

# Rewriting Modernity

STUDIES IN BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY HISTORY



expressive culture have seldom been raised to the level of theory on anything like a comparable basis. This book is not wholly an attempt to address this lacuna, but the problem is certainly part of its *raison d'être*. If I am cautious on this point, the reason is that my overriding concern is not to fuel the academic polemic around postcolonial theory but to engage with the record of South Africa's literary-intellectual and cultural life.

The relationship between theory and empirical interpretation is surely a reciprocal one. Thus far, however, postcolonial theory has not sat comfortably with South African realities. The proposal I offer in *Rewriting modernity* is that we might begin again at the inductive end, in order to gauge what new emphases within theory might be developed from studying the cultural transactions of the past. In time, South Africa might come to be recognised as a particular theoretical space with its own genealogy amongst the formations of postcolonial theory.

## Introduction

Your cattle are gone, my countrymen!  
Go rescue them! Go rescue them!  
Leave the breechloader alone  
And turn to the pen.  
Take paper and ink,  
For that is your shield.  
Your rights are going!  
So pick up your pen.  
Load it, load it with ink.  
Sit on a chair.  
Repair not to Hoho.  
But fire with your pen.<sup>1</sup>

I.W. Ciatsho (1882)

The African people's cultural struggle is as important as the political because both aim at establishing the African as a free citizen.<sup>2</sup>

H.I.E. Dhlomo (1944)

Two general historical conditions mark South Africa's post-colonial history. The first is its textured postcoloniality, by which I mean that it combines the histories of settler-colonial and migrant communities with that of indigenous societies. In a sense, it combines in one country the histories of Australia and Nigeria (if I may be allowed to simplify their histories for a moment). In other words, in South Africa the heirs of settler and autochthonous cultures have gone together down the road of finding a common basis for their political, economic, and cultural life, following the

departure of the colonial and later the imperial powers – first the Dutch, then the British – which so decisively shaped the region.

Further layers of complexity need to be added to this picture. Within settler-colonialism, South Africa went through a phase of racist republicanism that all but severed the country's tenuous connections to Europe. Everyone has been marked by this process, some more brutally than others, but even English-speaking South Africans were taken further away from their English apron-strings by Afrikaner republicanism than their anglophone cousins in other countries of the British Commonwealth. Indeed, for much of apartheid, South Africa defined itself outside of traditional colonial ties altogether, seeking dubious alliances almost randomly, that is, with similarly totalitarian regimes wherever it could find them. Then, within the traditions of anti-colonial resistance, the struggle for self-government and democracy was defined, predominantly, as secular and non-racial, a situation that still puzzles sympathisers familiar with the more ethnically driven movements for decolonisation around the world.

We can pass over these and other discriminations, however, in order to capture the general state of affairs: in a formal sense, South Africa became postcolonial in 1910 with the Act of Union, which brought about a coalition of Boer and Briton in a white colonial state; a bleaker kind of postcoloniality emerged with the triumph of Afrikaner republicanism after the National Party's electoral victory in 1948; then, mercifully, in 1994, a constitutionally-defined, non-racial democracy was established, representing the point at which these various postcolonial histories have begun to coalesce, at least in the legal sense.

The second general historical condition governing South Africa's postcoloniality is its experience of an aggressive modernisation, a situation that began with the industrialisation of the mining industry in the 1880s. Industrialisation, together with administrative centralisation (based on models of colonial control over frontier conditions earlier in the century) created the conditions for the

emergence of a pan-ethnic, non-racial movement for decolonisation (in the discourse of the African National Congress [ANC], the 'national democratic revolution') in predominantly urban and poly-lingual environments. Far from being the natural expression of residual, primordial ethnic loyalties, apartheid itself was a quixotic attempt by the National Party to put this process of social confluence into reverse, essentially an attempt to police intimacy (nowhere was this more apparent than in its absurd laws attempting to regulate sexual contact between the races). In the long run, the ANC was able to capitalise on this aggressive modernity, by harnessing its centripetal forces and using them against the white minority rule that had tried unsuccessfully to balkanise the country. Even in its most gentlemanly phase, when it was ruled by a patrician group of missionary converts, the ANC was always in possession of a code of modernity that would eventually be triumphant. It always held the right cards.

*Rewriting modernity* tells a part of that story, the part that can be traced in black literature, beginning with the foundations of an indigenised local print culture in the nineteenth century, then continuing down to the experimentation with modernism by contemporary authors. It is a study of key episodes in South Africa's literary and cultural history which argues, essentially, that the use by black intellectuals of print culture has been crucial to their establishing themselves as modern subjects, in direct opposition to the identities ascribed to them in colonial and apartheid ideology.

MODERNITY IS, of course, a notoriously baggy concept that resists narrow definition. In the chapters that follow, the writers themselves guide me as they articulate their experience of modernity. We will find that the writers of each generation encounter it in a slightly different guise. If a simple philosophical definition were available, it might be that modernity is the currently governing concept of what it means to be a subject of history. It refers not only to technology and the emergence of an administered and industrialised

society, but also to that fluid but powerful system of ideas that we inherit from the bourgeois revolutions of Europe in the late eighteenth century – ideas such as autonomy, personhood, rights, and citizenship.

