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They Were NOT Here before Columbus: Afrocentric Hyperdiffusionism in the 1990s

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Abstract. This essay responds to a theory that has been aggressively promoted as fact by an influential group of Afrocentrists in recent years—that New World civilizations were created or were influenced by African visitors at key points in the centuries that preceded the European discovery of the Americas. As discussed in this essay, the theory is shown to have no support in the evidence that has been analyzed by specialists in various fields. The essay focuses on the methodological approaches employed by Afrocentrists in their study of linguistics, terracotta figurines, technological development, and monumental sculpture. A concluding section briefly discusses the repercussions of this theory on ethnic relations in schools, on college campuses, and in North American society as a whole.

With increased frequency in recent years, students have asked college instructors and schoolteachers to comment on the validity of theories that claim that the ancient Egyptians, Nubians, and other “Black” Africans came to the Americas long before Columbus. At the same time, students have also asked whether there is any truth to the claim that the ancient Egyptians and Nubians might have influenced or might have created the first “civilizations” to emerge in the Americas. Invariably, the response to these questions has been vague or contradictory. Some teachers and college instructors have summarily dismissed such ideas as pure speculation not worthy of discussion, while others (probably the majority) have tried to evade the issue entirely by pleading ignorance or by urging their students to investigate the matter further. It is clear, however, that a considerable number of students are baffled by such tentative, elusive, or dismissive responses. For example, students at the college level have noted that ideas with regard to an alleged pre-Columbian contact between Africa and the

Americas have become an important part of the discourse in quite a number of introductory Africana or Black studies courses. At the same time, an increasing number of older college students of Native American or Latino background have acknowledged that their children are being exposed to such ideas in schools that have adopted the so-called Afrocentric approach to the study of human development. It should also be noted that many of these same individuals have already complained that such ideas are being presented as fact in a preachy and aggressive manner, and that they seem to minimize or even to appropriate the cultural contributions of Native Americans.

It should be understood that the spread of these ideas is rooted, in part, in the failure of academia to discuss this issue in a comprehensive and thorough manner. A number of professional scholars have made a brief or occasional reference to the claim that "Black" Africans came to the Americas in the pre-Columbian period (see, for example, Daniel 1977; Feder 1990: 75-77; Fingerhut 1989: 81-90; Kelley 1995; Reader's Digest 1986: 10-21; Sabloff 1989: 134-44; Williams 1991: 251-54, among others). The assessments presented by these scholars have ranged from skeptical tolerance to a total perfunctory rejection of such claims.¹ It must be understood, however, that many students, teachers, and other interested persons have not been satisfied with these critiques thus far. College students in general and African American students, in particular, have not been impressed by the abbreviated assessments that have been published in response to what amounts to a growing body of work by mostly African American writers that now includes two books, a book length collection of essays, numerous articles published in non-refereed journals and popular magazines, and a considerable number of endorsements from both Afrocentric and non-Afrocentric scholars.² It also has to be understood that African American students are clearly suspicious of an academic establishment that, in their view, has "neglected" or "distorted" the history of Africa and the African diaspora for the greater part of this century. This essay, as a result, will attempt to address the issues that have been articulated by students, concerned educators, and other interested persons with regard to the validity of these contact scenarios and the failure of the academic establishment to address them in a thorough or systematic manner.

The essay will begin with a brief review of the theory that the ancient Egyptians, Nubians, and other "Black" Africans came to the Americas at various times before the 1490s and established or helped to establish its first civilizations. This section will review the origins and evolution of this concept and will be followed by a second section that will discuss the assumptions and methodological approaches used by its principal advo-

cates. Subsequent sections will focus on several specific methodological techniques employed by advocates of this theory, such as the approach to linguistics, technology, the study of terracotta figurines, and the evaluation of monumental sculpture. A concluding section will discuss the increased popularity of these ideas, and the implications of this for the future of pedagogy and ethnic relations in North American society.³

Speculation that “Black” Africans first came to the Americas long before Columbus probably began in 1862 with the discovery of a carved colossal stone head that appeared to have the idealized classic features associated with African “Negroes” (specifically, a broad fleshy round nose and thick lips). In the years that followed, speculation continued as other examples of what later became known as Olmec art were uncovered by antiquarians and archeologists. In the early part of the twentieth century, Leo Wiener, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Harvard University, wrote a three-volume work entitled *Africa and the Discovery of America* (1920–1922), which claimed that Arabized “Black” West Africans came to the Americas in the centuries before Columbus and influenced the civilizations of Mexico. Using the historical, literary, linguistic, and pseudolinguistic analysis that was popular at that time, Wiener developed his ideas further with the publication of *Maya and Mexican Origins* (1926), which claimed that both Nahuatl and Maya were connected to the medieval Mande languages of West Africa. These works, along with the discovery of other colossal stone heads with alleged “Negroid” features, fueled the speculation further. European, Anglo-American, and African American scholars and writers made reference to these ideas and discoveries in their writings,⁴ but Leo Wiener’s ideas were quickly rejected and no concrete evidence ever turned up that demonstrated an African presence in the Americas prior to the 1490s.⁵ By the late 1950s and early 1960s, most scholars had concluded that the alleged “Negroid” features in Olmec “portrait” sculpture were, in fact, characteristic of the Native Americans that produced them. However, a number of African American writers were not quite convinced of this and kept the theory alive.⁶ For example, Harold Lawrence, a disciple of J. A. Rogers (see note 3), wrote an article entitled “African Explorers in the New World,” which appeared in *The Crisis* magazine in 1962. This essay was followed by several others that were written by Legrand Clegg, a Los Angeles-area lawyer and college instructor, and published during the heyday of the “Black nationalist movement” from the late 1960s to the late 1970s (see Clegg 1969, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1976–77). However, the most important and influential work on this subject was to be written by Ivan Van Sertima, who published his book *They Came before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* in 1976.⁷

Grounding his assertions on the concepts advanced by Leo Wiener and Alexander Von Wuthenau, a German art historian living in Mexico,⁸ Van Sertima claimed that the Nubian rulers of ancient Egypt's twenty-fifth dynasty organized an expedition (ca. 705–664 B.C.) that sailed across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, where they allegedly came into contact with the friendly, but inferior Olmecs. According to Van Sertima, the Olmecs willingly accepted the Nubian leaders of this expedition as their rulers ("Black warrior dynasts"), and these individuals, in turn, created or influenced the creation of the Olmec civilization, which also inspired all the other civilizations that followed. In Van Sertima's original hypothesis, the Nubians became the prototypes for the Olmec stone heads with their alleged "Negroid" features and "Ethiopian braids." They also presumably introduced a large number of ideological and technological innovations and practices, such as mummification, weaving, cire-perdue metallurgy, the use of Egyptian-style battle helmets, Egypto-Nubian religious rituals, the "Pharaonic cap" and "double crown," the symbolic use of purple murex dye, and the building of Egyptian-style pyramids and ceremonial centers, which, in turn, had a profound influence on the future of Mesoamerican economics, religion, mythology, and concepts of government (Van Sertima 1976).

Van Sertima also claimed that "Black Africans" organized other voyages to the Americas in the centuries that followed the first alleged contact in the seventh century B.C. According to Van Sertima, the most important of these voyages was the expedition organized by Abu-Bakari II, the West African emperor of Mali, who allegedly sailed to the Gulf coast of Mexico with a large fleet of ships in A.D. 1311. Following the example established in his Egypto-Nubian/Olmec hypothesis, Van Sertima claimed that the peoples of fourteenth-century Mesoamerica, such as the Mixtecs and the early Aztecs, were profoundly influenced by Abu Bakari and his agents in the areas of technology, economics, religion, and the arts. He also claimed that Black Africans had a profound influence on other indigenous groups in North America, the Caribbean, and South America at various times between the seventh century B.C. and the late fifteenth century A.D. In the case of South America, there is the claim that Black Africans influenced or came into contact with the major complex societies of that continent, such as the Chavin civilization, Tiahuanaco, the Chimú, and the Incas (Van Sertima 1976: 75, 104, 155, 157–58, 160, 166, 167, 169, 195, 196–97, 199–200).⁹ Thus, the reader is left with the impression that all or most of the complex societies in the Americas were created or in some way influenced by African "Blacks," and that Native Americans were incapable of creating any civilizations or complex societies on their own.

