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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Modernities & our inner Africas

“You say the act of writing produces its own illegibility? That it goes nowhere, but cannot help going?”

“Well then: run, baby, run!”

— Blackface, *A Veil of Footsteps*

“... essentially, there is no one at home, but the stories we tell ourselves.”

— Guy de Lancey, *Light as Thought and the Binding Problem*

1

Let us agree that you do not know me. Allow me then to introduce myself and indicate what I try to do and what I know I cannot do.

To be brief: I’m an Afrikaans-speaking South African African who, by luck and of necessity, was also exposed to living and working elsewhere in the world. Add to this the observable fact that I am whitish—a historical, generic marker that has again become acutely polarising, even though it comes in all shades of pale. My home language, to an extent also my working tool, is French; my mother tongue is Afrikaans.

I’m neither literary scholar nor an academic although I have been employed on and off by tertiary education institutions both in this country and abroad. Do not, therefore, expect me to contribute to the very valuable analyses and insights into African literatures, if I may judge from the themes announced in the programme, that you will be sharing over the next days.

A trope of the past used to be: *it is impossible to see South Africa whole*. This is true of the entire continent. The absence of a smooth, all-encompassing, unitary vision of what it means to be African—despite attempts to root such a make-believe entity in the awareness that the concept ‘African’ signifies to be oppressed and exploited, and hence the repeated attempts to overcome these by positing a rebirth, to deal with history once and for all—that this ‘absence’ of vision is experienced as an obfuscation or a lack of purpose that can be ascribed, it is now argued, to the contamination by non-Africans. But could it not also imply that to be African is to be multiple and diverse? Why should we submit to being defined negatively? Why be outlined and inked in at all? By whom? Can it not be that the texture of our specificities and the

flow of our interactions, often rough, constitute our collective being? More: that we are doomed and privileged to keep on having to situate and describe ourselves? Absence brings about the movement of searching.

Or am I now extrapolating from a personal condition, chosen or imposed?

To attempt presenting a *whole* will be like lobbing off the limbs of observation and experience so as to fit into the bed of structured theory. What I intend to do here is to show rather than tell, to share with you some fragmented writing numbered in sections. The fragments are not ordered in a logical procession of thoughts. Rather, as in concrete poetry, I hope the arbitrary positioning may produce unexpected *correspondances*. Some entries may be amplifications, or afterthoughts, or footnotes. Because of the many quotes you may also take (or mistake) my contribution for a collage.

The title of my contribution is “Modernities & our inner Africas”.

The one tenet of the equation refers to the fact that we are influenced, perhaps even conditioned, by modernism; that this modernism in assumptions and expressions is not as universal as we take it to be but, partly at least, to be understood in the light of the history of thinking in various cultures, not to mention other historical processes, and what we are slowly evolving may well be an *African modernism* in significant ways different from other manifestations elsewhere of the same tendency although we share basic traits. I can only allude to the subject because it is vast and slippery (even if being confined to half-an-hour is a great incentive for condensing one’s meandering—and a good excuse for not succeeding!), and because it is evolving as we speak.

The other part of the title points at a project of the Gorée Institute that I’d like to share with you. This coming year—2017—we’ll be celebrating the 30th anniversary of the historic meeting in Dakar and on Gorée Island (we also travelled to Ouagadougou and Accra) between the ANC, then still illegal and in exile, and a number of influential South African whites, most of them Afrikaners, from ‘inside’. It is generally accepted that this Meeting, also called the Dakar Expedition, was instrumental in legitimizing the processes of negotiating a transition to a democratic South Africa and initiated the national Reconciliation—which, with hindsight, was flawed and left unfinished. Gorée Institute was born from the desire to find shared ground and to resolve the conflict among adversaries of the time.

2

To illustrate aspects of modernism I want to insert here some pointers. The first is from Catherine du Toit who obtained her Doctorate in Philosophy, entitled “Henri-Pierre Roché: A la recherche de l’unité perdu”, from the French Department of the University of Pretoria. Her thesis was built on the life and work of Henri-Pierre Roché. She quotes him: “La vie est faite de morceaux qui ne se joignent pas...” (Life consists of pieces that don’t fit). This highlights a salient attribute: that modernism in Europe, emerging from the falling apart of dominant dogmas and orthodoxies, religious or