These concepts, or their equivalents, could be found in many cultures, of both the past and the present, where they exist independently of the Western paradigm. Nevertheless, the *force* with which the post-Enlightenment ideoscape has been imposed on the world over the last 300 years or so has ensured that most societies have now come to define themselves in relation to it. In South Africa, modernity is inextricably linked to colonialism. Its promises were offered selectively to settler-colonials and their heirs and to a handful of indigenous people trained as an élite. Under apartheid, this history was exacerbated, with masses of people being proletarianised and (in a contradictory move) confined to pre-modern, and less than fully human, forms of social life and identity. For most black South Africans, therefore, modernity's promises have been fraudulent and inherently contradictory.

And yet it would seem that those promises, at least in their ideal forms, are so desirable that people cannot do without them. Following Gayatri Spivak, who speaks of this as *catachresis*, Robert Young points to 'a space that the postcolonial does not want, but has no option, to inhabit'. It is the space, says Young, of 'history itself' (2001, 418). There is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity, unless one is to accept isolation or eccentricity. In practice, however, people facing this situation make a continual effort to translate modernity's promises into their own situations and histories, indeed to de-Europeanise them wherever possible. Intellectuals play an important role in this enterprise, and it is one of the key historical functions of black South African writing culture to translate modernity into South African terms, to wrest its promises away from corruption and give them new meaning. This process, I argue, entails acts of *transculturation*, the end-products of which can be seen in the vibrant syncretism of the country's post-apartheid democracy.

SOME READERS WILL ask, why emphasise writing and print at the expense of orality, which is so much a feature of South African expressive culture? I do not ignore the oral. Indeed, the oral and the written are often in a symbiosis, notably where writers who move easily between the two seek to develop the resources of oral culture into a written literature. Nevertheless, I make no apology for concentrating on writing, because whilst oral culture is a renewable and living reality, writing's relationship with modernity is peculiarly intimate. Citashe's famous poem, quoted in the epigraph at the start of this Introduction, illustrates this. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Citashe could say that what we have come to call the 'primary resistance' of the pen – the 'pen' representing several 'secondary resistance' of the pen – the 'pen' representing several aspects of colonial modernity such as education, Christianity, journalism, and political organisation. The poem, together with H.I.E. Dhlomo's remark, defines the parameters of this study: black South African writing has from its inception sought to appropriate intrusive technologies and ideas, displace their corrupted imaginaries, and create spaces in which intellectuals and their communities can reconstruct themselves as 'free citizens'.

This approach to the literary-intellectual history of South Africa is the product of several considerations, some historiographical, some theoretical, and some personal. The personal ones I touched on in the Preface; here, I will refer to the other, perhaps more important ones. The historiographical argument, stated simply, is that the post-apartheid situation requires a fresh approach to the cultural archive (using this term loosely, to refer to the accumulated expressive culture of the past). Some might disagree. In fact, in the Preface to his recently re-issued *Southern African Literatures* Michael Chapman argues that the end of apartheid does not have to entail a change in the way we relate to the cultural past, given the persistence of inequality both locally and on a global scale (2003, xii). Although I would share this political vision, I am not sure that it translates into the kind of reading that is most useful to the present – or particularly, that it answers to the hunger of current students, who

seem more than ever to want to locate themselves as global citizens. Chapter 1, on what I have called 'the transculturation of enlightenment', was originally written in 1994, in the months preceding and following South Africa's first democratic elections.<sup>3</sup> It was an attempt to understand the historical-cultural roots of what I was witnessing in those remarkable events. The rest of the chapters, written at various times during the past ten years, were conceived in the wake of that first chapter, each of them an attempt to explore a particular episode in the same intellectual history.

TO STRAY BRIEFLY into the context: to be sure, constitutional democracy has not produced economic and social emancipation for the majority of the country's people. I could speak of the ways in which the country's celebrated pluralism masks the racist legacies of the past; of a deepening or a 'normalisation' of class division as the middle class becomes more black than white; of official corruption; of faltering public institutions – in education, and in the health sector in the context of an HIV/AIDS pandemic; of capital being directed to arms procurement rather than social development, and so on. Despite all this, the basic *script* of the present, both in constitutional and moral terms, has fundamentally changed. It is a script that could be described broadly as an attempt to re-enter the world of global modernity. The historical moment in which this re-entry is being attempted gives it an air of promise but also of danger. The prevailing paradigm, in the sense of a dominant political economy, is obviously liberal or transnational capitalism. The question for South Africa, then, is how to translate the terms of this current version of modernity in ways that are appropriate to our history and the country's political, social and cultural priorities. The nature of that 'translation' is the key, since the challenge is whether the country will repeat liberal capitalism's manifest failures or whether it will translate its underlying promises appropriately.

Such is the game that the post-apartheid settlement is playing. The fact that *South Africa*, with its particular history, is playing it

means that the project involves more than simply another exercise in making liberal capitalism work. It also involves attempts to reconstruct modernity's longer history, beginning with the Enlightenment and some of its humanitarian if rather disabled discourses, into a vision for the future that involves, amongst other things, re-connecting the nation-state with a culture of rights and a truly participatory democracy. It means, in other words, localising and actualising what have become compromised universal principles.

What we call this vision is not especially important, but terms such as 'critical humanism', and a 'new cosmopolitanism', have been proposed.<sup>4</sup> I am conscious in writing such phrases how naïve, hubristic, even how anachronistic they seem. Nevertheless, the South African experiment continues to interest and give hope to many who see little grounds for optimism in the current geopolitical scene. John Comaroff puts this well in a recent interview:

... the reason that South Africa grabbed so much world attention in the mid-1990s is because it represented a heroic, hopeful effort to build a modernist nation-state under postmodern postmortem conditions; at just the time, that is, when the contradictions of modernity were becoming inescapable. As Eric Hobsbawm said then, the African National Congress was perhaps the last great Euronationalist movement. He was not altogether wrong. (Bhabha and Comaroff 2002, 32)

In different terms, Homi Bhabha speaks of a 'time-lag' in postcolonial forms of modernity, a being-out-of-step with 'world' history that operates, paradoxically, as a source of potential renewal (1994, 239–41). Such may be the South African case at present. But to return to the purposes of this book: they do *not* involve attempts to sell or celebrate the country's cause nor its currently dominant political culture. Rather, I seek to take the discourse of the times into the field of literary and cultural studies, and literary history in particular. The task is to explore the cultural history of the present.

