatre; there are no theatres in the townships, yet black theatre is flourishing and leaping into international prominence; the screening of *Sarafina!* at the Cannes Film Festival drew a fifteen minute standing ovation from a tough, critical audience; many of our writers are internationally recognised and admired, and in 1991 Nadine Gordimer won the Nobel Prize for Literature; some of our musicians, both exiles and non-exiles, are legen-

dary – they have brought great credit to South Africa, although they are not always known here. It took Paul Simon to make the Ladysmith Black Mambazo famous in their own country, and few people are aware of the African and South African contribution to the international cross-cultural explosion known as 'world beat' – the product of the meeting between the First and the Third Worlds. Who has seen Michael Williams' intricate, delightful indigenous operas? Who has heard Hans Rosenschoon's symphony, the *Magic Marimba*, where Mozart and the marimba merge in a most marvellous manner?

Difficult questions have to be asked, for example, can opera be defended? Can it be justified when annually it is seen by 671 768 people, almost exclusively white? Is it in the national interest, and should the State pay for it? Can we justify the production of a single opera which costs R3 million or a Civic Theatre which is being revamped at a cost of untold millions – if they remain within the reach of whites only? Contrary to general perceptions of the cultural boycott, Albie Sachs maintains that South African culture as such was never boycotted. Nor were South African artists prevented from developing successful careers abroad.<sup>1</sup> But they were largely ignored by a white South Africa which clings to delusions of being the last practitioners of 'high' culture and the last remaining champions of European 'standards' at the tip of darkest Africa. But we are regarded by our gods and heroes in Europe as no more than a marginal appendage to the Western tradition – perhaps capable of satisfying a hungry Western audience with a taste for exoticism and authenticity. They are certainly not interested in 'look-alike' art, in works which conform to established Eurocentric modes, for these are regarded as provincial and parochial and are assessed in the vocabulary normally reserved for the Other. Reference to two exhibitions will suffice to illustrate this.

The response of some British critics to *Art from South Africa*, an exhibition of contemporary South African art, which was curated by David Elliot, Director of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art in association with the Zabalaza Festival (held in London in July 1990), and which toured the United Kingdom for eighteen months, gave an indication of the kind of work which they expect from this part of the world. In an article in the *Weekly Mail* (10-17 January 1992) Neville Dubow analyses reactions to the show: Margaret Garlake (*Art Monthly*) warns against "the patronising and reductive *idée fixée* adhered to by white liberals and some black nationalists, that it should be demonstrably 'African'"; William Feaver (*The Guardian*) dismisses white socially-conscious artists

as "the least convincing" – they are no more than "external examiners of conscience", while foremost black abstractionist David Koloane is the "Pollock of Rorke's Drift." Critics favoured the 'democratic' areas of the exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

A number of exhibitions dealing with the Other were curated abroad during the 1980s; all were controversial.<sup>3</sup> A South African component, comprising thirteen artists, formed part of the most recent attempt to include artists from the South or the Third World – *Il sud del mondo: L'altra arte contemporanea* (*The south of the world: the other contemporary art*), an exhibition which was presented in Marsala, Italy under the patronage of UNESCO (February to April 1991). A whole paper could be devoted to the curatorial inconsistencies, the negation of Third World art to the development and enrichment of the North, the pretensions of creating dialogue between North and South and the inequities which we suffered at their hands in attempts by them to represent us in a favourable, kindly light. Suffice it to refer here to the title of the exhibition, which speaks for itself, and to the conflation of the South and the Third World which occurs in the catalogue essays. The essays bear no relationship whatsoever to the art; they are about benevolence, guilt and justification; they are about the crisis of European society – the crisis of development, of identity and of creativity.