otherwise, and the break-up of state hegemonies, made public life *secular* to a large extent and gave primacy to the individual consciousness—at least as expressed in literature and through the visual arts. It brought about an increased awareness of the matter and the import of the material of your craft, with which you are in a dialectical relationship: words, images, sounds... As Arnold Schönberg, the modernist composer, wrote to his friend Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian painter, cited by Catherine du Toit: “Art belongs to the subconscious. You have to express yourself—not your tastes or education or intelligence, that which you have been taught to know. None of these acquired possibilities—but the inborn, instinctive qualities.” Or, as expressed by Edward Said in writing about Theodor Adorno whose entire career, Said says, “skirted and fought the dangers of fascism, communism, and Western mass-consumerism. [...] For him life was at its most false in the aggregate—the whole is always the untrue, he once said—and this, he continued, placed an even greater premium on subjectivity, on the individual’s consciousness, on what could not be regimented in the totally administered society.”

But the need for structural and organic interaction with the environment, your readers, maybe even with the people or the instances that govern our lives, or with your memory or moral imagination or better instincts—this need remains. Hannah Arendt notes in her, *The Life of the Mind*:

Nothing could appear, the word ‘appearance’ would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist—living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize and react to—in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise—what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception. In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into nowhere, *Being and Appearing* coincide... Nothing and nobody exist in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody... *Plurality is the law of the earth.* (My emphasis)

One should read this together with the opening remarks of Susan Sontag in her lecture on Nadine Gordimer, titled, “At the same time: the novelist and moral reasoning”, later included in the posthumous collection, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*: “I’m often asked (she says) if there is something I think writers ‘ought’ to do, and recently in an interview I heard myself say: ‘Several things. Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world.’”

3

Have we abandoned the position that writing reflects reality? Do we still believe the narrative of novel-making may help constitute the shaping of norms and values or even just the understanding of our lives and the world? Are other discourses not

more illustrative of our condition, do they not more urgently influence the ways we approach our surroundings, fashion it, leave it? I'm referring to the exercise of power, the importance of economic systems, the ritualisation of fear and ignorance and intolerance and greed, to the herd instinct of migration?

Do we really gain much from exploring life as we observe and experience it? Do the scaffolding and surfacing through writing achieve anything more than satisfying a dumb but, it would seem, collectively experienced need to allay our apprehensions by imagining life as the making of virtual worlds? Is the money lender not more influential than the writer?

One could hold that all of the above are articulated. But the forces and surges defining our lives now mostly live *outside writing*. Writing no longer mediates the world. It used to be that we could pretend to engage with a social consciousness spanning the illusion of generations, embodying the strive for freedom and dignity—even if splintered into a multiplicity of individuated voices.

Now, even when polyphonous—are we not indulging in a monologue, intensely aware of the materiality of our means—language—and as intensely immersed in the existential consciousness of the individual? What we do at best is to project fractured options of telling what it is like for *this* individual to be alive in *this* matter, *this* tongue, and during these tumultuous times. Often, it would seem the writer excruciatingly reaches for a lost certainty (some would say 'safety') through the manifestations and interruptions of uncertainty.

In the North writing appears to have lost that imagination which was fed by and sometimes constituted the skin of the world we inhabit. Writers have forfeited the folly of daring, the hubris to attempt reflecting or recasting the outside in one wide sweep. We no longer see the ambition of a John Steinbeck at work. Or that of a Joseph Conrad or a Balzac, a Malcolm Lowry or a Marquez.

This holds for Africa as well. Where are the attempts at a total vision of an epoch or a topography? Where are the contemporary successors to Naguib Mahfouz, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer? It is as if we shy away from Utopia as much perhaps as we avert our eyes from Hell in all its gaudy facets, as in the horrors painted by someone like the medieval Dutch painter, Hieronymous Bosch.

4

One writes, and in the process of doing so, as the matter densifies, one discovers *what* it is that you're writing about or *for*. Inevitably, it would have been a trip recognizing and exploring the environment, but also a process of *making* it. Seeing is making. Even when you're shortsighted. The words are eyes, the sentences the interpretations of what comes into being in the process of seeing.

Is any of this new? Or are you but enacting the gestures of "I cannot go on, I must go on"?

Is it that one can no longer bear to continue imagining because to do so would be to re-enter the world (or the night) of contradictions, which was always there: a dichotomy between the voyage of uncovering consciousness and the inadequacies of the means used (words, images) that will solidify to become opaque like skins (cataracts) darkening sight? To uncover the existent is to be faced by the unacceptable and by your limitations in bearing witness.

You write landscapes, escapes, I-scapes—and all of these finally inkscapes.