In the years since the publication of *They Came before Columbus*, Van

Sertima has reluctantly modified his overall thesis to some degree. For example, in the early 1980s, he pushed back the date for the first alleged African voyage to “948 or circa 1000 B.C.” in a desperate but inadequate attempt to account for the revised dates that were established for the origins of Olmec civilization (ca. 1200 B.C.) by Michael Coe and Richard Diehl (Van Sertima 1992c [1983]: 60–61, 6, 69; Coe and Diehl 1980).¹⁰ Later, in the early 1990s, he modified his position further by emphasizing the presumed importance of the “Black-Egyptian” in Pharaonic society, and by claiming that “the black African . . . played a dominant role in the Old World at either end of the dating equation, be it 1200 B.C. or 700 B.C.” (Van Sertima 1992b: 38–39; 1995: 74, 76).¹¹

Van Sertima has also received the enthusiastic backing of a number of devoted acolytes and supporters. These individuals include Wayne Chandler, Joan Covey, Keith Jordon, Beatrice Lumpkin, and Runoko Rashidi, among others. In the late 1980s, they wrote a number of essays that attempted to support or to reinforce all of Van Sertima’s most prominent ideas.¹² However, there were other writers who took Van Sertima’s diffusionist and hegemonic tendencies to even greater lengths. For example, Clyde Ahmad Winters, in an article that appeared in the *Black Collegian* during the early 1980s and was largely based on Van Sertima’s work, said the following:

The first civilization to appear in America, called the Olmec culture was founded by Africans. . . . The Olmecs spoke one of the Mande languages. . . . The Olmec script had its origin in the Western Sahara. . . . In addition to teaching the Indians how to grow crops, the (African) Olmecs also taught them how to make calendars and build step pyramids. . . . The original Maya were probably Africans. . . . The Aztecs, Zapotecs, Toltecs and Maya usually occupied urban centers built by Africans, or Afro-Indians. Once the Indians were bound to African colonists for trade goods which they themselves could not produce, they settled in the urban centers where they learned architecture, writing, science and technology from African technicians. As a result, the technology being brought to the Amerindians was of African origin. (Winters 1981–82)

Basic Methodological Problems

1. Chronologies and Cultural Sequences

The most problematical aspect of Van Sertima’s arguments is his total disregard for time and cultural sequences. For example, Van Sertima proposes the diffusion of cultural traits from the ancient Nile Valley civilizations to

Mesoamerica (ca. 1200 or 680 B.C.) and uses as evidence the existence of Mesoamerican traits that are chronologically hundreds if not thousands of years later without demonstrating how these traits were present in Mesoamerica in the intervening time periods. In one case, Van Sertima argues that the Olmecs built smooth-sided or stepped pyramids at La Venta soon after the alleged arrival of the Egypto-Nubian visitors in Mesoamerica (1976: 132, 155–56; 1992a: 12; 1992b: 48; 1992c [1983]: 76–79; 1995: 87–89). Van Sertima, however, does not explain why the Egypto-Nubians would transmit the idea of pyramid building to the Olmecs when such structures (large pyramids) were no longer built in Egypt during the period 1200 or 680 B.C. According to Edwards (1985), Fakhry (1961), and others, the last Egyptian stepped pyramid was built around 2630 B.C. and the last large, smooth, triangular-sided pyramid was built for Pharaoh Khenjefer in the early eighteenth century B.C. (ca. 1777 B.C.). In 1200 B.C., the Egyptians either buried their dead in secret, as was the case with all the pharaohs of the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties, or they constructed small tombs that might have incorporated small symbolic “pointy” pyramids into their overall design (Edwards 1985: 225–30, 232–34; Fakhry 1961: 251–53).

Curiously, Van Sertima hardly discusses the pyramids that were built by the Nubian pharaohs of Egypt during the final stages of his Mesoamerican contact scenario (twenty-fifth dynasty, ca. 716–664 B.C.). These pyramids were also small, pointy, smooth, triangular-sided structures in the Egyptian style, which included wall paintings, funerary objects (*shabti*), and other Egyptian styled artifacts not found in any of the mounds or platform structures built by the later Olmecs. There is also considerable controversy with regard to the exact configuration of the Olmec mounds, pyramids, or platform structures,¹³ but Van Sertima and his supporters continue to claim that the Egypto-Nubians had a profound influence on Olmec architecture. Van Sertima (1976: 155) further claims that the Egyptian “step pyramid” design was transmitted to Teotihuacan (ca. A.D. 150) and Cholula (ca. A.D. 700), a further jump in time of 1,000 to 1,500 years, while his followers go even further by claiming that the Egyptians influenced the building of the Zapotec platform structures at Monte Alban and the Classic and Post-Classic Mayan pyramids (ca. A.D. 900) of Uxmal and Chichen Itza (see Lumpkin 1992).¹⁴

Van Sertima (1976: 152–62, 1995: 86–87) continues to claim that the Egyptians brought mummification to the Americas in the pre-Columbian period. There are, of course, no Olmec mummies, but Van Sertima argues that the stone sarcophagus of the Mayan king Pacal (A.D. 683) constitutes a clear example or “slavish imitation” of an Egyptian prototype (1976: 157). Apart from the fact that Pacal was not mummified, Van Sertima

has not provided his readers with an example of an Olmec sarcophagus in the Egyptian style, nor has he shown how the design for the alleged Egyptian prototype was presumably transmitted from the Olmecs to the Mayas over a period of almost 1,400 years. It should also be noted that the same disregard for temporal sequences appears in Van Sertima's linguistic comparisons, but these will be discussed later in this essay in greater detail.

2. Outdated or Questionable Sources

Van Sertima relies to a great extent on outdated sources, particularly when dealing with the Americas.¹⁵ Most of his evidence on myths, customs, and iconography is derived from the writings of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors, such as Leo Wiener (1920–1922), Donald Mackenzie (1923), and Grafton Elliot Smith (1915, 1916, 1923), to name but a few. The reader looks in vain for more up-to-date materials from recognized authorities, or scholars who have actually worked at archaeological sites, laboratories, and historical archives. The reader also searches in vain for references to primary sources or studies of Nile Valley or Mesoamerican civilizations that have passed through the peer review process. Van Sertima writes confidently about Maya and Aztec rituals and myths but offers no citations from Sahagún's Florentine Codex and other historical documents, nor does he cite the works of Diego Durán or Bishop Diego de Landa. He has few references to people who actually have worked with primary sources or archaeological artifacts in Mesoamerica, such as Alfonso Caso, Elizabeth Benson, William Clewlow, Arthur Demarest, Elizabeth Easby, Peter Furst, David Grove, Miguel León Portilla, Gareth Lowe, Roman Piña Chan, William Rust, Jacques Soustelle, Paul Tolstoy, and Alfred Tozzer, and he misquotes or misrepresents the statements made by Ignacio Bernal, Eduard Seler, and Michael Coe among others. We also do not see references to Nahuatl dictionaries (e.g., Molina 1944 [1571], Simeon 1885) or Mande phrasebooks, nor do we see any reference to recognized authorities in Mesoamerican, Egyptian, or West African linguistics. Van Sertima usually obtains his information second-, third-, or even fourth-hand from amateurs, dilettantes, and early-twentieth-century writers such as Wiener and Mackenzie, who at least had the excuse that the Florentine Codex and the works of Durán, Molina, and de Landa were still unpublished. Wiener and Mackenzie also wrote at a time when no absolute dates were available for the existing archaeological sites and when the temporal sequence of cultures in the Americas was only vaguely or poorly understood. The Olmec sites at La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Tres Zapotes had not yet been discovered, and nothing was known about the Olmec culture. As a consequence, writers such as Wiener and Mackenzie used the Mayas and the Aztecs,

not the Olmecs, in their arguments about presumed contacts with the Old World. However, by 1976, not to mention by 1995, a wealth of research had been done in Mesoamerican archaeology and culture. It is therefore quite astonishing for Van Sertima and his supporters to ignore the recent evidence and pretend that works written in the 1920s are still relevant and authoritative in the 1990s.¹⁶ Van Sertima persists in using outdated sources even when the authors have repudiated or revised their views. For example, despite Michael Coe's numerous articles that point to the anteriority of the Olmec stone heads at San Lorenzo (ca. 1200 B.C.), Van Sertima continues to cite as authoritative an obviously obsolete letter from Coe to Ignacio Bernal, first published in 1969, in which Coe suggested that the colossal stone heads were first carved centuries later at La Venta (see Van Sertima 1992a: 15, 1992b: 38, 40, 1992c [1983]: 61, 1995: 74, 76; Bernal 1969: 57; Coe 1981, 1989; Coe and Diehl 1980; Coe et al. 1967).