U. T. ... no. of the kind ...

THERE HAS BEEN a lively literary-historiographical debate in the last ten years in South Africa, but it is one that has been conducted in other terms than these. Predominantly (perhaps predictably) the main issue has been how to cope with difference, how to write a properly comparative and integrated literary history that takes into account the multiplicity of languages, traditions, and social spaces in the country, the kind of literary history which could overcome the cultural balkanisation that was apartheid's peculiar *forte*. In fact, long before 1994, literary historians such as Albert Gérard looked forward to a time when such a history would be possible (for example, Gérard 1986, 172). Despite several bold developments, however, most notably Michael Chapman's encyclopaedic achievement, there has been surprisingly little consensus as to what a national-cultural literary history *should* look like, and even less about whether such a history would actually be desirable.<sup>5</sup> If the desire for an integrated literary history was a result, or perhaps a reflex, of pressures to overcome the divisive legacy of colonialism and apartheid, then it is already apparent from the sheer irresolution of the debate that the post-apartheid order is exercising our imaginations in ways that fall outside of the previously dominant paradigm. The axis has been shifting, I would suggest, from an emphasis on how to write about sameness and difference, to writing about *temporality*, which is to say, writing about one's place in history or one's place in the present and future.

Another reflex of the past has been the tendency to assume that there is really only one story to be told about black literary and cultural history: that of the growth of political consciousness. That narrative runs something like this: from a phase of mission-educated intellectual colonisation from around the mid-nineteenth century to 1912 (when the Congress movement was established), through the compromised civility of the 'New African' generation in the 1930s and 40s, to the lively, avowedly urban *Drum* era, to the period of exile in the 1960s, to the resurgent militancy of Black Consciousness in the 1970s, and then the trade union poetry of the 1980s (which seemed to bring together racial and class mobilisation)

the narrative is one of a developing and finally triumphant political confidence. To be sure, this is not a story that I would want to treat lightly. Indeed, to suggest anything other than that writers have always seen their roles as being about promoting the liberation of their people would be to traduce some of the most important claims of the literature. There are, however, problems with this narrative. Firstly, it is uni-dimensional. The literary history shows writers engaged at a number of different levels, not only the obviously political. There are debates about religion, especially the place of black people in Christianity, about the value of written narrative as a way of claiming historical continuity and identity, about art and aesthetics, about gender, about the value of tradition, about the meaning of selfhood, about the social imagination. The chapters in this book will show that what we might be tempted to call the 'civil turn' in post-apartheid society, has actually been with us all along – what is different is simply our capacity to recognise what has always been part of a complex picture.

Secondly, the stringent narrative produces condescension about all but the most recent of texts. In fact, *all* texts, in this account, but especially those of the early years, are allegorised as representing particular phases or periods, like coloured pins on a battle-map. And yet this is supposed to be an intellectual history: the qualities of these texts, their construction, the journeys inscribed in them, have been obscured in the teleology. It is time to get beyond the survey to a more heuristic mode of reading, one that takes the literature's ideas more seriously. If we attend closely to the writing, I suggest we will find that resistance is a many-faceted thing, that it has been with us from the beginning, though sometimes at sub-textual levels that require careful excavation. This approach requires some adjustment to traditional forms of criticism; it certainly requires a suspension of strong evaluations, whether aesthetic or political, until something like an adequate contextualisation has been achieved.

Zakes Mda, arguably the most innovative of writers on the post-apartheid scene has also succeeded (albeit in the language of fiction)

that the present demands a fresh approach to the cultural archive. In his recent novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Mda shifts the emphasis away from the question of resistance to apartheid, narrowly conceived, and gives his fiction a wholly new orientation: the relationships that black humanity in South Africa has forged with modernity at various points in its history. Mda does this by deprivileging the struggle years as those of 'the middle generations', foregrounding instead two moments of seminal importance, indeed of crisis: namely, 1857, the year of the Cattle-Killing Movement in the Eastern Cape, and 1994, the year in which formal democracy was achieved. The significance of these dates is that they are moments of choice. As such, they represent high water marks in the definition of agency in black historical and cultural identity. In the Cattle Killing, the argument had to do with the efficacy of local knowledge-systems as they try to come to terms with the challenge of settler-colonialism. In 1994, the argument is related, circling around the choice in post-apartheid national development between isolationism or a version of indigenised modernity. Mda presents two historical narratives, each with its own cast of characters, in parallel, with continuities being suggested between the events and characters. In Mda's novel, therefore, what I have called the axis of temporality has moved to the centre of attention, the result being that it enables both a clearer dramatisation of choice and agency within each generation, and a richer and wider canvas for the work of the post-apartheid interpretive artist. It is that perspective that I wish to carry over into literary-cultural criticism.

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FROM THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL issues, let me turn to questions of theory, by which I mean transnational currents in reading and their relationship to South African literature. The international field most relevant to South African writing, the one enjoying extraordinary, if rather problematic, prominence at present, is postcolonial studies. In the last decade, one of globalisation's effects on academic life

has been to bring together, under the sign of the 'postcolonial', developments in literary and cultural studies that had been emerging fairly contentedly in their own spheres for several decades.