5

A little more than a week ago I had the dubious pleasure of listening to V. S. Naipaul being interviewed in public, painstakingly so, by a young aspiring writer in Obidos, Portugal during the *Folio* cultural festival. It was distressing to watch the old Minotaur having to defend himself, clinging to the thread of writing as justification for *the suffering of having seen* (these were his words), confined to a wheelchair that might as well have been his sanctuary in the labyrinth; watched over (or trapped) by his entourage. But still lowering his hump to thrust horns at the shadows, real or imagined, of the cape that we may see as the illusion of life (or is it death?) always just out of reach. At one point the young interviewer asked him whether he had the impression of leaving the world a better place than he'd found it. He tossed the question aside; he'd already deflected a question on Utopia or the need for utopias as being of no concern and now reduced the reason for his existence to the deontology of, "I write and I write and I write, and so on." In my mind I completed the echo: *I write writing*. He also claimed he never rewrites, but I didn't believe him. We all do because we dream with eyes wide open.

"It is what I do," Naipaul said. "It is a job. My job is to finish books, you know."

His wife, present as one of the Guardians of the Wheelchair or Keepers of the Cave (to prevent him from escaping?), then took over to recount how, on a recent visit to Cameroon, people who'd detested his African books, particularly *A Bend in the River*, came up to shake his hand as a prophet. "You foresaw it all happening, you saw the corpses floating down the river." (The reference was of course to the Rwanda genocide.) She told of how her husband always had *to see for himself*: to fly in a helicopter over the jungle could not replace the suffering of going down to *see*. And how one should not listen to one's own ideas. This workman-like attitude, she says her husband told her, constitutes the difference between a great writer and a hack. Her husband was a great writer to thus foretell the existing.

She might have added that writing brings to the surface—or *is* the surface, one can say the river—of what has always been there, that this carries with it a responsibility. How accountable are we for the pictures, inevitably coloured by personal experiences and limitations and prejudices, that we hold up to the reader? 'Great writing', however defined, has the capacity of interacting with what's to come by engaging

with the material of consciousness. Scenarios are built in the original sense: stories, sequences, motivations put together (imagined), which somehow go to the heart of the enduring human madness just under the surface of our collective existence. Imagination is an intense awareness of who and what we are. And consciousness (one could say conscience) is the *matter* of imagination.

Perhaps all things have been since all time. One is using the known to forge a way to making the unknown known, or to create the pretence at predictability. And thereby, of agency.

And yet here I am; I can do no less. Silence may be a resolution, a way of becoming dissolved in the flow of awareness, ultimately a corpse in the water. Even if there can be no absolute silence, and thus no absolutism in silence. For it continues anyway as the vibration of after-sound.

To breathe is to be. Maybe past and future are the breath of the present dreaming. And to be is to dream. You objectify the means to your awareness: the I as *eye*. You are terrified of closing the eye.

Imre Kertész in his flow of consciousness text, a raging argument with himself about the purpose of being—it is called *Kaddish for an unborn child*—says one must by all means continue *to do*. If one were to cease doing one would have *to be* and he does not know what that state would be like (when *that* becomes *this*), but the eventuality scares him.

The *word* is a coming into being of the *world*, a bifurcation and thereby a tension. Hope springs eternal. What is modernity if not an expanding experience of the rhythms of existence, the awareness of and therefore the responsibility for the world in all its manifestations ?

6

One shudders at the enforcement of mob thinking that seems to be the order of the day in this country. Of course, it is not 'thinking' and it is most certainly not about decolonizing the mind. It is painful to witness the contradictions evident in the posturing of spokespersons and in the campaigns they try to launch. First contradiction: to destroy the places of learning, the depositories of knowledge and the expressions of awareness or of processes of creativity that would help us free ourselves—ostensibly because they are not 'African' enough.

We proceed from a condition of being hybrid cultural products—the result of past acculturation and the refraction of an ongoing process where we not only share the same consumerist desires and bourgeois values, but probably also similar dreams of a future where our vitality and potential and discrete contributions may come to fruition for the well-being and the development of the people. Yet, there is a pretence that it is possible to do away with the complications of the parts striving for a whole. Of what good will it be to get rid of the whites if the dominant modes

we are left with, including the white language of imperialism, remain unchanged? As if the pristine Utopia supposed to have existed in the past, that we wish to see reborn and pure, will be anything else but a clone of the present dispensation come to mock our dreams!