An extreme example of the use of outdated evidence is Van Sertima's reference (1976: 171-73) to a 1780 letter by Abbé Lorenzo Hervás, which was sent to Francisco Clavijero,¹⁷ that claims Egyptian influence on the Mesoamerican calendar. Hervás claimed that there were parallels between the ancient Egyptian and ancient "Mexican" calendars and that the Aztec year began on 26 February, a day celebrated in the era of "Nabonassar," which was fixed by the Egyptians at 747 B.C. Hervás also claimed that at some point in the past, the "Mexicans" had lunar months like the Egyptians, but that this changed for some unknown reason. Finally, Hervás claimed that there was a correspondence in the Aztec calendar with the zodiac and saw the signs of Taurus, two young goats (which are now Gemini), Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Capricorn.¹⁸ Of course, this is a preposterous source to cite as evidence. In 1780, no one understood the complete Mesoamerican calendar as used by the classic Maya. The Aztec calendar was in fact a watered-down remnant of the Mayan calendar (Ortiz de Montellano 1979). And although there were variations among the calendars, and a gradual loss in the ability of the Mesoamericans to use the full range of elements in the classic Mayan calendar, there were always the basic fundamental characteristics (base 20, the interlocking of a $20 \times 13 = 260$ -day sacred calendar and a $20 \times 18 + 5 = 365$ solar year, 18 [20-day] months + 5 days, 13-day "weeks," a "Long Count" with a "zero" date) which in no way resemble Egyptian calendars (base 10, 12 months, 30-day months, no "zero" date). Even in 1780, Clavijero (1964 [1780]: 292) knew enough about the Aztec calendar to refute thoroughly Hervás's claims, but Clavijero is not cited by Van Sertima because Van Sertima is not served by this reference. It was inexcusable for Mackenzie to cite Hervás in 1923, and even more inexcusable for Van Sertima to cite the same source in 1976, because

Ernest Forstermann had already deciphered the basic Mayan calendar in 1897 (Coe 1992: 107). In other words, it was clear by the late nineteenth century that there was no resemblance between the ancient Egyptian and the ancient Mesoamerican calendars, despite Van Sertima's claims to the contrary.

In seeking support for his thesis that sub-Saharan Africans came to the Americas before Columbus, Van Sertima also resorts to other discredited sources. For example, he claims that the Piri Reis map shows "beyond the shadow of a doubt that Africans crossed the Atlantic in early times" (Van Sertima 1995: 91). This map is a composite that was made by the Turkish admiral Piri Reis in 1513.¹⁹ Charles Hapgood (1966), who is Van Sertima's principal source (through Joan Covey 1992), claims that the Piri Reis map and other "portolan" charts were made by a superior and universal Ice Age civilization (before 10,000 B.C.) that was possibly centered in Cuicuilco, Mexico, and disappeared without a trace, leaving its expertise to the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Chinese.²⁰ Hapgood "proves" his contentions by adjusting the grids and scales of the Piri Reis map in an ad hoc manner to fit his preconceived and unsupported hypothesis. Reviews by informed scholars have been uniformly negative. Brice (1981) states that "the book is so pompous, garbled and inconsequential that it is not even much use as amusing fantasy." Stunkel (1967) declares that the "gnawing weakness of Hapgood's thesis is the absence of credible supporting evidence." And Dilke (1987: 197) concludes that "Hapgood . . . reaches what seems to be an absurd conclusion." On the other hand, Erich Von Daniken (1968: 14-16) is an enthusiastic devotee of the Piri Reis map and its use in support of another very questionable theory. Von Daniken claims that the "absolutely accurate" map is based on "aerial photographs taken from a very great height" by alien visitors from outer space (see Stiebing 1984: 91-94).

Van Sertima (1992a: 22, 23; 1992b: 51; 1995: 91, 95) suggests that West Africans from Mali or southern Libya came to the Americas before Columbus on the basis of a supposed inscription that was found on St. John in the Virgin Islands, which Barry Fell has translated and identified as a Libyan script. Barry Fell is a notorious hyperdiffusionist and retired professor of biology who claims that Celts, Egyptians, Libyans, Greeks, Phoenicians, and Hebrews visited and settled in different parts of North America in antiquity (Fritze 1993: 87-89). Earlier, Fell (1975: ix) had claimed that an inscription found in caves in New Guinea and dated to 19 November 232 B.C. told of "a Libyan-Maori naval squadron which was sent to that island by the Greco-Egyptian king, Ptolemy III" (Williams 1991: 271). When it comes to Fell's analysis of inscriptions, there is hardly a

scratch on a stone that cannot be translated into some ancient or medieval language that was introduced by alleged visitors from some distant region. For example, Fell (1976: 268) states “that Iberian and Punic speakers were living in Iowa in the ninth century B.C.,” based on his reading of passages supposedly inscribed on the so-called Davenport Tablets. However, there is conclusive proof that the Davenport Tablets are fakes (Feder 1990: 106–7; Williams 1991: 90–96). Fell’s theories are almost universally rejected by professional archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians (Feder 1990: 78–85; Williams 1991: 264–73; Daniel 1977; Cole 1978, 1980; McKusick 1979). At the same time, two anthropologists from the Smithsonian Institution have written a devastating critique of Fell’s methodology (Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978, 1979). Thus, Van Sertima is relying on very weak evidence indeed when he bases his arguments on the work of an individual such as Fell.

3. Linguistic Arguments

Based on Wiener, Van Sertima (1976: 92–100) argues that a number of Maya and Nahuatl words were influenced by several West African languages, as well as by Arabic. Wiener’s puerile linguistic efforts have been roundly condemned by linguists (Fritze 1993: 271–72), and Van Sertima (1992b: 53) seems to acknowledge that they are in error, but Van Sertima continues to make linguistic claims that are even more problematical than those originally proposed by Wiener. Wiener’s language comparisons were, at least, more or less synchronous. It is therefore quite astonishing to see Van Sertima (or his surrogates) try to show a connection between Middle Egyptian (1200–700 B.C.) and the language of the ancient Olmecs (which is poorly understood) by using words that were spoken by Nahuatl speakers in the fifteenth century A.D. (a difference of 2,600 years!). Another question involves the specific choice of Nahuatl to make this kind of linguistic comparison. Van Sertima uses Nahuatl, which is a language of the Uto-Aztecan subfamily of Amerind, to prove a connection with the ancient Olmecs who spoke a Mixe-Zoquean language belonging to a completely different language subfamily called Penutian. This is like claiming that the ancient Egyptians had contact with the ancient Scythians of Northern Europe by discovering word similarities between ancient Egyptian and modern Portuguese. Van Sertima claims that Nahuatl words from the fifteenth century A.D. derive from ancient Egyptian words of the eleventh century B.C. (a difference of 2,400 years) without showing any of the intermediate transmission forms that should be included in such a discussion. Two examples from Van Sertima’s most recent publications follow:

But there is also in this interconnected cluster of monarchic traits, the sacred bark or ceremonial bark of the priest-kings. What is so remarkable about this is that it not only has the same function but the same name *sibak* in Egyptian, *cipac* in Mexican (the b and p, of course, are interchangeable plosives). (Van Sertima 1992b: 45; 1995: 82)

Of course, both the Egyptian and the Nahuatl claims are erroneous. The Egyptian sacred bark was not in fact called “sibak.” Faulkner, in his dictionary of Middle Egyptian (1962), lists the following terms: sacred bark is *wj3* (pronounced uia), *wrt* (uret), or *dpt ntr* (depet neter), night bark of the sun is *msktt* (meseketet), ship is *shrt* (seheret) or *dpt* (depet), boat (with a cabin) is *shyt* (sehit), and canoe (or small boat) is *smhi* (semhi). None of these resemble the words for any type of watercraft in Maya or Nahuatl, as we shall see. *Cipac* is not a word in Nahuatl. *Cipactli* (see-pactli—the “tl” phoneme is unique to Nahuatl and is not found in Egyptian, or for that matter in other Mesoamerican languages) means “saurian monster” and was the name of one of the days in the calendar. The Nahuatl word for canoe is *acalli* (a[tl] water + calli [house], i.e., “water house”). The Maya names do not fit either. According to Laughlin (1975, 1988) and the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex* (1980), canoe is *jom*, *hom*, and *chem*, and the equivalent of “royal boat” is *ahawli chem*.²¹

Citing Rafique Jairazbhoy, a hyperdiffusionist writer based in London, and Dr. Charles Finch, an Afrocentric writer, Van Sertima also includes the following assertions in a recent publication.

Jairazbhoy cites the traditions of the ancient Americans who, according to Sahagún, said that “the bookmen (*amoxaque*) went taking their writings, the books, the paintings, the crafts, and the casting of metals.”²² The use of the term *amoxaque* in Mexico turns up as *amoutas* in Peru for these travelling bookmen. This word (like *Ra* for sun and *yaru* for paradise) which the Egyptian (*Re*, *iaro* or *yaro*) share with the pre-Inca people of Peru, has led to a very interesting revelation.

“As per your request,” writes Dr. Charles Finch, in a letter to me dated January 20, 1987, “I have investigated the possible Egyptian etymologies of the pre-Columbian Meso-American word “*amoxaque*” and the pre-Columbian Peruvian word “*amoutas*.” The two words mean in Egyptian “bookmen,” “teachers,” “sages,” or really any meaning that has the connotation of “learned” or “instructed” men.