Postcolonial theory in the form of [Colonial discourse analysis] \* has been at work in what we might conveniently call the First World, emphasising the discourses of Empire at first, but gradually (and belatedly) discovering writing from outside the United Kingdom and the United States (to use the Modern Languages Association's compromised description). The legacy of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which was the dominant mode in relation to imperial discourses led, however, to an unsteady treatment of non-metropolitan writing, with suspicions of a new hegemony emanating from cultures positioned on the so-called 'periphery'. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was obviously one of the founding texts of this tradition, although his later *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) avoided the dangers I have mentioned.

Emanating from a different sphere altogether, though sometimes confused with colonial discourse analysis, is the brand of what I would call comparative literary history that grew out of 'the new E/english literatures' and then Commonwealth literary studies. Canadians and especially Australians have led the way in theorising this version of postcolonial studies (rather than postcolonial theory, now) for reasons we might speculate about. From the South African corner of the world, it sometimes seems that a largely white anglophone comparative-literary-historical practice has developed as an expression of the confident maturation of settler-colonial cultures, emphasising themes of displacement and the creation of new identities. South African historical conditions, however, have rendered that project suspect. *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) is obviously the ur-text in this tradition, followed by a substantial literature complicating and enriching the positions taken in it. Behind this brand of postcolonial studies, I should also mention, lies the work of generations of postcolonial writers in whose work many later developments in postcolonial studies were anticipated.

What is this brand?

Then, to continue with the southern African perspective, the 'postcolonial' could also be linked to a loose tradition of nation-based studies, developing initially on an axis between the United Kingdom and various African universities, then increasingly involving scholars in the United States, very much as the critical apparatus that accompanied the Heinemann African Writers Series. The contiguous presence of this critical literature as a paradigm of a new version of 'English studies' was strong in South Africa for several decades, so much so that it exercised a stronger influence than any version of 'Commonwealth Literature' more broadly might have done. The reason for this was no doubt the fascination of South Africans living under apartheid for the literary culture of a continent that had already passed through a political decolonisation. However, the distribution of 'theory' across these contexts has been uneven and incongruous. Given the literary-intellectual feuding in this country in the years of late apartheid, predominantly between liberalism and Marxism (and to a lesser extent also between liberalism and feminism and poststructuralism), postcolonial African criticism, at least until the 1980s, seemed remarkably orthodox and peculiarly 'metropolitan' in its assumptions. It found various kinds of organicism, empiricism and formalism taken over from British and American new criticism to be extremely congenial in the dominant ethos of cultural nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

These communities of reading – and there were others, but I have mentioned the most visible ones – were, and are, by no means hermetic, and my description is reductive. The underlying point, however, is that the 'postcolonial' has brought together critical lineages and the intuitions that accompany them in relationships that are bound to be fractious. Given the various contexts and histories involved, what is surprising is that so many participants seem to expect the field to deliver consensus. For how else can we explain such a welter of rebarbative accusations and counter-accusations over whose political card remains cleanest, a situation that detracts from the empirical work that needs to be done? Over the last few years, resistance to early assumptions that *American*

emanating from one kind of expressive culture can be generalised to others seems to have produced a general retreat, so that if there is consensus now, it is that the exigencies of the local and the historically specific need to be respected. There is no longer the chimera of a 'postcolonial position', nor even a common theoretical tradition.<sup>7</sup> However, while there may not be consensus, the globalisation of academic culture has seen to it that resources and ideas are being more widely distributed, with the result that what the 'postcolonial' does do is name those institutional spaces in which people from widely different backgrounds and situations can at least talk to one another. In the globalised spaces of postcolonial studies, it seems possible to begin the comparative mapping rather more carefully now, given the increasing agreement on the need to respect local specificity.

It is in this light, then, that I come back to the question of the place of South African writing on the postcolonial scene. We must acknowledge straight away that white writing of the stature of J.M. Coetzee's and Nadine Gordimer's – the country's two Nobel laureates in literature – does receive far more attention than any other writing, whether by black writers or in other languages than English. This is, of course, a pattern that has prevailed in surreptitiously anglocentric versions of postcolonial studies for some time. We have to note that despite a few exceptions – the lively interest in Bessie Head, for example – there is a general pattern involving the isolation of black writing from international communities of readers, and when we consider the full range of black writing culture, which goes beyond the strictly literary, not to mention the proximity of writing and oral culture, the isolation looks even deeper.

There are reasons other than the failings of anglocentrism for this isolation. Historical pressures have produced an image of South Africa's black writing as a literature in extremis. The common view is that a uniquely troubled history has brought out a literature whose necessarily restricted function has been to support political liberation.<sup>8</sup>

you cannot get the fucking books!



its moments, black writing has indeed been produced out of the experience of brutality – torture, massacre, assassination, lifelong confinement. To the extent that this is indeed its provenance, we might note Achille Mbembe's astute comment when he says, from 'Martin Luther King to Nelson Mandela, [the] absolute authority granted to death or the possibility of death, this [otherworldliness of freedom] is a fundamental aspect of modern black narratives of redemption' (Mbembe 2004, 5).