We'd be well advised to remember that the 'harmony' we wish to establish or impose—posited on the exclusion of those we consider to be 'foreigners'—actually translates as perpetual *dynamic change*. (Another wisdom postulates that *one ought to be one with what already exists*: only active identification will close the gap between the desire for change and a consciousness of the open-ended process of which we are both the outcome and the protagonists.)

7

The reasons for the dead-end street littered with soiled dreams and spent teargas cannisters that we find ourselves in, are the moral bankruptcy and the unbridled gluttony and greed for patronage and power of the erstwhile liberation movement kidnapping the state to share the loot with a system of exploitation they—we!—were mandated to replace.

Free education ought to be a given in a development state. But it implies that the viability of the concept of 'university'—a Western construct that also embodies the universal need of being prepared and equipped for full citizenship—must be revisited. *Entitlement is not a revolutionary stance*.

The students are barking up the wrong tree. Barking in unison may make the news—sicked on by lecturers wallowing in the luxury of guilt hoping to vicariously assuage their romantic wet dream of escaping the human condition and their responsibilities by sucking up a 'revolution' where 'others' will man the barricades, and appeased by spineless and thoughtless administrative authorities. But neither the whipping up of mass hysteria nor the nostalgia of closet activists or the acquiescence of those who suddenly forgot their history will confer legitimacy on the protest.

It will be disastrous if we should, when struggling for a transformation toward greater social and economic justice, take refuge in nationalism—often nothing more than thinly disguised tribalism—as the first dance of the scoundrel and the alienated. There are only too many examples of this "forward flight" in Africa. Idi Amin tried to 'de-Asianize' Uganda; Mobutu Sese Soku wanted to make of 'Zaire' an 'authentic' African state...

We must not ignore the little historical memory we still have despite the narcissism of instant gratification in constant communication that obliterates whatever sense we may have had of the linkages between cause and effect. For the sake of all of us, we dare not forget the horrors wreaked by Hitler's Storm Troopers when they, similarly, torched the 'parasite culture'—and once you burn books and paintings, why not people? Or the regime of terror brought about by the so-called revolution-

ary fundamentalism and nihilism of the Red Guards in China, or the barbarism of Pol Pot's populism that led inevitably to the physical elimination of all independent and reason-based contestation (in fact, all those who wore glasses, since they were considered to be of the stinking ninth category of intellectuals—one could say, the "clever blacks" of their time). Or, closer to home, the terror imposed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, who probably hold that all book knowledge is 'impure' because it can be construed as the power food of colonizers.

The phenomenon is not new. Elias Canetti during the 'thirties of the previous century already warned against the fascism inherent to mass-thinking in the Europe of his time. "Eat shit: a thousand flies can't be wrong!" We know about the totalitarianisms that followed. Blind obedience to the One-Thought idol leads us to the social pathology of fanatically religious extremists blowing themselves up for Paradise—and to child soldiers with Kalashnikovs, pathetically garbed in dirty wedding gowns on the streets of Freetown during the civil war there, drugged to believe they cannot die.

Is this not the self-annihilation of those who feel they have been betrayed?

8

Our acceptance and exploration of the many faces of Africanism need not be a cause for fatalism. Africa bears the seed of vigorous resistance and of alternative creative thinking. In South Africa, for example, the Big Indaba about the nature and the purpose of tertiary education institutions, about the function of intellectual development and research and analysis conditioned by *this* topography and by *these* histories, can still take place.

In doing so, and in the light of the call for the Africanisation of universities in contents and appearance, we should lift our noses above the horizon of victimhood and ask where the once prestigious universities in Africa are now and what their prospects are. We should then listen to the considerations and aspirations of people who study or teach there, or who studied and once taught there.

The acrimony and confusion people here seem to experience at the present moment can perhaps be partly explained by a true need and desire to be actively involved with the magnificent challenges and exciting possibilities facing the continent, the creative thinking and potential for ethical imagination that can be valorized and developed - not only because these are essential contributions to bring about a more just and more decent future so that young people particularly may want to stay and invest their energies, but as well so as not to forfeit the freedoms already gained for which so much was sacrificed.

We need—and we have it in us—to unlock the richness of *pluralism, critical thinking, true accountability*, an exploration of the veritable epistemology encapsulated in each one of our mother tongues, the flesh of living and dreaming that make us part of the past and the future and without which we'll be formatted stutterers with mouths and minds shaped by the clichés of parrot wisdom.