The root of “*amoxaque*” and “*amoutas*” is the Egyptian “*ām*” and “*ym*” both of which mean “to know, to learn, to understand.” It is derived from the original meaning of the word “*ām*” which means “to eat, to devour, digest.” “*Ym(i)*” also has the meaning of “within,

dweller, 'he who is within,'” and is frequently a title or cognomen of a “priest” or “follower.” In “amoxaque” the “x” is pronounced like our “ch” and is interchangeable with “k” or “kh.” Thus “xaque” = “khekh” in Egyptian and Khekh is the Egyptian god of learning and letters. Thus “amoxaque” = “ym-Khekh” which would mean “priest or follower of Khekh,” that is the “follower of the god of learning. . . .” In any linguistic cross comparative analysis, the two words being compared have to conform in structure (morphemes), sound (phonemes), and meaning. I think that all three of these are satisfied in the above etymologies. (Van Sertima 1992a: 17)

All of this pedantry is, of course, a waste of time because as we pointed out (see note 22), the Nahuatl word is in reality *amoxoaque* or *amoxhuaque* (meaning, the “owner of books”), which is made up in typical Nahuatl fashion of *amox(tli)* “book”; *hua* or *ua* or *oa* (a possessive, the spelling of which was not quite fixed in the sixteenth century); and *que* (a plural ending). Finch also does not know that *x* in Nahuatl was pronounced as a soft “sh,” not a hard “ch” or “k.” Therefore, his phonemes, morphemes, and meanings are erroneous.

Even worse, the supposed Egyptian words are also wrong. The following derives from Brunner 1979, Faulkner 1962, and personal communications from Frank Yurco, an Egyptologist from the Field Museum in Chicago. According to Yurco (1994a), it is:

Utterly untrue that *amoutas* in Egyptian means “teacher, sage or bookman.” The Egyptian word for “teach” is sb3, pronounced (seba), while teacher = sb3w (sebau). The word for book, actually papyrus roll, is md3t (medjät). What the Afrocentrists are trying to lay claim to is the underlying root ‘m (am) in Egyptian, which means to “swallow” in the literal sense. It is never used to mean “know,” “learn,” nor “comprehend.” The standard Egyptian term for “know” is rh (rekh), and it can mean “comprehend,” or “learn,” as well. As for imi (imy), it means “what is within” derived from the adverb im (im). It does not mean “priest,” for which the standard Egyptian term was hm-nr (hem-netcher), not “follower,” for which the Egyptian is smsw (šhemsu). The Amerindian phoneme “x” if pronounced ch/kh²³ would be equivalent to the Egyptian h (kh). This hardly adds up to amoxhuaque deriving from Egyptian! It is no surprise that Egyptian has few phonemes in common with Amerindian dialects. . . . No indeed, the only *total* phonetic match for Egyptian is found with other Afro-Asiatic languages, in particular Arabic and Hebrew, the two closest cousins of ancient Egyptian. . . . The Egyptian words I have cited are

from Raymond O. Faulkner (1962). . . . The phonetics from Alan H. Gardiner (1957: 27).

Yurco also tells us that the Egyptian gods associated with learning and letters were Toth and Seshat, who was also associated with counting and numeration. There is no Egyptian deity called “Khekh.” The god with the closest spelling is “Kuk,” a primeval diety associated with darkness (Yurco 1994b).

4. Purple Murex Dye

In his writings, Van Sertima claims that the ancient Egyptian and Olmec elites shared certain cultural attributes, and that these attributes demonstrate the implausibility of an independent cultural development for the Olmecs and for the other Native American cultures that followed (Van Sertima 1976: 162–67, 268–69; 1995: 73, 78–87 *passim*). According to Van Sertima, some of the shared cultural attributes include “the ritual use of purple as an exclusively royal and priestly color” (1976: 162), ceremonial umbrellas, feathered fans, sacred boats, and royal flails and crooks, among others. It would be redundant to deal with all of these erroneous claims, and here we will deal only with claims about the ritual use of purple as illustrative of the rest.

Van Sertima, as usual, anchors his arguments on obsolete sources, in this case Donald Mackenzie (1923: 302–9),²⁴ whose book depends heavily on the works of another hyperdiffusionist, Grafton Elliot Smith (1915, 1916, 1923). Like many other writers of the time, Smith believed that civilization had originated only once, in a Caucasoid Egypt, and from there was transmitted to the rest of the world by the ancient Egyptians, whom he saw as the “children of the sun.” Seeking gold and pearls, first in the Old World, and then in the Pacific islands, the ancient Egyptians presumably came to the Americas, where Egyptian influences became manifest in such areas as mummification, the building of pyramids, and the ritual use of purple from the murex shell (Wauchope 1962: 21–23). Smith’s arguments were demolished by the anthropologist Roland Dixon (1928) many years ago, but Van Sertima continues to articulate them in his writings and speeches up until the present time.

For example, Van Sertima claims that “murex purple” was used to distinguish royalty in ancient Egypt, and that although the dye was first extracted in Crete, its religious significance was due to the fact that:

In ancient Egypt the riddle of life was read in the Nile which, as it rose in flood, turned green, red, and yellowish and then blue. The fluid in the murex shell, barring a tint or two,²⁵ behaved in almost

the same way, turning from a yellowish cream to green, then blue like the Nile before acquiring its final fixed purple. It thus revealed by its sequence of colors (green, yellowish, blue) the various attributes of the Nile deity. This accounts for the enormous sanctity accorded to shell purple, which, according to Besnier, was not only considered a noble and sacred color by the Egyptians but “emblematic of the power of the gods.” (Van Sertima 1976: 165)²⁶

Van Sertima (1976: 165; 1992b: 44; 1992c [1983]: 72; 1995: 79–80) also claims that this association of purple with royalty was adopted by the Phoenicians and subsequently spread to other parts of the Mediterranean. He also claims that purple had the same value and ritual meaning in both the Olmec and Mediterranean worlds. He states that both Stirling and Medellín Zenil observed a patch of purple on one of the colossal stone heads at San Lorenzo, and that Medellín Zenil (1960: 86) claimed that the heads were originally painted, but that their colors faded over time. As supporting evidence, Van Sertima (1995: 80) argues that the *Codex Nuttall* has

pictures of no fewer than thirteen Mexican women of rank wearing purple skirts and five with capes and jackets of the same color. In addition, forty-five chieftains are figured with short, fringed, round purple waistcloths, and there are also three examples of the use of a close-fitting purple cap.²⁷

All of these claims concerning murex purple are in error, and we shall take them up sequentially. It is important that the claims be clearly stated. A crucial part of the arguments posed by Van Sertima and his obsolete sources centers on the manufacture of murex dye, which was supposed to be so complex that the process could not have been invented independently and had to be evidence of diffusion from one region to another (Mackenzie 1923: 305). Thus, we need to discuss specifically the vat dye that was produced from the various species of *Murex* or *Purpura* because substitute purple colors could be produced from other dyes by a variety of processes in both the Old and the New Worlds (Forbes 1964: 121).

The murex purple industry was first documented in Crete around 1600 B.C. Contemporary texts speak of the considerable trade in purple dye from Ugarit in Syria during the fourteenth century B.C. The Phoenicians, centered in Tyre, dominated the trade throughout the first millennium B.C. (Barber 1991: 228–29). Neither Van Sertima nor any of his obsolete sources provide any primary evidence that demonstrates the widespread use of purple murex in ancient Egypt during the period 1500–700 B.C. Forbes

(1964: 111) identifies words for murex purple in Sumerian and Akkadian, but not in ancient Egyptian. Middle Eastern cloth dyed with woad, madder, and saffron has been found dating back to before the presumed contact with the Olmecs (Forbes 1964). Barber (1991: 224) refers to cloth that had been dyed red, brown, and blue as far back as the Egyptian third and fourth dynasties. She also refers to yellow linen from the twelfth dynasty, along with red, yellow, blue, green, brown, and black cloth from about 1500 B.C., but she makes no reference to the use of purple at any time during this period.

