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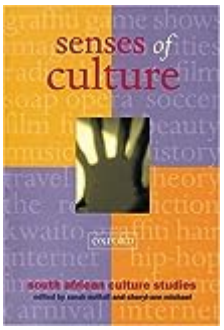

Sarah Nuttall, Cheryl-Ann Michael, eds. *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiii + 547 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-571839-3.

Reviewed by Sean Jacobs (University of London, Birkbeck College)

Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2002)

This book is a substantively massive and theoretically ambitious undertaking. In twenty-five essays (over 500 pages), ranging from interviews, longer rhetorical articles, a number of individual case studies, and a fictional short story about Cape Town, the editors have attempted to outline a terrain of cultural studies that has been neglected in South African academia.

The collection encompasses music (kwaito, hip hop, the composer Joseph Shabalala of Ladysmith Black Mambazo), performance art (from the work of Venda artist Samson Mudzunga to graffiti artists in Cape Town), film ("road movies" about Johannesburg), television (soap operas and games shows), radio (Zulu dramas), the politics of the post-1994 city (local government in Soweto; immigrants in Johannesburg), and other disparate topics such as beauty contests, football, the Internet, and hair.

All these chapters fit well into the editors' agenda (and illuminate the title, although they are not equally well argued) which indicates an aim to "explore not only the preeminence of the visual, but to turn to other senses as new spaces for understanding cultural practice" and "forms of pleasure that destabilize cultural orthodoxies" (p. 18). Given the interdisciplinary nature of "cultural studies", it is not surprising that a wide array of academic disciplines, such as history, literary criticism, anthropology and sociology, are put into practice and fused.

For example, Abdoumaliq Simone in his chapter "Going South: African Immigrants in Johannesburg", which offers probably one of the first serious studies of its kind on this topic, probes new waves of African immigration after 1990 that has settled around Johannesburg and their impact on the changing the South African economic and cultural landscape.

Denis-Constant Martin who has written extensively on the "Coon Carnival" in Cape Town, continues his work on New Year festivals in that city as contested spaces that reflect both adaptation and resistance to apartheid. As Cape Town's tourism body prepares to market the Carnival as a rival to Rio, such politics will become even more significant.

Oren Kaplan's chapter on the performances of Venda artist Samson Mudzunga follows a similar vein. Since 1996, Mudzunga, known more for his woodcarvings in the South African art world, invited Johannesburg-based fine-art institutions to witness a series of performance-based works including a "funeral" with Venda rites, a "miracle", and a "traditional Venda wedding ceremony". Most commentators at the time, particularly in the mainstream art world, interpreted Mudzunga's actions as emphasizing cultural difference and the separation of the Venda people from the Johannesburg metropole. Kaplan, however, suggests that Mudzunga was deliberate. By set-

ting up these "traditional" events, Mudzunga "engaged his marginality–resisting and perpetuating it" (p. 86), while using the art world as sources of influence to access sources of economic and political power.

The same tensions run through a number of other chapters. While the content achieves new breadths, the theoretical aspirations fall short of the editors' ambitions. The main points of Nuttall and Michael's argument are as follows. In the introduction, they take issue with contemporary analyses that assume that South Africa before 1994 (the date of the first democratic elections) was bound to a narrative of political liberation and that new configurations were only allowed to emerge in the mid-1990s. While this focus on "decompression" of the post-apartheid era is important, Nuttall and Michael insist that such complex configurations–at least at the level of identity–were always there:

"Apartheid tried to mask them through the ideology of separation; the liberation struggle, strikingly marked by a non-racial ethos, nonetheless emphasized that very segregation as a means of generating support. The new nation has tried to mask these complex configurations by foregrounding an over-simplified discourse of 'rainbow' nationalism" (p. 1).

For Nuttall and Michael, this binary opposition has also permeated and corrupted the academy in South Africa. They write:

"Cultural theorizing with its emphasis on separation and segregation has been based until recently on the following tendencies: the over-determination of the political, the inflation of resistance, and the fixation on race, or more particularly on racial supremacy and racial victimhood as a determinant of identity. In its adoption of these paradigms, South Africa has projected itself as different, as special and as unique ... as dislocated from the African continent, as not African" (pp. 1-2).

They suggest that "new forms of imagining need to emerge and indeed are emerging" (p. 1). In pursuit of such a rereading of culture, the editors suggest the concept of "creolization" (pp. 6-10). They define creolization as follows:

"Creolization has usually been understood as the process whereby individuals of different cultures, languages, and religions are thrown together and invent a new language, Creole, a new culture, and a new social organization" (p. 6). Nuttall and Michael also use the "senses" to develop their notion of "creolization". "The very notion of creolization that we have invoked here relies on a conception of intimacy and connectedness" (p. 22). By referring to intimate space and senses, the editors attempt to show how power relations would become sensually experienced.