It may be difficult to entertain the idea that Pan-Africanism is *not* synonymous with blackness, that we therefore cannot simplify our stories to some homogenisation that would provide, theoretically, a national cohesion. It is, similarly, complex to keep in mind that Africa is a vast mosaic of cultures and languages drawing its strength exactly from diversity (the works of Assia Djebar and Yvonne Vera and Chimamande Adiche attest to this)—and, at the same time, that the communal, the common sense of a shared future, of being preyed upon by the outside world (the North still, and now also China)—that this history shaped us collectively and will continue to do so.

Let me contrast two approaches, which I trust we can keep in harmony. (But keep in mind also that ‘harmony’ is ‘movement’!)

The first position is that of Edward Said from an essay he wrote about Yeats and Decolonization:

Let us look again at [...] the literature of anti-imperialist resistance. If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical element. Imperialism [I’m tempted to add: *as the avatar of colonialism*] after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination.

A shading of Said’s position will come, at least implicitly, from Manthia Diawara, an essayist from Mali and a fervent advocate for African modernism, and Edouard Glissant, poet and nomadic thinker from Martinique. Diawara published an extensive interview with Glissant, known as “Conversation with Edouard Glissant aboard the Queen Mary II”, when the latter had to cross the Atlantic by ship because of ill health. Glissant:

Departure is the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words [...] every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity [...] One of Africa’s vocations is to be a kind of foundational Unity which develops and transforms itself into a Diversity.

And when Diawara asks whether we’re arriving somewhere, Glissant says:

For me, the arrival is the moment where all the components of humanity—not just the African ones—consent to the idea that it is possible to be one and multiple at the same time ; that you can be yourself and the Other; that you can be the Same and the Different. When that battle [...] is won, a great many accidents in human history [...] will be abolished.

Could it be that the characteristics and prerequisites of the modernity we speak of are quite universal, underpinning our aptitude for survival and competing in the contemporary environment? And among these: an adequate education, a functioning democracy, a paid job, dependence on Chinese fabricated consumer goods and appliances?

What are the present day struggles about?

I'd suggest they are as much about the past as they are about the present and the future.

The *past*: The uses and abuses of memory, the importance accorded a critical assessment and valorisation of history within the ambit of historical consciousness, if possible. That is where our values and the forms and possibilities (or restrictions) of our means of expression are sedimented.

The *present*: Where contest and the extent of differentiation lie within the scope of the responsibility we're willing to take for one another—be it due to cultural codes, custom, or moral and religious convictions. This where our values come into operation.

The *future*: The extent to which we are willing and prepared to re-invent our relationship to the world and to the notion of differences, to imagine an Africa of self-sustainability given its richness of human potential, to risk a *dépassement de soi* (a going beyond self)—recklessly, if needs be.

Are we willing to reach for true transformation, which will change all of us in a profound repositioning not only premised on entitlement, the settling of scores, demographic repartition, pragmatism, or national cohesion?

The 'good', it is said—competence, conformism, approval of the peers—is the enemy of the 'great'. Under 'great' I'd understand in this instance the inevitability of total rupture, of discomfort, dissidence and even abnormality.

The present-future is where the viability of our values are tested against the capacity we have for breaking through to the acceptance of our humanness (or of life in all its forms) posited on ongoing change, perhaps ultimately to challenge the void. Are we capable of thinking—imagining, creating, making being—beyond the glib validation of political correctness? Can we break free of self-centredness and the survivalist obduracy of our mediocrity as consumers of shallow thinking: the tyranny of the profit motive where faceless administrators try to turn our universities into business enterprises instead of protecting the groves where new generations can be prepared for participative and responsible citizenship and the critical assessment of power?

Grabbing hold of life as the one fire against the eternity of not knowing is a question of allowing ourselves to *imagine*. When we wake up to the disappointment that we no longer experience literature as essential, as a surprise or a revelation, it is not because of jaded senses, but because we have lost the ambition to bring down the

moon, to effect justice in our time, to beard the woman in us, to *be* the Other, to be the dogheaded human who promotes the chaos and the radical changes of harmony from which all creation originate. We lost our outsize, maybe mad dreams. We no longer want to be free—only independent and preferably linked to facebook.

What happened to the spaces opened up for us by—again to name eclectically—James Joyce, Robert Musil, Aimé Césaire, or N.P. van Wyk Louw?