The elaborate sequence of color changes in the Nile, together with their ritual significance and their alleged similarity to the manufacture of murex purple, is totally the product of Mackenzie's (1923: 308) vivid imagination. Mackenzie cites no primary Egyptian text, no authority on Egyptian religion, not even Grafton Elliot Smith, to support his strained argument. As it turns out, the purple dyeing process is clearly described by Pliny (1949-1962: Book 9, 125-42). The mollusk was broken and crushed, the dye sac was removed, and the remains were soaked in salt water and then boiled and skimmed for days. This reduced the volume of the product until it was clear before dyeing. At first, the dyed cloth appeared yellow because the dye was in leuco-form and was subsequently photo-oxidized in the air until it reached its final color (Forbes 1964: 114-18). Forbes (ibid.: 118-20) points out that the principal sources for purple dye in antiquity were *Murex brandaris* and *M. trunculus*, while *Purpura haemostoma* was a lesser source. *M. brandaris* changes photochemically to a deep purple, while *M. trunculus* and *P. Haemostoma* give a scarlet-red hue. Using various proportions of different mussels, a range of different colors would be seen, but no single mussel could produce the sequence that Mackenzie proposes (ibid.: 120). The process described in antiquity has been reproduced and the dye identified as 6,6'-dibromoindigo (Friedländer 1909; Forbes 1964: 118). This experiment has been repeated and the identity of the ancient dye has been verified by electron spin spectroscopy (Seaborg 1964).

The presence of murex purple among the Olmecs is very doubtful. Van Sertima misquotes Stirling, who actually wrote that "a large chunk broken from the lower jaw" of a colossal stone head "was covered with a thin smooth white slip which had been painted a *dark purplish red*" (our emphasis; see Stirling 1955: 20). This is not Van Sertima's "purple patch" (1995: 80). Van Sertima's citation from Medellín Zenil is even more problematical. Medellín Zenil does *not* hypothesize that the Olmec stone heads were once painted purple. The word *purple* is not mentioned on the page that Van Sertima cites (Medellín Zenil 1960: 86), nor is it mentioned on any other page in Medellín Zenil's monograph. Medellín Zenil does not

discuss the Olmec stone heads at all, but as the title of his monograph suggests, he deals with the other more obscure sculptures produced by the Olmecs.

Purple dye was used in the pre-Columbian New World, but it was obtained from a different species of mollusk altogether (*Purpura patula* and *Purpura persica*) and dyed in a different manner (Forbes 1964: 118). In the absence of written records, it is impossible to know the process by which dyeing was carried out in antiquity, and the pre-Columbian textiles are extremely rare. The only textiles tested for color, those of the Maya from Rio Azul, were treated with cinnabar; that is to say, they were painted, not dyed (Carlsen and Wenger 1991). Carlsen and Wenger (1991) have developed a chemical process for identifying dyes in treated cloth, which shows that Maya textiles, accurately dated to the nineteenth and twentieth century, were colored with a purple dye obtained from the indigenous mollusk *Purpura patula*. The New World species differs from those found and used in the Old World in that they can be rubbed to release the dye and do not require breaking or crushing (Barber 1991: 228; Carlsen and Wenger 1991). The dyeing process does not involve all the elaborate steps described by Pliny and crucial to the diffusionist arguments of Grafton Elliot Smith, Mackenzie, and Van Sertima. The cloth to be dyed is rubbed with the mussel, the mussel is returned to the sea, and the dye, which is photo-oxidized *in situ*, eventually colors the fabric purple (Carlsen and Wenger 1991; Barber 1991: 228). Even if the use of purple was to be found in a pre-Columbian context, there is the distinct possibility that the color would have been made from cochineal, a dye made from the insect *Coccus cacti*, which is much more abundant and was clearly known in pre-Columbian times. Carlsen and Wenger (1991) have demonstrated that cochineal can produce the color purple with the proper mordant, but Van Sertima fails to cite their study or the works of others writing on this issue.

In citing Nuttall (1909),²⁸ Van Sertima, once again, resorts to comparisons across wide expanses of time and space. Even if it was true that purple was used as a color of ritual and distinction by the Mixtec elites in the fifteenth century, this says nothing about the Olmecs without evidence that (1) purple was used by the Olmec elites in a similar manner in 1000 B.C.,²⁹ and (2) that purple was used in a ritualistic and symbolic manner by the other cultures of Mesoamerica, such as Teotihuacan, the Maya, and the Zapotec during the 2,500-year gap between the Olmecs and the Mixtecs. Needless to say, the evidence for this is lacking. In fact, the evidence with regard to the elite use of color in post-Classic Mesoamerica completely contradicts Van Sertima's claims. Patricia Anawalt's study (1981: 130–37) of clothing in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica found that the clearest indica-

tion of noble rank in the Mixtec codices was the wearing of a red *xicolli* (sleeveless jacket) and that priests wore a white *xicolli* with black dots. In another case, Anawalt (1990) showed that the Aztec emperors wore a *xiuhtlalpilli* cape, with a *blue and white* (our emphasis) “diaper” design, which symbolized the royal Toltec “charter” of the Aztecs.

5. Colossal Stone Heads and Terracotta Figurines

Perhaps the most belabored aspect of the Afrocentric hypothesis centers on the colossal stone heads of the ancient Olmecs. To the Afrocentrists and to a number of other observers as well, the colossal stone heads appear to be naturalistic “portraits” of “black,” “Negroid,” or “Negroid African . . . dynasts” (see Van Sertima 1976: 23–24, 25, 28, 30, 31, 59, plates 27–30; 1992a: 7; 1992b: 37–38, 39; 1992c [1983]: 57–59; 1995: 72–74); however, problems arise with this assumption when the stone heads are subjected to closer scrutiny.

The eighteen stone heads that have been found up to this point actually vary in appearance. Some of the colossal stone heads appear to be stereotypically more “Negroid” in appearance than others. At the same time, some of the stone heads also feature certain physical traits, such as the lack of an epicanthic fold in the eyes, that appear to link them to East Asian or Native American populations. This has motivated Van Sertima to suggest that some of the colossal stone heads may also represent the descendants of unions between the alleged African “migrants” and their Native American hosts (Van Sertima 1992a: 11; 1992b: 40–41, 43; 1995: 74, 76–77).

Although the Afrocentrists are generally silent on this issue,³⁰ it must be noted that all such claims are based on traditional Anglo-American and European concepts that support the idea that specific “races” can be linked scientifically to ideal physiognomic traits. Thus, for the Afrocentrists, the colossal stone heads are “portraits” of “Negro Africans” (or their mixed descendants) because they feature the somatic traits of “Negroids,” such as the “broad” or “fleshy” nose and the “full” or “everted lips.” This view rules out the possibility that Europeans, Eurasians, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and others can exhibit such traits. Hence, there is no discussion of the fact that so-called Negroid features are commonly seen in combination in the populations of eastern and southern Asia. For example, broad noses, and full or everted lips with “Mongoloid” eyes are quite commonplace among the Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Malays, Filipinos, Polynesians, and the other populations of eastern Asia and the Pacific region.³¹

There is also the assumption that Native Americans cannot possess

such traits—not at the present time, nor at any point in their long history. Van Sertima and his supporters simply neglect to establish a precise physical stereotype for Native Americans, and they also fail to discuss the complex demographic history of indigenous peoples with any degree of precision or completeness. For example, Van Sertima makes little or no reference to “genetic drift,” “sexual selection,” “gene flow,” “migration,” and other factors that may have had a significant impact on the evolution of native peoples. Additionally, he makes no reference to the fact that the Native American population declined by over 90 percent in the years between 1492 and 1650, and that certain local groups were essentially wiped out as a result of war, colonial exploitation, and the introduction of diseases from Europe, Africa, and Asia.³² Van Sertima also fails to take into consideration the consequences of these factors for the study of Native American demography and the possibility that there might have been a much greater degree of physical or somatic variability in the indigenous population in the centuries prior to the post-1492 holocaust. Instead, there appears to be the presumption that throughout the Americas, the native peoples possessed a particular kind of look—perhaps tantamount to the old stereotype of the “Hollywood Indian” but not clearly defined in any case.³³

Alternative explanations for the physiognomic traits depicted in the Olmec stone heads have been presented by non-Afrocentric scholars over the years. For some of these individuals, the colossal stone heads appear to be monumental portraits of pudgy infants who might have had some connection to the cult of the “were-jaguar” in the ancient Olmec religion. At the same time, other scholars have identified an apparent idealization of obesity in the representation of the human face and figure that seems to permeate Olmec art to a significant degree.³⁴ However, Van Sertima and his supporters have summarily dismissed such explanations, but without any real analysis or discussion. In a rather doctrinaire fashion, Van Sertima has declared that the colossal stone heads have no relationship with the many Olmec terracotta figurines and relief sculptures that illustrate the various elements of the were-jaguar cult and the idealization of obesity in children and adults.³⁵ These include a number of anthropomorphic were-jaguar figurines and sculptures (“transformation figures”) that clearly show infant and adult physiognomies that seem to be capable of making a metamorphosis from the humanoid with fleshy lips and broad noses to the feline with broad, flat noses, projecting upper jaws, snarling mouths and menacing teeth.³⁶ They also include many figurines and sculptures that portray pudgy or obese full-figured adults and infants with the same range of somatic traits in a variety of combinations; however, in all of these pieces, an “Asian” look seems to predominate despite the presence of the so-called