Inescapable it may be, but the 'otherworldliness of freedom' of which Mbembe speaks is tragically isolating. Etymologically, being *in extremis* is to be near death; therefore, writing which is *in extremis* issues from a sacred circle, and the polite response from those who cannot enter might be to turn quietly away, to close the book and be silent. Reflecting on the post-apartheid situation and its challenges, Mbembe also says, 'there comes a time when freedom has to be disentangled from the histories of spilled blood and sacrificial cruelty' (2004, 5). The practice of freedom, in other words, requires a suspension of otherworldliness, difficult though this may be. My hope, then, is that the time is right for a more heterogeneous and cosmopolitan dialogue, although I recognise that many may still disagree.

LET ME PROPOSE a way forward by referring to a contiguous tradition in South African writing, in particular to J.M. Coetzee's work on white settler-colonial literature. In 1988, Coetzee published a collection of essays called *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, in which he was concerned with 'the ideas, the great intellectual schemas, through which South Africa has been thought by Europe; and with the land itself, South Africa as landscape and landed property' (Coetzee 1988, 10). The phrase 'white writing', he was careful to add, did not 'imply the existence of a body of writing different in nature from black writing. White writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (11). *White writing is writing of a...*

self and its relationship to Africa; it is writing in search of a language in which the self and Africa can enter into a fulfilled, reciprocal relationship. Needless to say, the hard realities of the colonial encounter preclude an easy passage into this reciprocity. Indeed, Coetzee is astute in showing the impossible longings, delusions and evasions in white writing in English-language South African literature of the colonial and early apartheid periods, so much so that it is disquietingly evident that we can hardly speak of a living tradition in 'white writing', certainly not one that, in the best sense, and with a few exceptions, nourishes writers of Coetzee's own and subsequent generations.

A question left unexplored in *White Writing* is whether it is true that we can really speak of a writing that is not 'different in nature from black writing', but that is distinguished 'only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (Coetzee 1988, 11). To speak pragmatically, the concerns that generate white writing are not likely to be those of most black writers. The question then becomes whether we can reverse Coetzee's terms, so that we inquire about the existence of a discourse representing the concerns of people who might be 'no longer African, but not yet European'? Such a question, though intriguing, fails to hit the mark. 'Yet' would imply a European teleology for black writing, an inappropriate implication given that the whole orientation of such writing would be towards cultural decolonisation, possibly African nationalism, however inclusive such a nationalism might be. Then, the phrase Coetzee uses in relation to white writing, 'no longer European, not yet African', purposefully shifts the emphasis away from the historical, bodily realities of race towards a more abstract concept of discourse. Such a move in the context of black expressive culture strikes me as inappropriate, since it is frequently about race and the historical body and their place in language and relations of power. <sup>what does this look like?</sup>

Coetzee's terms, then, are not easily transferable to black writing, which shows that it is not (yet) possible to avoid differentiations <sup>between the language of the text. In one sense, however, what</sup>

Coetzee says of white writing opens a question that could be applicable to South Africa's writing culture as a whole: if white writing emerges from a place of *instability, tension, and negotiation* – in this instance, between the self and Africa – is there an equivalently unstable place in black discourse? The answer is yes. While the vectors may point in other directions – in white writing, the self is 'here' while Africa is 'there' – tension and instability are nevertheless inherent in the relationships with modernity that black writers have carved out for themselves. The chapters that follow will give historical content to this assertion, but at this point, let me encapsulate things by saying that black intellectual life in South Africa often seems to have the character of a Faustian wager. This is true of the mission-educated intellectual toying with Christian liberalism; of the poet who experiments with European forms while writing in an indigenous language; of the modernist who uses fragmented prose forms to convey the precariousness of life in a township; even of the Black Consciousness activist who takes over liberal ideas of individualism, personhood, and autonomy, in an act of self-empowerment.<sup>9</sup>

We might extend Coetzee's lead, then, and suggest that tension, instability, and negotiation across a historical and cross-cultural divide permeate South African writing; they may even be the most characteristic features of all the country's literature. Homi Bhabha's Third Space is, in a sense, the culture's *sine qua non*. This observation is scarcely new. In fact, the historiographers I alluded to earlier, notably Stephen Gray and Leon de Kock, have agreed that South African literature is characterised by writing that, no matter from which community it comes, is forced into self-consciousness about difference – by the very pervasiveness of difference, or at least by the presence and persistence of other, contiguous and powerful, voices. De Kock refers to this as an obsession with the 'seam', the site of repeated efforts to join what is separate, to 'suture the incommensurate', the result being a process that only 'bears the mark of its own crisis' (2001, 276).

I have spoken of tensions across historical divides...

consciousness of difference not so as to conflate various degrees and forms of resistance and sites of enunciation within a common national-cultural framework.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I have done so in order to suggest that colonialism in South Africa has had the effect of disallowing everyone from remaining unchanged, and therefore has kept histories, traditions and identities radically in flux. The aggressiveness of modernity in South Africa has seen to this, although attempts to order patterns of settlement systematically and on a wide scale, to facilitate settler-colonial agriculture and political control, go back to the 1820s. This observation, first stated in the opening paragraphs of this Introduction, informs the overarching theoretical position that I wish to offer in this Introduction: the term transculturation is an apt description of the conditions governing the formation of black writing culture in South Africa. As such, it also represents a useful point of connection between international postcolonial studies and local black writing. In Chapter 1, I describe more fully the socio-historical basis of this position by revisiting nineteenth-century colonial relations, but let me develop the basic idea here.

