

MANGANYI'S LOOKING THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

(Looking through the Keyhole: N. Chabani Manganyi
(Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981))

Reviewed by J. S. Cumpsty

Every now and again one reads a book dealing with themes central in one's own interest by an author in a different, albeit cognate field, and is greatly enlivened by the experience. Such was my experience in reading this collection of essays by Professor Manganyi.

The sub-title — Dissenting Essays on the Black Experience — in many ways does less than justice to the universal applicability of Manganyi's thinking and the way in which, while remaining wholly committed to the black experience in general and the black South African experience in particular, he has so climbed above this as to be able to discuss the problems at the level of the absurdities present in humanity's existential situation and in the symbols through which men seek to construct their ontologies. It is significant that I read the greater part of the book in Israel while researching changes in Jewish religious symbolism and found it so relevant to that situation that I became quite unreasonably impatient when the author returned to discuss and protest specific aspects of the South African black experience.

The need for the student of a situation to be committed to it and the need for one caught in a situation to climb above it in his thinking are constant themes of this collection. We are told that to know the truth of one's own situation is not yet to be a philosopher.

There are so many particular themes in this collection, responsible architecture, black housing, migrant workers, Africanization of the universities, the role of the social sciences in social change, the roots of polarity in white ontology, that one is constantly surprised by the way in which the essays cohere, but they do so because the significance of the symbolic is never far from the centre of the author's concern and central to his interest in the symbolic is what he calls the paradox of culture and identity. The symbolic identity that the individual inherits and/or creates for himself is achieved by marking himself off from other individuals in his culture and yet is dependent upon his belonging to that culture and sharing in its symbols. Likewise the shared symbolic identity of a community depends upon its ability to distinguish itself from other communities and yet also on being a part of the wider reality comprised of itself and those other communities. If the lines of demarcation are too firmly drawn the reality of the total frame of reference in which they are drawn and from which they

gain their significance diminishes in the ensuing fragmentation.

From such a central concern all manner of questions arise and the book explores many of them. The interview with Ezekiel Mphahlele not only sets the scene of the collected essays in South African black experience but also makes plain that however unsatisfactory we may judge the context and quality of our upbringing to have been, therein lie our roots. We may go on from thence, but to deny them or have them denied for us would involve the most traumatic unselfing.

Manganyi then explores the role of the writer in the creation and development of appropriate symbols in a developing community and the fruits of inhibiting such imagination. He explores in terms of his own discipline of psychology the costs in mental health of the clash of cultures, the need for the western form of the discipline to learn from the African experience and the possibility of a therapeutic culture.

The significance for black identity of migrant employment, the qualities of private and public space and of tertiary education, are dealt with specifically as is the black response to the situation.

While the polarity in white ontology is undeniable and evidence of its outworking is to be seen all around us, I find the explanation of its roots and indeed its evaluation in the essay "The Body-for-Others" less than convincing. In the entire book it is only in the first part of this essay that the logic of the discussion might not be readily discernible to the non-specialist reader.

Just as this collection is not limited to black experience, so it is not limited to dissent. Throughout there are positive and specific suggestions for improving the situation but beyond this, the level at which the problems are dealt with encourages every one of us to climb out of our entrenched positions.

I have chosen to review this book in terms of the theme which seems to me to hold it together; there are however many gems of particular insights scattered throughout and the whole is eminently readable. □