It may well be true that a secular society only has itself and its complicated history of coming into being as reference. But even so, I believe that we should dare to imagine. That we can put our writing out there as pebbles for the birds who will show us the way back to the pleasure houses of the gods or the sacred sanctuaries of the ancestors. (It may well be the same place.)

11

Let me conclude these rambling thoughts that go nowhere. (Writing, as you would have noticed, only too often, takes one there.)

We need to be aware of the theories and the practices of other modernities. Among the attributes I tried to allude to here, are—not exhaustively and in no hierarchical order (it is too late to try and put my house in order):

- A shattering of the pretence at seeing the world/fate/sense *whole*;
- The fragmentation of discourses;
- An intensification of awareness of the means and material at one's disposal, and also that these are defined by limits, scars, approximations;
- A deepening of the dichotomy inside/outside, the dance with shadows, oscillation, movement and hence nomadism ("one doesn't dance with one's feet, but with the head and the heart", the flamenco dancer, Antonia Mercé says);
- The gods of old now being distant family speaking foreign tongues—the drunken uncles, the fat aunts;
- A hollowing out of our humanity.

From Africa, as well, we must look at these forms of creativity manifest in modernism if we wish to break the sterile cycles of fatalism, impunity, dependence, and the corruption of victimhood. But our modernity will be grounded in what we share and play with: the magic of memory; eating from the *shared* bowl of oral tales told to explain the coming about of mankind, to placate the spirits, to deride the gods, to track the trickster god who stole our stories.

These distinct qualities ought to be valorised and promoted. We need substance and not just motions of lofty intentions. We should not have to play up to the foreign paymaster. But *with responsibility comes depth and texture*. I believe we can learn and integrate and adapt the lessons whilst counteracting the alienation of following (and then resenting) norms embodying attitudes established elsewhere.

That is how and why—if you'll tolerate me a little longer—we dream from the ancient slave island of Gorée, within the ambit of our project of creativity and taking ownership of our dreams, called *Imagine Africa*.

More specifically, we'd like to mediate a concerted exploration of *Our inner Africas*: to weave the threads of literary research and creativity into a cloak that we can proudly wear in the salons and auditoriums and bookstores, on the stages and the screens of the world. It will have sewn to the inner lining the reminder of the trickster god: that *we do what we do to make mankind live up to the best we have in us, and not just to submit to the world*.

Admittedly, all of this was done long before our time, and impressively so, by Arab travellers and merchants of ancient lore to European explorers all the way to novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sony Lab'ou Tansi and Bessy Head and many more. But we're convinced that we have to try and foster the conditions that would allow for African writers *to continue writing Africa*, to again uncover the topography of our concerns and our aspirations. This they will do as observers and protagonists, historians or sociologists or simply as storytellers... of the splendor and the vigour, the wickedness and clamour and knack for survival in our megacities to the depths of our rural areas, from our wars and our cruelty and our poverty and our superstitions to our wedding feasts and our sharing and our diasporas.

Our inner Africas. The project, coordinated by the Gorée Institute and more specifically by the Pirogue Collective—the grouping which initiates festivals and literary caravans and publications and translations—will consist of conceiving of the possibilities and conditions for fifteen writers (to start with) to each have the time and support and leisure to do the book she or he has always dreamt of writing. Be it novel or travel journal or memoir. This should happen over a two-year period. The authors may wish to do so while travelling, or working from another country, or from the facilities offered by writers' residencies. Or just to stay home and explore the known.

Ideally, the process ought to be facilitated and punctuated by creative writing workshops—for the participants to meet, to reflect, to exchange experiences, and to impart some of all of the above to younger writers.

The intention will be to have the works published and made available and distributed not just in one or two international languages, but as well in the major languages of Africa. The books will be made known and grouped over a short period in order to achieve maximum impact. And all of it in collaboration with established publishers who may well wish to integrate the works as a Collection. But it should also be with the aim to promote the distribution of works in African languages, and thus to strengthen African publishing ventures.

I end with a quote from Senga Nengudi, an African-American artist who talks about her many forms of expression—among them writing, dancing and sculpting, and each time, like a chameleon, taking on a new ‘identity’:

The powers that be don’t get it—even today—that when you expose full histories of things, everybody is richer for it. I guess it’s a power thing. I don’t know why that hasn’t gotten through. When they talk about Black studies, Asian studies, people think it’s only a course for that ethnicity. But we’re all part of the same tapestry. It’s important that we know as much as we can know, and be exposed to as much as possible, and be motivated, inspired, and show interest in something that’s beyond our own personal history.

Note

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