The origin of the notion of transculturation lies in the work of Fernando Ortiz, the great Cuban anthropologist of the 1940s and 50s. It has received surprisingly little attention in English-language scholarship, although Mary Louise Pratt refers to it in *Imperial Eyes* (1992) in the context of Latin American culture. Before Pratt, the Uruguayan critic Angel Rama also applied Ortiz's theory, in *Transculturation Narrativa en América Latina* (Coronil 1995, xxxvi), a work that remains unavailable in English translation. Pratt defines transculturation as the process whereby 'subordinated or marginalised groups select or invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture' (1992, 6). This appears to be the only definition circulating in anglophone theory (Bartolovich 2002, 13), and while it is accurate as far as it goes, it does not capture the extent of Ortiz's intervention.

Ortiz offers the term in dialogue with Bronislaw Malinowski, as

condition of postcolonial societies, a term that implies a degree of passivity on the part of 'recipient' cultures. Transculturation, by contrast, suggests multiple processes, a dialogue in both directions and, most importantly, processes of cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms. Transculturation goes further than the weaker concept of cultural translation, which would be the translation of material from one culture into the terms of another. This is a possible limitation in Pratt's definition. Ortiz intended transculturation as a general description of the historical condition of Cuba throughout history:

The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations. First came the transculturation of the paleolithic Indian to the neolithic, and the disappearance of the latter because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought by the Spaniards. Then the transculturation of an unbroken stream of white immigrants. They were Spaniards, but representatives of different cultures and themselves torn loose, to use the phrase of the time, from the Iberian Peninsula groups and transplanted to a New World, where everything was new to them, nature and people, and where they had to adjust themselves to a new syncretism of cultures. At the same time there was going on the transculturation of a steady human stream of African Negroes coming from all the coastal regions of Africa along the Atlantic, from Senegal, Guinea, the Congo, and Angola and as far away as Mozambique on the opposite shore of that continent. All of them snatched from their original social groups, their own cultures destroyed and crushed under the weight of the cultures in existence here, like sugar cane ground in the rollers of the mill. And still other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins arrived, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn: Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions of the sometime Celestial Kingdom. And each of them torn from his

native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation – in a word, of transculturation. (Ortiz 1995, 98)

The 'counterpoint' provided by such a world stands in direct opposition to myths of essentialism and uniformity in both colonial and nativist forms of self-representation. 'Counterpoint' also suggests the way in which Cuba's history represents an alternative form of modernity, a peripheral modernity that provides its own guarantee of centredness. The philosophical basis of this point of view (as Fernando Coronil, who introduces the 1995 English translation of *Cuban Counterpoint* explains it) is that Ortiz's particular historicism came not from Hegelian idealism but from Spengler: *The Decline of the West* (1918) was translated into Spanish in 1923. Its 'depiction of multiple paths leading toward historical development encouraged many Latin American intellectuals during the inter-war period to view their societies as occupying not a lower stage in the unilinear development of Western civilization, but a unique position in a different historical pattern, one informed by its greater spiritual qualities and by the revitalizing mixture of races' (Coronil 1995, xvii–xix). The theory of alternative or multiple modernities – which is increasingly popular in postcolonial theory as well as cultural anthropology – has seldom received so clear a philosophical underpinning, although it has been around for more than a generation in this form.

The question for our purposes must be, then: does Ortiz's theory apply to South Africa? An honest assessment would acknowledge immediately that the theory does not fit entirely, for the simple reason that in Cuba, in Ortiz's terms, being a foreigner is a common condition, so much so that it almost defines the whole national culture, whereas in South Africa that is manifestly not the case. The autochthonous is not as strained a concept in South Africa as it might be in Cuba. In South Africa, however, the historical conditions I mentioned earlier – a highly textured postcoloniality

and an aggressive modernity – do imply that there have been thoroughgoing processes of transculturation, with far-reaching consequences. To take just one, admittedly controversial example, it is not without an historical basis that the Black Consciousness (BC) movement developed such strong ties with diasporic ideas of racial identity, for the invasive effects of racial capitalism were such that intellectuals such as Steve Biko and his followers were, to a degree, culturally disenfranchised *at home*. Whilst I make this assertion about the BC movement, I would also agree that the concept of transculturation would not account for every aspect of South Africa's cultural history, nor for the countless ways in which South Africans might negotiate questions of identity. There would be some modes of oral culture, for example, that would be less transculturated than others, given the stronger links within oral culture to the autochthonous presence (although that presence could not be found in an entirely unmediated form either). Nevertheless, as a description of the conditions governing the development of writing by black South Africans it remains apt, because this literature has developed from exogenous sources and has ever since been through innumerable processes of adaptation and indigenisation.

It needs to be made explicit that nowhere does the theory of transculturation, as defined by Ortiz, suggest that it occurs in an equal or reciprocal exchange of cultures, despite recent materialist critiques of 'transactional' or 'negotiatory' analyses of colonialism (Parry 2004, 8–9). The transcultural relationship can and often does involve violence of every kind, both structural and direct. Indeed, my contention would be that it is precisely when the colonial relationship is violent, that transcultural formations are likely to emerge. Violence itself could be a mode of transculturation. The critique is directed at a straw target, a residue of a rather shallow and hermetic debate between materialists and poststructuralists, thankfully one that is now receding in pertinence. Interestingly, the apparent opposition between the material and the linguistic is never part of Ortiz's scheme. Indeed, his study foregrounds the role of material commodities in shaping

but only in order to narrativise the play of human interaction between and around them. So concerned is Ortiz with narrative, and especially with allegory, that despite the emphasis on commodities his text has remained an example of inspired *literariness* in anthropological research to subsequent generations of Cuban intellectuals (Coronil 1995, xxxv).