Negroid traits.³⁷ Upon closer scrutiny, it also becomes apparent that Olmec art is not totally naturalistic. The Olmec stone heads, along with the paintings, the relief sculptures, and the terracotta figurines, show a degree of idealization, stylization, and symbolism that brings into question the interpretation of the colossal stone heads as “realistic” portraits in the strict sense of the word.³⁸

Although Van Sertima argues against making comparisons between the large Olmec stone heads and other types of Olmec art, he makes much of an undated private collection of terracotta figurines owned by Alexander Von Wuthenau, the Mexican-based art historian. According to Van Sertima, these figurines, and others cited by Von Wuthenau, are supposed to be realistic portraits of “Negroid” people who were present in the Americas at various times during the pre-Columbian period. However, the evidence provided by these figurines is much less persuasive than Van Sertima and his supporters would have us believe. Most, if not all, of the figurines were purchased rather than obtained from carefully excavated archaeological sites. Thus, the figurines are not dated and provide no evidence as to their place of origin or provenance. Even more problematical is the fact that a number of Mexican Mesoamericanists, including the past and present Director of the Institute for Anthropological Research at the National University of Mexico, have examined these figurines and declared them to be fakes for the most part (Vargas 1991; Viesca Treviño 1991; Litvak-King 1991). One of us (Warren Barbour), a specialist in the study of pre-Columbian terracottas who has handled thousands of these figurines, concurs with this assessment. Von Wuthenau himself (1985: 235) points out that there may be fakes in the private collections that he cites, including his own, but claims that the number would be small.³⁹

In any case, Van Sertima does not cite Von Wuthenau with complete accuracy. Von Wuthenau makes a number of assertions that Van Sertima and his supporters are inclined to ignore. For example, Von Wuthenau claims that there was an ancient connection between the Olmecs and the Japanese, and that there was a strong Asian presence in pre-Columbian America that included Chinese with pigtailed (1985: 80, 86–87, 92, 93). He also claims that the Mayan ruling class and the ruling elites of Mesoamerica in general were Caucasians from the “classical” period onward (*ibid.*: 174–8). Of course, Von Wuthenau presents no concrete evidence regarding the actual mechanism by which West African “Negroids” could have come to the Americas beyond the credulous acceptance of any and all diffusionist theories from the Mormon’s “ten lost tribes of Israel,” to Thor Heyerdahl’s papyrus raft and Charles Hapgood’s ice age civilization.

Conclusion

It is quite clear from the foregoing that claims of an African presence in pre-Columbian America are purely speculative, rigidly diffusionist, and have no foundation in the artifactual, physical, and historical evidence. Nevertheless, the Afrocentric position is routinely articulated in a very forceful manner with few if any caveats. Van Sertima makes reference to the “ample,” “overwhelming,” “remarkable,” and “indisputable” evidence, or he uses phrases such as “there is no doubt” or “there is no question whatever” to support his claims (1976: 23; 1992a: 24; 1992b: 34, 43; 1991c [1983]: 61). Such phrases or statements apparently have persuaded many Afrocentrists to accept Van Sertima’s hypothesis as fact as opposed to theory or speculation. For example, Molefi Asante, the leading proponent and theoretician of the Afrocentric movement, has included Van Sertima’s contact scenario in a coedited work entitled *The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans*, which makes reference to “Olmec Africans” and the alleged voyage of Abu Bakari II (Asante and Mattson 1991: 15–19). C. Tsehloane Keto, another Afrocentric theoretician, and three non-Afrocentrists, Manning Marable, bell hooks, and the late St. Clair Drake, have also made reference to the work of Van Sertima with apparent approval (Drake 1987: 312; hooks 1992: 25; Keto 1992: 44; Marable 1991: 22–23). In all likelihood, these endorsements probably are rooted in the presumed conceptual conflicts that exist between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism rather than on the actual merits of the contact theory itself.

To some degree, the Afrocentrists have correctly criticized the traditional Eurocentric approach to history, anthropology, geography, and other fields for its racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and “hegemonism.”⁴⁰ They also have correctly criticized Eurocentrism for its claims to “objectivity” and “universality,” and for its attempt to appropriate the cultural and historical legacy of non-European civilizations, such as ancient Egypt. But Eurocentrism has also been falsely portrayed as unchanging, monolithic, and totally hostile to any Afrocentric perspective. The work of Basil Davidson, Melville J. Herskovits, Robert Farris Thompson, and Martin Bernal, to mention only four scholars, is proof that this is not the case. Oddly enough, the Afrocentrists also have relied very heavily on the application of Eurocentric concepts and methods to the study of human development in all parts of the world. This fact is seen quite clearly in the Afrocentric approach to the Olmecs and the evolution of cultures and civilizations in the Americas.

First and foremost, there is the slavish acceptance and promotion of the old Anglo-American and European race concepts of the nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, and the application of these ideas to the study of representational art. There is also the acceptance and the dogmatic promotion of the old Eurocentric hyperdiffusionism with regard to the origins of structurally complex societies or civilizations. In the current Afrocentric variant, there is the idea that civilization began with a “black” Egypt and Nubia and was subsequently transmitted to other parts of the world in succeeding centuries.⁴¹ In the case of the Americas, there is the assertion that Egypto-Nubian visitors transmitted the important political, social, religious, and technological ideas of Nile valley civilization to the grateful but backward Olmecs, and thus played a crucial role in the emergence of “America’s first civilization.” Of course, recent research has demonstrated the fallacy of this particular concept. It is now believed that the recently discovered “pre-Chavin” civilizations of coastal and Andean Peru predate the beginnings of Olmec civilization by as much as 1,300 or 1,500 years.⁴² However, despite evidence to the contrary, the Afrocentrists continue to promote their Mexican contact theory and their belief in the “primacy” of a “black” or mixed (Black-Indian) Olmec civilization. The purpose behind this hypothesis seems to be the promotion of a strong, dominant “black” and civilizing Egypt and Nubia that can appeal to African Americans and engender racial pride as a kind of antidote to modern Eurocentric hegemonism at all levels of North American society. In the process, they belittle and denigrate Native American civilizations just as nineteenth-century Eurocentrists belittled and denigrated African civilizations.

Ironically, C. Tsehloane Keto, the aforementioned Afrocentric theoretician, has argued against the “hegemonic” tendencies that he sees in much of the Afrocentric literature. He also warns against the use of biological “race” concepts and other Eurocentric ideas (Keto 1992: 27, 28–29, 46–47), but these admonitions do not seem to have had any impact on Van Sertima and the Afrocentrists who support his hypothesis. At this point, there is no evidence that proves or disproves the Afrocentric contact theories, but the burden of proof lies with Van Sertima and the Afrocentrists, not with any critic. The reliance on racial stereotypes, the use of questionable linguistics and outdated sources, and the utilization of other kinds of questionable “evidence” is woefully and regrettably inadequate. Thus, the Afrocentric literature appears to be “hegemonic” and “Eurocentric” from a Native American and Latino perspective—and nothing much more. It also seems to be part of a conscious or unconscious effort to appropriate the cultural legacy of Native Americans and Latinos of part Native American background for conceptual and pedagogical purposes that may be relevant to Afrocentrists, but appears to be detrimental to the interests of Native Americans and Latinos.

Molefi Asante and other Afrocentric writers have called for “the accurate representation of information” and the need to create a new Afrocentric history that will raise the “self-esteem,” “self-worth” and “self-respect” of African Americans by reconnecting them to their heritage (Asante and Ravitch 1991: 270, 274; *Washington Post*, 14 December 1989: D1, D9). To this end, a kind of mini-industry of books, pamphlets, videotapes, and other materials have emerged for use in Afrocentric curriculums at all levels of the pedagogical process. These materials frequently include an articulation of Van Sertima’s position with regard to the alleged African presence in pre-Columbian America: a position that is presented largely as fact and not as speculation or conjecture.⁴³

All of this suggests that the preoccupation with the “primacy” of Nile valley civilization, the worldwide diffusion of its culture, the need to reconnect African Americans to their heritage, and the conflict with the Eurocentrists, is of greater concern to Van Sertima and his supporters than historical accuracy, the presentation of concrete evidence, and any sensitivity to a Native American or Latino perspective. It also suggests that some Afrocentrists are willing to trample on the self-esteem of Native Americans and Latinos of part-Native American background by denigrating their cultures, by minimizing their role as actors in their own history, and by usurping their contributions to world civilizations.