What is actually happening is that, once again, Europe is looking from the 'centre' of the world towards the 'periphery' as a possible source of its own revitalization and redemption. Umberto Melotti writes (*Il sud del mondo* 1991: 38): "I think it is legitimate to foresee that such a crisis of creativity can yet be overcome thanks to contact with other cultures, which are still imbued with the authentic values which our acquisitive industrial society disrupts or destroys." In an article on the exhibition Nikos Papastergiadis asks (*Third Text* 14, Spring 1991: 46-47): "Does this exhibition herald the arrival of a new set of figures on the cultural landscape: the emergence of the EEC and UNESCO funded ethnocrats?" Are we prepared for them? The exhibition was seen as a positive attempt to establish and improve contact among different cultures. The South African Association of Arts undertook to select artists from South Africa and to organise our participation, unaware and innocent of its complicity in relegating South African art to the periphery of contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> The new millennium is approaching. Global issues, such as the threat of planetary catastrophe, can no longer be based upon concepts of a First, Second and Third World. The iron curtain has disintegrated, the boundaries created and enforced for so long are on the point of collapse, the North-South shift has commenced and we

must demand equality in the debate and in the exchange. And we must get our own house in order.

Certain concepts are inextricably linked to the terminology of marginalisation and control typical of Eurocentric thought and to the ideology of keeping the Other out: ethnic, native, tribal, amateur, art versus craft, high versus low. Writing about the exhibition *The other story*<sup>5</sup> Kobena Mercer says (*Third Text* 10, Spring 1990: 66): "The high/low culture distinction is a class distinction because it concerns the institutional formation of those discourses and practices that valorise the dominant forms of cultural production by de-valorising the cultural expression of subordinate classes and collectives. The 'autonomy' of fine art and the 'aestheticism' of tradition (eg. art for art's sake) depended on the hierarchical and institutional separation of 'art' (in elite galleries and official museums) from the culture of everyday life, which was thus de-valued as the denigrated product of mass-culture or as the devalorised folk-culture of the urban masses." Recently, in South Africa, other words have been added in order to, where possible, retain and maintain existing structures: 'standards', 'quality', 'experience', 'expertise'. Marcia Tucker writes in *Different voices* (1991: 13): "The covertly racist equating of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity with the abandonment of standards, of 'quality' itself, seems to be a central issue in the museum community at present. But what is needed (and of course what is also so threatening) is a radical shift in understanding, a willingness to see, for instance, that mainstream ideas of quality are not absolute, but are fluid and variable. Such a shift would mean questioning, criticising, deconstructing and perhaps even dismantling the canon, which is based on the idea of universal and absolute judgements."

In a critique of Canadian art galleries, entitled 'Organizational apartheid' (*Third Text* 13, Winter 1990/91: 92), Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker lists reasons offered by directors of art museums for not modifying acquisitions and exhibitions policies: finance, priorities, expertise, tokenism, contradiction. It sounds all too familiar. Let us refrain from employing these and other arguments against change. We dare not ignore or sidestep the larger issues of change in our institutions or in our society, and those issues include race, class, gender, sexual preference, religion. Affirmative action is necessary before we can talk about equal opportunity, and reverse discrimination is not possible in South Africa. Change cannot simply be legislated – *there must be a will for change*.

I am fully aware that a critique of Eurocentrism and a call to mend our ways will be

resisted. Eurocentrism is concerned with what Amin (1989: 116) calls 'the comfortable classes of this world'. To call into question the dominant ideology, and particularly its economic dimension, is taboo. But it has to be done if we are to free ourselves completely from the shackles of Eurocentrism. We have to validate our culture in all its complexity and diversity – and on our own terms.

Our project is to inform ourselves and the public about the art and the material culture of Africa. The international boycott has come to an end. Are we now going to boycott the African continent?<sup>6</sup> White South Africans have a lot to learn about the humanistic imperatives and spirituality of African culture.

Writes ESKIA MPahlele (1991: 9): "Western humanism is a fiercely intellectual consciousness, whereas African humanism is essentially a spiritual experience tied up with social relationships". We must strive to come to terms with what and where we are: "If theoretical discourse is to be meaningful in modern Africa, it must promote within African society itself a theoretical debate of its own that is capable of developing its themes and problems autonomously instead of remaining a remote appendix to European theoretical and scientific debate" (*Third Text* 12, Autumn 1990: 81).

We must cherish and nurture our own. The imbalances in our society and in our history, as well as the need to rewrite South African art history, have been addressed through a number of exhibitions and publications in recent years.<sup>7</sup> The success of these and the progress which was made through them – progress which far exceeds any efforts made abroad – can be contributed to the fact that the dialectic of mainstream-periphery within the South African context is no longer determined by ready-made, imported culture. South African art is informed by, and separated from, contemporary mainstream Western art by specific cultural references, despite influences and allusions and areas of convergence and overlap.