This book seeks to demonstrate that transculturation is an historical and archival reality of black print culture in South Africa. The niche into which this position fits within postcolonial theory lies somewhere between Marxism and what has been called 'culturalism' (Young 2001, 7–9). That is to say, it refuses the opposition between these positions, arguing that understanding local processes, and (recognising material contexts) are indispensable to any responsible account of postcolonial cultural production. In fact, the archival emphasis of the chapters that follow (together with the emphasis on narrative and thick description) participates in the critique and correction of early developments in postcolonial theory, when there may have been a tendency to homogenise and globalise the description of colonial and postcolonial cultures. These chapters also decline the temptation to programmatic materialism, however, partly because it seems to me that the politics of such a position have been thoroughly compromised, not least by Marxist states in Africa, and partly because such an emphasis could de-privilege the subject-construction of intellectuals negotiating their way out of colonial marginalisation. In this regard, I share Robert Young's view that postcolonial theory, far from representing a radical departure from Marxism, 'is distinguished from orthodox European Marxism by combining its critique of objective material conditions with detailed analysis of their subjective effects' (2001, 7).<sup>11</sup> The chapters in this book, while remaining uncompromisingly local as well as attentive to material situations, will seek to track in detail the extremely varied projects and aspirations, whether ideological or aesthetic, of the texts being read. This will necessitate an eclectic methodology that combines historical narration, textual description and analysis, comparative literary studies, and theory. I am hopeful

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the inherent difficulties of postcolonial theory over the last decade or so, of which I will mention two in particular: the inadequacy of centre-periphery binarism, and the related, demeaning notion of authority being disposed exclusively from the metropolis in a linear vector, which carries with it the corollary that 'writing back' is the only possible kind of response – a kind of reversed linearity. The theory of transculturation, combined with the idea of alternative modernities, seems to me to overcome these difficulties. To speak more specifically of the project at hand: my intention is to negotiate a position somewhere between the idea of a colonialism that dictates terms, and blithe concepts such as appropriation and transformation. The middle ground of rewriting interests me, ground to which the historical record attests: a rescripting in and through transculturated discourses of modernity.

IN A RECENT issue of *Public Culture*, Charles Taylor says, 'perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day is understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world' (1999, 153). If we are to understand modernity's multiple and alternative forms, we need to move away from what Taylor calls an 'acultural' notion of what it means – that it is essentially development driven, linear, and diachronic, the same for everyone – and move instead towards accepting that it has a certain cultural aetiology in the West, tied as it is to Protestantism, the Enlightenment, the scientific outlook, and liberal individualism. This 'cultural' view of modernity leads logically to a recognition of alternative modernities, especially in the context of local intellectual cultures.<sup>12</sup>

The reason for my emphasis on the role of intellectual cultures in producing alternative modernities is that this is obviously the provenance of a writing culture. Taylor argues, in fact, that alternative modernities are most likely to develop amongst élites, who engage with modernity most closely whilst seeking to adapt from traditional cultures: 'a call to difference [is] felt by modernising élites

that corresponds to something objective in their situation', writes Taylor (1999, 163). This may be an overemphasis, since I am not convinced that it is *only* the élites who experience modernity this closely, especially in aggressive forms, nor am I sure that it is only the élites who are engaged in producing alternative modernities. Modernity is experienced 'objectively' as much by the migrant labourer as the writer-artist, and the chemistry of alternative modernity would be found in their own terms in many contexts – in oral popular genres and in the African independent churches, for example. It is true, nevertheless, that élites are, indeed, deeply involved in such work of interpretation and re-inscription.

An interesting question here would be how these élites are constituted, not so much in terms of race and class, which seem self-evident, but in terms of gender. Rosemary Jolly has put it to me that *Rewriting modernity* deals with the 'boys' game', an observation that I find as consoling as it is critical. The project of recasting modernity as I describe it may well be inherently masculine. While I would hope that my readings of the texts illustrating this process are reasonably gender-sensitive, it does strike me as inevitable that my efforts to describe and theorise some of the relationships between race and modernity in South African intellectual life will be limited in their scope, and that the relationships between *gender*, race, and modernity require a different and distinctive kind of treatment. I am also conscious of the scholarship that has already gone into such a project, in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (Daymond, et al. 2003), where the distinctiveness of women's experience under colonialism in southern Africa and of feminine discourses in contexts of transculturation have been documented and discussed.

In early versions of the approach developed here, I suggested that the investment in modernity on the part of South Africa's black writers had a 'fugitive' quality, that it produced something like 'fugitive modernities'. By this I meant that such investment was never complete or unguarded. It always involved an element of counter-humanism: it always sought in other words to define itself

outside of received, colonial versions of authority. Fugitiveness, in this sense, has less to do with flight – as in, for example, the fugitive slave culture of nineteenth-century African-American experience – than with the fugitiveness of being in-and-out simultaneously, a condition that is evoked by the musical implications of fugitiveness: glimpses, intimations, aperçus, night-pieces, which take us beyond the cold realities of the present. In case I am construed as being too lyrical, this fugitiveness has a basis in social reality: as Es'kia Mphahlele once put it, 'we are digging our feet into an urban culture on impossible terms . . . Ours is a fugitive culture: borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, rejecting that' (1960, 346).