Notes

- 1 The exception here is Kelley (1995), whose essay is tantamount to an endorsement.
- 2 See Manning Marable (1991: 22), bell hooks (1992: 25), and St. Clair Drake (1987: 312) for three endorsements of this position by individuals who are not usually considered Afrocentrists.
- 3 The discussion that follows assumes that the most valid approach to this subject is the social-scientific scholarly approach. It also assumes that science is not merely the collection and presentation of facts but a systematic epistemology that links theory and fact in particular ways, requires feedback between the two, sets forth specific methodologies for discovering facts, places them into evidence, and subjects them to agreed-on canons of proof. The type of Afrocentrism discussed in this essay takes on the superficial form of normal scholarly discourse but then proceeds to violate all the agreed-on methodologies and canons of proof. For a discussion of this issue, see Ortiz de Montellano 1995.
- 4 Carter G. Woodson (1968 [1928]), W. E. B. DuBois (1939), Joel Augustus Rogers (1942, 1961), Chiekh Anta Diop (1987 [1960]), and John G. Jackson (1970) were among the African and African American writers who became interested in this subject.
- 5 We should be reminded at this point that in the early part of the this cen-

tury, there was some speculation with regard to the “racial” make-up of the earliest Americans. Based on the morphological studies that were popular at that time (e.g., cranial measurements), some scholars thought that “Negroids” might have migrated to the Americas from Asia or elsewhere, along with “Mongoloids,” “Caucasoids,” and other “types.” This theme was picked up and discussed by J. A. Rogers, John G. Jackson, and later in the 1970s by the Afrocentric writers Legrand Clegg (1975, 1992 [1979]) and Runoko Rashidi (1992 [1987]). These last two individuals based their assertions primarily on the extremist ideas of Harold S. Gladwyn, as articulated in his classic pseudoscientific work, *Men out of Asia* (1947).

- 6 In addition to the African Americans, a number of European and Anglo-American diffusionists and hyperdiffusionists also kept the theory alive. These included, most notably, M. D. W. Jeffreys (1953a, 1953b, 1953c, 1954, 1963, 1967, 1971), Muhammad Hamidullah (1958), Constance Irwin (1963), Cyrus Gordon (1971), James Bailey (1973), and Alexander Von Wuthenau (1969, 1985), among others. The ideas articulated by some of these individuals, for example M. D. W. Jeffreys, were presented and debated in scholarly journals and books. But the theories put forth by others, such as Constance Irwin, Cyrus Gordon, and James Bailey, among others, have been rejected out of hand, as were the ideas of Wiener and Gladwin in the late 1920s and 1940s. The Afrocentric writers discussed in this essay use whatever sources they find in an indiscriminate, selective, and self-serving manner. For a discussion of this issue as it applies to non-Afrocentric writers, see Davies 1979 and Wauchope 1962.
- 7 It also should be noted that in 1981 the Canadian writer Michael Bradley published the first edition of *Daun Voyage: The Black Discovery of America* (1992a [1981]), which parallels Van Sertima’s work to a considerable degree. However, this publication, in contrast to *They Came before Columbus*, clearly lacks the scope and sophistication of Van Sertima’s book, which has been much more influential, especially with African American readers. Nevertheless, reference should be made to the fact that Bradley is also the author of *The Iceman Inheritance* (1978) and *The Chosen People from the Caucasus* (1992b), which are two very controversial books that are also popular with a number of Afrocentrists and Black nationalists.

In the first book, Bradley claims that “white” people are inherently racist because they evolved in the brutally cold and demanding climates of prehistoric Europe. This idea, in part, has served as the basis for the controversial comments made by City College of New York Professor Leonard Jeffries to the effect that European “whites” are “devilish,” “pathological,” “ice people,” while African “blacks” are “warm,” “communal,” “sun people” (see *Time*, 26 August 1991: 19–20; *Emerge*, 3, 4 (February 1992): 32–34, 36–37).

In *The Chosen People from the Caucasus*, Bradley states, among other things, that Jews are impostors descended from tribes “noted for their stench” and that Jews were “major participants in the genocide of American Indians.” For these and other equally outrageous comments, see Bradley 1992b: 22–23, 25, 27, 76, 199, 213, 220, 222).

- 8 Van Sertima has also been influenced to a lesser degree by M. D. W. Jeffreys (1953a, b, 1954, 1963, 1967, 1971), Constance Irwin (1963), Cyrus Gordon (1971), James Bailey (1973), and in particular, by Rafique Jairazbhoy, a hyper-

diffusionist writer based in London, who published a book two years before Van Sertima's *They Came before Columbus* entitled *Ancient Egyptians and Chinese in America* (1974).

- 9 Overall, this is an enormous number of claims that would require several volumes to refute, but as noted earlier, and for practical reasons, this essay will focus on several of the most significant assertions and the methodological approaches used by the advocates of pre-Columbian contact.
- 10 Van Sertima's (1992c) essay is actually a reprint of an article that was originally published in *Dollars and Sense* magazine (vol. 8, no. 6) in 1983.
- 11 In this case, Van Sertima is probably applying the old Anglo-American and Eurocentric criteria that define a "black" person as anyone who has at least "one drop of black blood." The subjective application of what has been called the "one drop rule" would enable Van Sertima to claim that the ancient Egyptians were "black" regardless of their appearance; however, as of this date, there has been no clarification of this issue because Van Sertima has not provided his readers with a definition for "blackness" as opposed to "whiteness" in any of his writings.

It should be noted, however, that in *They Came before Columbus* Van Sertima made a clear distinction between the Egyptian, the "Negro-Egyptian" and the "overwhelming 'Negro-ness' of the Nubians" by making the following observations.

The use of "Negro-Egyptian" is even more necessary in light of the mixed and confused racial situation in the North (of Egypt) during certain dynasties. These racial distinctions would not need to be so heavily emphasized were it not for the attempt, deliberate and sustained over the centuries, to deny the contribution of the black African to ancient Egyptian civilization. (Van Sertima 1976: xvii)

- 12 See, for example, the essays published in Van Sertima, ed. 1992.
- 13 The consensus opinion with regard to the Olmec structures at La Venta is that they were primarily rectangular platform structures or mounds with the exception of a large, fairly tall edifice that might have been conical in shape; however, recent excavation work by Rebecca González-Lauck suggests that the base of this structure might have been "more square than round" (see Princeton University, Art Museum 1996: 17-18, 108).
- 14 Both Van Sertima (1976: 132; 1992a: 12) and Beatrice Lumpkin (1992: 145-46), one of his supporters, have argued that "some" of the Nubian pyramids of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. were originally constructed as step pyramids. This assertion, however, is quite doubtful. The pyramids in question (at Nuri and El Kurru) are in a very bad state of repair, and it is difficult to make a judgment one way or another. A diagram of a "typical" Nubian pyramid that appears in Lumpkin (1992: 146) seems to be stepped, but it also has a top that comes to a point. This suggests that the alleged "steps" had no functional purpose, which is the complete opposite of Mesoamerican practice. It also suggests what is much more probable: that the pyramids lost their outer casement or covering blocks that would have given them their smooth appearance in ancient times (see Edwards 1985: plate 35, or any other contemporary distant or close-up view of Khafre's pyramid at Giza, which has the remains of original casement blocks still situated at the top).

On the Nubian pyramids at El Kurru and Nuri (ca. 716–250 B.C.), see Edwards 1985: 234–40, Adams 1984 [1977]: 278–85, and Dunham 1950–57. Also see the photographs and a typical diagram of the remains of these structures in Edwards 1985: plates 55, 56 and Adams 1984 [1977]: plates XIb, XIIIb, XIVa, and fig. 42, p. 279.

- 15 When Van Sertima’s (1976) citations are broken down by area and date, the results are as follows:

	Before 1900	1900–1940	1940–1960	After 1960
Africa	14.0%	24.0%	20.3%	41.8%
Mesoamerica	11.0%	48.7%	7.8%	28.8%

In other words, 59.7 percent of the citations for Mesoamerica date from before 1940, while 41.8 percent of the citations for Africa come from sources published or printed after 1960.

A similar pattern results if one examines Van Sertima’s (1995) bibliography.

