

## Review

Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (eds) (2000)  
*Senses of Culture: South African culture studies*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.

Dennis Walder

In his 1993 Reith Lectures, Edward Said defined the role of the intellectual as 'speaking truth to power'. Questioning, not to say undermining, authority has to be the most important job of thinking people in any society, even one like South Africa today, in which scepticism is likely to be taken as unpatriotic or irresponsible. But the structures of power in any society demand analysis and interrogation, if only because power always corrupts. It is the great strength of the cultural studies project worldwide to offer ways of approaching the myriad phenomena of lived existences so as to develop systematic critiques of their relations to power. It is the great weakness of this project frequently to lose its focus in jargon, abstraction and a certain naïve triumphalism – as if it were the only area of the human sciences or the arts to engage with power.

Both the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of the cultural studies project are apparent in Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael's rich and varied new collection of 26 essays on aspects of South African culture today. According to Robert Thornton, in the opening of chapter 1, cultural studies was born in the 1960s – that epoch of iconoclasm and attacks upon 'the West' and its institutions. In fact, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in 1964 under the directorship of Richard Hoggart, whose approach to popular culture in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) underpinned the new institute's work, and hence the foundation of cultural studies as a new area of the humanities and, subsequently, the social sciences. But, as everyone seems to forget, Hoggart's book was modelled upon FR Leavis' and *Scrutiny's* original work in the 1930s on the cultural context of literary texts – an important

originating source that helps explain the otherwise surprising emphasis upon literary analysis in cultural studies, as well as its often overtly moralising, ahistorical tendency; and perhaps also, as an oppositional reflex, its often limited, politically and philosophically reductionist accounts of literary or other aesthetic phenomena. After 1968, when Stuart Hall replaced Hoggart, the Centre's work shifted towards the 'neglected' popular and 'mass' cultural arena, at the same time as it moved out of the English Department at Birmingham to become an independent school, increasingly sociological and Marxist in emphasis. This tendency has increased since Hall's departure for the Chair in Sociology at the Open University – a post from which he has since retired, to be replaced by Tony Bennett, who shares Hall's interest in the analysis of practices and institutions, rather than empirical investigation.

I mention all this to clear the air a little, and to suggest that it would be useful to draw up the lines of connection and disconnection between South African cultural studies and its British (and American – people like Andrew Ross developed the Birmingham initiative in new directions) antecedents, rather than to try and give the impression of always breaking new ground, when what you are doing is building on the (often unexamined) assumptions of your predecessors – including, for example, in the South African context, truly groundbreaking works like David Coplan's now-familiar study of black urban popular culture, *In Township Tonight!* (1985). But although the first of the seven sections into which *Senses of Culture* is divided is called 'Reflection', hence claiming to be self-consciously self-reflexive, the book's overall tendency is to ignore those who went ahead of it – or to offer dismissive remarks such as those made by Nuttall and Michael in their Introduction, where they argue that cultural studies in South Africa up to now has been 'overdetermined' by 'the political', by 'the inflation of resistance', and by a fixation upon 'racial supremacy and racial victimhood'. Who are they thinking of? Surely such remarks cannot seriously be intended for the work of Coplan – or, more recently, cultural critics such as Dorothy Driver, Liz Gunner, Isabel Hofmeyr, Anne McClintock, Rob Nixon or even, under the rubric of Theatre Studies, Loren Kruger?

Where, then, do Nuttall and Michael think we should be going now? If the political, 'resistance' and racial inflection of earlier studies was problematic, how should cultural studies be reconceived? By taking on 'the concept of creolisation – a concept that has', they breathlessly report,

'already begun to be used by cultural theorists in South Africa'. Creolization, they argue, leaning on the Martiniquan novelist and theorist Edouard Glissant, 'carries an inflection beyond both multiculturalism and hybridity and more accurately reflects what we want to say about contemporary South African culture'. But what they want to say never becomes clear and, indeed, fortunately for their book's success, this 'new' concept (which carries considerable historical and racial baggage and is far from new), is largely ignored by their contributors. The exceptions – such as Denis-Constant Martin's account of 'Cape Town's Coon Carnival' and Zimitri Erasmus on 'Hair Politics' – these exceptions use the notion in contradictory ways: as a means of identifying a communal survival strategy in the familiar Cape festival on the one hand (Martin), and, on the other, to identify the aftermath of 'colonialism, slavery and genocide', no less, in hair-styling (Erasmus). And the book's concluding 'inherently diasporic' short story – as the editors call it – merely collapses under the weight of editorial assumption.

But if no very clear approach emerges from this collection of essays, some indication of its general drift may be discerned in the recurrent invocation of Foucault and Raymond Williams by contributors, indicating the rootedness of their thinking in cultural studies as traditionally conceived. Despite its lack of real theoretical drive or originality, the book's value lies in its remarkable range and variety, in the manifest interest of what it claims is currently visible – or, to accept one useful editorial nudge, is currently to be heard as well as seen. Carefully listening to kwaito (Simon Stephens), to composer Joseph Shabalala (Christopher Ballantine) or to Zulu radio (Liz Gunner) is revealed to be as semiotically fruitful as watching soap opera in the theatre (Miki Flockemann), South African cinema (Lesley Marx), TV game shows (Desiree Lewis) or looking at hip-hop graffiti (Sandra Kloppe); while the performance of soccer rites (Torgeir Fjeld), beauty contests (Rita Barnard), and Vhavenda symbology (Oren Kaplan) appears to confirm the continual repositioning (if not exactly liberation) of socio-cultural behaviour in the 1990s.

There are many incidental insights in the book. Ashraf Jamal's interviews with contemporary South African theatreworkers from Jane Taylor and Peter Hayes to Reza de Wet and Fred Abrahamse produce some particularly useful thoughts about the redefinition of the stage at a time when, as Gerhard Rudolf points out, theatres are empty and musicals sold out, as audiences go for spectacle rather than challenge. Another set of interviewees

questions Mbeki's over-sold notion of an African Renaissance – as Zakes Mda sharply remarks: 'Emancipation in all its facets is necessary to sustain any renaissance'. Some of these 'facets' are touched on in the survey of recent autobiographical voices (including, however, a damagingly uncritical account of Antje Krog) by Nuttall and Michael; in David Schalkwyk's modest and sensitive analysis of 'Writing from Prison'; in Leslie Witz's analysis of the re-writing of the van Riebeeck story; and in the three pieces placed in the section entitled 'Space' – Steven Robins on the failure of urban planning to take up the 'post-apartheid' challenge to free the city; Abdoumalig Simone on the pressing dilemmas being faced by African immigrants in Johannesburg; Justin Fox on 'the road' as a space of new freedom, but 'freedom with teeth' and, finally, Martin Hall's intriguing attempt to deal with the ambivalent impact and potential of South African digital culture – 'if there is such a thing'.

If all this makes the book seem rather a rag-bag, that is true. But it is a bag full of treasures.