Homi Bhabha, in conversation with John Comaroff, and searching for whatever it is that constitutes the postcolonial optic, offers several propositions that chime with the main emphases of this book: the re-inscription of modernity, transculturation, modernity's multiple nature under postcolonial conditions, the possibility of a 'fugitive' relation to modernity. Here is Bhabha's version of these themes:

[The postcolonial] is the conviction that being colonial or postcolonial is a way of 'becoming modern', of surviving modernity, without the myth of individual or cultural 'sovereignty' that is so central a tenet of liberal individualism and its sense of serial progress or cultural evolution. The disciplinary and temporal orders of Progress, Rule, Rationality, and the State become corrupted in the colonial and postcolonial conditions where they play a double, aporetic role: as norms of value they make emancipatory claims, crucial to the definition of modern citizenship; however, as part of the power practices of the colonial state they create inequality, injustice, and indignity. It is from the interstices of this paradoxical situation that the postcolonial perspective emerges. It unsettles the ubiquity, the ordinariness of those orders of common sense, those polarities of perception, that modernisation has bequeathed to the rest of the world. So, for instance, postcoloniality is open to the continent and hybrid articulations of the ~~located in the continent~~

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psychic fantasy as part of social rationality, the archaic within the contemporaneous. (Bhabha and Comaroff 2002, 24)

LET ME DRAW this Introduction to a close by mentioning, in brief, what the forms of South African alternative and fugitive modernity are that will be explored in the chapters that follow. I have already mentioned the first, the 'transculturation of enlightenment' that occurs in the journal of Tiyo Soga, where discourses of reason, and Christian emancipation and freedom, which Soga took over from his missionary brethren, are disarticulated from colonial racism and applied in what is arguably the first sustained expression of modern black or Afrocentric consciousness in South Africa.

I proceed in Chapter 2 to a discussion of written narratives – biographical, historical and fictional – in the work of a generation of mission converts and African nationalists: John Knox Bokwe, John Langalibalele Dube, Solomon T. Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, and others. Their writing establishes ideas of collective continuity and alternative teleology in a situation in which they had been schooled to imagine the cultural death of the African.

In Chapter 3, I examine a twenty-year dispute between close allies, B.W. Vilakazi and H.I.E. Dhlomo, who sought to construct what they saw as a 'modern' written literature from the resources of Zulu oral culture. From similar backgrounds, and comparable perspectives, they could not agree on how this passage should be achieved, though both were immersed in the post-Romantic aestheticism of the 1930s.

I then move to the 1950s and 60s, to the apartheid era, passing over the *Drum* period in South African writing (only because it has been so thoroughly examined already) to look at one of its major representatives, Es'kia Mphahlele, and his encounters with the Black Atlantic over the period of his exile. Here, the sense of alternative modernity is doubly removed from the Western paradigm. With his distinctively urban, transcultural background, Mphahlele had difficulty in locating himself in the counter-cultural myths around

Africinity that circulated in the diaspora; over time, he reconciled himself to them and on his return, integrated them into a more encompassing 'African humanism'.

In Chapter 5, I move into the 1970s, to Black Consciousness, where the discourses of anti-colonial liberation and civil rights introduce a radical revisionism into the anti-apartheid struggle and simultaneously into notions of selfhood. The attention falls in this chapter on the poetic genres of lyric and epic, how these forms became transculturated by Black Consciousness, and how and why the changing rhetorical formation necessitated a shift from the one to the other.

Finally, I examine the debate around literary experimentalism, arguing that contemporary black fiction in South Africa does have an 'experimental turn' in which modernist and postmodernist influences have been felt. This is contrary to the way the writing is often perceived, as comprised exclusively of flat, uninventive forms of documentary realism. Such experimentalism needs to be properly understood as the product of a complex web of local history and international, travelling modernism.

From enlightenment discourse, then, through nineteenth-century discourses of collective progress, to post-Romantic aestheticism, to diasporic consciousness, to the influence of anti-colonial discourse on local constructions of self and expressive culture and, finally, to the reception of modernist and postmodernist aesthetic practices: these are some of the 'fugitive modernities' of South African writing culture. They are not meant to be wholly representative, and indeed there are a number of major figures who are not represented here, including Peter Abrahams, Mazisi Kunene, Bessie Head, and others. Such significant omissions indicate the degree to which this book ought *not* to be taken as a representative survey of South African literature. It is not a survey, but a study of significant transitions and transactions in a history that is more variegated and complex than I am able to describe here.

## *The transculturation of enlightenment*

### *The Journal of Tiyo Soga*

Subsequent to a skirmish during the last of what came to be called the frontier wars in the Cape Colony early in 1878, a company of colonial troops was preparing a mass grave for seventeen of their Xhosa enemy when they came across a copy of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* on one of the bodies. The flyleaf bore the following inscription:

Lovedale Missionary Institution. First Prize in English Reading, Junior Division, First Year, awarded to Paul Nkupiso. [Signed] James Macdonald, Lovedale, Dec, 1875. (Shepherd 1940, 210)

Soon afterwards, the discovery was reported in the settler newspaper, the *Tarkastad Chronicle*, together with the sarcastic remark: 'it is unnecessary to make any comment on the subject. The book will be kept as a standing advertisement of missionary labour' (in Shepherd 1940, 210).

Always wary of settler opinion, and arguably the pre-eminent centre of missionary education on the African subcontinent, the Lovedale mission was immediately put on the defensive. The report was false, it said, because no Lovedale boy could possibly have died fighting the Colony. Paul Nkupiso was a loyal 'Fingo', the very people whom the British were trying to protect. The principal, James Stewart, boldly stated that 'sooner or later they would be able to produce Paul Nkupiso in bodily form as the best proof that the whole story was a fabrication — and one of a numerous class of the same order' (Shepherd 1940, 211). His bravado did pay off, for the