	Before 1900	1900–1940	1940–1960	After 1960
Africa	(22.2% combined)		22.2%	55.6%
Mesoamerica	17.1%	20.0%	42.9%	20.0%

- 16 Williams (1991: 251–4) criticizes the methodology of the “self-made, self taught” Wiener, a professor of Slavic literatures, and decries Van Sertima’s word-for-word repetition of Wiener’s claims fifty years later.
- 17 Cited thirdhand from Mackenzie (1923) citing Clavigero (1964 [1780]: 288–92).
- 18 This is erroneous in several ways. Bulls and goats were Old World animals unknown in the New World, and, furthermore, the ancient Egyptians did not use the zodiac either (Mertz 1990 [1966]: 202).
- 19 The map was pieced together subsequent to the early Portuguese and Spanish voyages of discovery, and explicitly states on a marginal note that it includes a map of the “Western parts” obtained from Columbus (Bagrow 1985 [1951]: 107–8; Soucek 1992: 268). Thus, it is not surprising that “the Cape Verde, Madeira Islands and the Azores are shown in perfect longitude” (Van Sertima 1995: 91), or that the map includes portions of the New World.
- 20 Although based entirely on Hapgood, Van Sertima conveniently omits Hapgood’s main conclusion, which provides no support for his thesis. If Hapgood is correct, the ancient Egyptians and Nubians were influenced by a superior civilization that emerged earlier in central Mexico, an idea that would be anathema to Van Sertima and his Afrocentric supporters with their agenda for promoting the anteriority and primacy of ancient Nile valley civilizations. If Hapgood is wrong, the Piri Reis map becomes an ordinary portolan map reflecting current knowledge which proves nothing about the alleged transatlantic voyages by Egypto-Nubians and sub-Saharan Africans in the pre-Columbian period.
- 21 To show the pitfalls of blindly comparing words even in closely related Maya languages, in Quiché, *chem* is a verb meaning “to nick, break edge off” (Edmonson 1965).
- 22 The passage is not cited or identified by Van Sertima but can be found in Sahagún (1956, 3: 208) book 10, chapter 29, paragraph 108. Also, Jairazbhoy is in error on this point if he is cited correctly by Van Sertima. The correct word

in the original is *amoxoaque*, not *amoxaque*. In the index to Sahagún, Garibay cites the word with the proper orthography as *amoxhuaque*.

- 23 As pointed out above, it does not. The “x” is pronounced with a soft “sh” in Nahuatl.
- 24 Mackenzie is an indiscriminate hyperdiffusionist who ties Mesoamerican myths to the myths of India, China, Tibet, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. For example, the Mesoamerican rain god Tlaloc is connected by Mackenzie to the dragon lore of China and the water gods of Japan; however, Van Sertima would have us believe that only Egypt was being used as a source for civilization by Mackenzie and the other hyperdiffusionists that he quotes.
- 25 This comment provides a rather wide escape hatch for Van Sertima. It was also inserted by Van Sertima, who does not cite his source accurately (see Mackenzie 1923: 308).
- 26 This is a thirdhand quotation because Van Sertima cites (Mackenzie 1923: 307), who in turn cites John W. Jackson (1917: 7–8), who refers to Besnier. In fact, Besnier’s remarks did not refer to the color changes of the Nile. According to Jackson, Besnier attributed the importance of the murex shell color to its resemblance to blood, the principle of life, and because both the “milk” of the mussel and the “milk” of the deity “made” blood (see Jackson 1917: 7–8).
- 27 This is another thirdhand citation and quote from Mackenzie (1923: 303) citing Nuttall (1909).
- 28 We should be reminded at this point that the Olmec had not been identified as a separate civilization at the time that Nuttall wrote the paper cited by Van Sertima. No one had any idea of the length of time that separated the earliest cultures of Mesoamerica from the Mixtecs and Aztecs, and very little was known about the interpretation of the codices.
- 29 Ann Cyphers (1995), who has recently led several excavations at San Lorenzo, points out that red is used abundantly in ritual situations by the Olmecs. This is a much more likely candidate for an elite color than a nonexistent purple.
- 30 The exception here is Legrand Clegg, who accepts and promotes the racialist ideas and categorizations of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe and North America. See Clegg 1992 [1979]: 238.
- 31 Nigel Davies has also made reference to Cambodians, Melanesians, Philipinos, Sri Lankans, Vietnamese, and to tenth-century Chinese statues that portray the “Guardians of the World” or the “Divine Protectors of the Faithful” with “Negroid features . . . huge mouths and flat noses.” See Davies (1979: 90–92).
- 32 On “genetic drift,” “sexual selection,” “gene flow,” and “migration,” see Smedley 1993: 301.

At this point, it is generally believed that “old world” diseases were the principal cause of Native American mortality in the post-1492 period and that they had a particularly devastating effect in the tropical lowland environments of the Caribbean and coastal Mexico—including the Olmec region. It also appears that contact between the two “worlds” is ruled out prior to 1492 by the mere fact that plants and animals were not exchanged until after this period. See Crosby 1972: 38, 44–51; 1986; 1993. Also see McNeill 1976: 176–207, 312 n. 28; and Verano and Ubelaker 1992.

- 33 According to Legrand H. Clegg II, the typical “Indian or red man . . . was of Mongoloid stock with a broad head, straight, black hair, broad and prominent cheekbones, and a broad concave nose.” See Clegg 1992 [1979]: 231.

- The majority of scholars now believe that the colossal stone heads are naturalistic portraits of Olmec rulers who were representative of the indigenous population of the Gulf coast region of Tabasco at the time of the alleged contact. See Clewlow 1967: 7, 10–13; Coe 1989: 77; Diehl 1990: 70; Grove 1984: 129; Lowe 1989: 43, 45; Miller 1986: 21; Reader's Digest 1986: 134; and Sabloff 1989: 145.
- 34 Alternative explanations for the Olmec stone heads are found in Bernal 1969: 25–28, 56–57; Clewlow 1967: 7–9, 10–15; De la Fuente 1992: 130–32, 210; Feder 1990: 75–78; Piña Chan 1989: III.
 - 35 See Van Sertima 1976: 150; 1992b, 37, 40; 1992c [1983]: 55, 61. Contradicting Van Sertima's assertion, a number of scholars have noted that the headgear on some of the colossal stone heads are decorated with "jaguar claws," "jaguar paw prints," "jaguar paw-wings," or an "eagle's foot." See Coe and Diehl 1980: 310, 392; Easby and Scott 1970: 70 (fig. 3), 72; Grove 1981: 65; Miller 1986: 21; and Piña Chan 1989: pl. 45.
 - 36 See especially Furst 1996: 69–81; Reilly 1989; De la Fuente 1992: 128 (fig. 9); Easby and Scott 1970: 73 (fig. 4) and pls. 35, 40–44, 70; Reader's Digest 1986: 139 (illustration and caption); and Chandler 1992: 267–28, 274–38. Also see the discussion in Furst 1968; Davies 1979: 92; and Coe 1989: 73.
 - 37 See, for example, Bernal 1969: pl. 14; Easby and Scott 1970: 73 (fig. 4) and pls. 12, 37, 38, 40; Piña Chan 1989: 169 n. 44, pl. 66; and Princeton University, Art Museum 1996.
 - 38 Roman Piña Chan, Beatriz De la Fuente, Matthew Stirling, and others have called attention to the idealization and the stylistic details that were used to carve the colossal stone heads. At the same time, Bernal and De la Fuente argue against the consensus view that the colossal stone heads are actual portraits of Olmec rulers. They favor an interpretation that sees the colossal heads as symbols or as mythic beings—not as actual persons. See Bernal 1969: 56–57; Clewlow 1967: 11–13; De la Fuente 1992: 130–33; Piña Chan 1989: III; and Stirling 1965: 733.
 - 39 For a discussion of the serious problems that exist with regard to the manufacture of forged artifacts in pre-Columbian art and their frequent initial acceptance by collectors, museums, and scholars, see Reader's Digest 1986: 140; Crossley and Wagner 1987: 98–103; and Jones 1990: 229–31, 288–89, 296–97, 298–99.
 - 40 In this sense, "hegemonism" refers to the view that one society or civilization is culturally superior to another. For example, the notion that was articulated in old grade-school textbooks that the ancient Greeks were culturally superior to their Middle Eastern neighbors because they were inclined toward individualism, liberty, and democratic ideals, while the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Assyrians and other Mesopotamians were the enslaved victims of "oriental despotism." On "hegemonism" in the social sciences and history, see Keto 1992: 3, 17–18, 25, 27, 28–29, 33, 37, 52, 55–58.
 - 41 See, for example, Ben-Jochannan 1972; Diop 1974, 1991; Jackson 1970; James 1976; Williams 1987 [1974]; and Asante 1987, 1988, 1990. See also various essays in the *Journal of African Civilizations*, which Van Sertima edits.
- It also should be noted that many Afrocentrists accept and promote the old rigid Eurocentric definition of "civilization" as a structurally complex society with formal writing and record-keeping systems, monumental art and architecture, hierarchical political institutions, and a bureaucratic centralized state.

- 42 Scholars have noted that ceremonial centers with monumental art, "pyramids" and platform structures were already established along the Peruvian coast by 2600 B.C. or as early as 3100 B.C. This means that they were roughly contemporaneous, or may have even predated the first pyramid complexes of ancient Egypt by roughly four hundred years. See Burger 1992: 27-28, 37-42, 45-52; and Moseley 1992: 109-19.
- 43 See, for example, the listing of audio tapes that are sold through the *Journal of African Civilizations* with titles such as "African Presences in World Cultures," "Re-educating Our Children," "African Presence in Early America," and "Van Sertima before Congress."

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