We are in the process of dismantling old systems and replacing them with new ones. We must know and understand the power of our culture – it is our greatest asset. Colin Richards writes (*Third Text* 16/17, Autumn 1991: 130): "The power of culture in South Africa lies in the vital bond between symbol and substance, the imagined and the material. Ideals mix with blood. It is a volatile power. The sanitizing aesthetic distance so characteristic of Western aesthetic discourse does not have, in the African sun, the easy life it might promise elsewhere. The challenge for us is whether we can harvest this power according to needs other than those of the interrogator's room, the wounded crowd, the dusty backstreet, the isolated studio. Our task is to uncover our history

and recover our traditions. To straighten distortions, to make the negative positive. To do this with those who have been absent for so long – exiled, jailed, and marginalised. To do this in memory of those who cannot return".

The time for reconstruction and reconciliation, for repatriation and restitution has begun. There is a compelling need for museums to determine how far they are measuring up to their responsibilities. For, after fulfilling all our duties, and after contributing to learning in all its facets, we also have a responsibility to the national well-being, to fostering a national consciousness and to building a national culture. We must put the lies, the distortions and the prejudices of Eurocentrism behind us. No only are we fundamentally implicated in the lives of the Other, we are part of the Other. Let us therefore acknowledge, restore and celebrate our Otherness!

## NOTES

1. Albie Sachs delivered the Daantjie Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture at Rhodes University in August 1991. Entitled 'Black is beautiful, brown is beautiful, white is beautiful. Towards a rainbow culture in South Africa', it is unpublished.
2. The exhibition was on view at the South African National Gallery from June 17 to August 5.
3. The most important were:
  - 1984 – *'Primitivism' in twentieth century art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
  - 1989 – *Magiciens de la terre*, Centre Pompidou & La Villette, Paris.
  - 1989 – *Into the heart of Africa*, The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
  - 1990 – *The other story*, The Hayward Gallery, London.
  - 1990 – *Facing history: The Black image in American art 1710-1940*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
  - 1991 – *Il sud del mondo: L'altra arte contemporanea*, Galleria Civica d'Arte Contemporanea, Marsala.
  - 1991 – *Africa explores. 20th century African art*, Center for African Art, New York.
4. The artists selected were: Reggi Bardavid, Etienne de Kock, Lola Frost, Sharon Lutchan (living in London), Sfiso Ka Mkame, Johann Moolman, Tommy Motswai, Derrick Nxumalo, Francine Scialom-Greenblatt, Peter Schütz, Johannes Segogela, Sarah Thabane, Jeremy Wafer. Exhibited at the SAAA, Western Cape, May-June 1992.
5. *The other story* comprised works by Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain.
6. The 1992 Conference of the Southern African Museums Association was most encouraging in this regard. The organisers invited participants from Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe and their contributions were particularly pertinent to our situation, informative and enlightening.

7. These exhibitions include:  
*Tributaries* (curated by Ricky Burnett and seen in Johannesburg and Germany 1985-86);  
*The neglected tradition* (1988): *Images of wood*;  
*Aspects of the history of sculpture in 20th century South Africa* (1989); *Art and ambiguity* (1992) were shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery;  
*South African mail art – View from the inside* (1989) which travelled abroad;  
*Images of history* (1991) shown at the Grahamstown festival;  
*Art from South Africa* (1990-92), curated by David Elliot, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, the exhibition travelled through the United Kingdom and was shown at the South African National Gallery, June-August 1992;  
*Recent acquisitions* (1991-92); *Where we live – panels by the people of Cape Town* (1992); *Affinities* (1991-92), a display from the permanent collection which alters from time to time;  
*Art from South Africa* (1992) at the South African National Gallery main building; *The hand is the tool of the soul* at the Natale Labia Museum, Muizenberg; *Shelter* (1991) and *Cape Town – the forces that shape our lives* (1991-92) at the SANG Annexe Gallery; *The collection of W.F.P. Burton* (1992), University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries.

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