For them, creolization may take on different inflections. It may for instance take the form of a dynamic and self-conscious process, or it may refer to a more porous process occurring in societies and cultures. They claim that creolization so conceived is distinct from "hybridity"; they argue that "hybridity", as in Homi Bhabha's notion of a third space, repeats the binary oppositions of the recent cultural theorizing in South Africa, while they borrow Glissant's notion of creolization to offer a more varied sense of understanding identity and culture.

For South Africa specifically, they see Robert Shell's work on the history of Cape Slavery as representative of a South African theory of creolization. In contrast to the few (but influential) studies that have appeared on slavery and the social world of the seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Cape colony and "begun at the frontier and stayed there," Shell shows that settler and slave created a Creole culture of music, language and cuisine within the setting of the home.[1]

Nuttall and Michael also see parallels to their use of creolization in the work of Carolyn Hamilton on the nineteenth century Zulu kingdom (as a construction of a "tribe"); David Bunn on poison in eighteenth and nineteenth century South Africa, who "gestures towards the beginnings of an ambivalently shared knowledge of medicines and herbs between colonizer and colonized" (p. 8); and more recently Charles van Onselen's study of (shared) sharecropper identities in the early twentieth century. They also find use (although they suggest it is less certain) of creolization in the works of Lauren Smith, Michael Chapman and Rob Nixon.[2] All these theoretical connections are referred to in passing, though, and without much explanation.

It is difficult to disagree with the general thrust of their initial critique (which are also taken up by two other contributors, Robert Thornton and John Noyes in separate chapters): taking issue with South Africa as "closed space" is especially timely. At the same time, I take issue with their investment in "creolization" as a concept and as a way out of the post-1994 cultural theoretical impasse. It is true, as Robert Thornton argues in the same volume, that cultural studies in South Africa is strongly influenced by British models emphasizing Marxist class analysis. As a result, complex cultural understandings of

race and gender in particular have suffered at the expense of more materialist explanations (p. 36).

Nuttall and Michael bring in creolization as a means of putting race and gender back into the conservation. At first sight, it appears a novel contribution, but it becomes clear that creolization is not sufficient as a historically or theoretically cogent concept to help scholars out of this theoretical impasse. In fact, Nuttall and Michael exaggerate the power of creolization. For one, they overgeneralize from the history of the Cape (a problem with most recent studies of cultural studies texts from South Africa), and hastily abandon class and race, domination and resistance, in a way that does not gel with the realities of post-apartheid South Africa.

It is also true that many of the hierarchies of culture are not so strong as in the past. At the same time, many different movements take place over the "boundaries" or at the "margins" of culture (here one can mention music forms–hip hop, house, kwaito–and broadcast media like television and radio, for example). But in their eagerness to privilege this creolization, Nuttall and Michael underplay the determining impact of material factors and power relations. South African society still largely reflects economic inequalities that coincide with the racial divides of the past, despite the emergence of the cultural mixing of kwaito with house (the latter a largely "white" music form in South Africa until recently) or coloured rappers' tales of ghetto nihilism and black power politics going down well with Afrikaner youths in mostly white clubs of the major cities, for example.

They appear to underplay the fact that such imaginings always go along with power relations, which in turn sustain certain identities with a political agenda and that even the new imaginings will themselves be subject to power relations. This is particularly dangerous in their favoring of an interpretation of Cape slavery as a site of creolization while ignoring the significance of the power relationships underlying such exchange. Nuttall and Michael fall into the trap of relying on theoretical insights gained from work elsewhere, such as the wholesale import of Glissant's insights, without showing more sensitivity for the history and specific context of South Africa.

This tendency is ironically critiqued within the volume itself. Citing Said, John Noyes writes that when theories move from one historical or geographical context to another, certain ideas lose their revolutionary edge while others become activated in their full revolutionary potential. Noyes also cites fiction writer Zoe Wicomb on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity–which can be "conceived as a subtle and effective refutation of Manichaean tendencies in colonial discourse studies in the 1980s"–sounds more like "an apology for apartheid population management policies" when it is used in the South African context (p. 52).

What Wicomb takes as Bhabha's glorification of hybridity is, in her opinion, "offensive in a country that for many years codified 'hybridity' in the exploitable liability of 'coloured' identity" (p.52). Bhaba's comments on hybridity as a post-colonial potential loses its meaning in a country that until recently, legislated quite literally, a third space for a coloured subjectivity defined according to a highly unstable and convoluted notion of racial mixing.[3]

For me a theory of "creolization" does not bring us to "new imaginings". Instead, it reflects the tendency to reinforce dependency within academia; that is the wholesale importation of theoretical ideas from outside a particular context (originating largely in the West) without engaging with that theory more creatively and critically and with the specificity of history.[4]

Notes

[1]. R. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1994).

[2]. C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invension* (Cape Town and Cambridge: David Philip and Harvard University Press, 1998); D. Bunn, "The Brown Serpent of the Rocks: Bushman Arrow Toxins in the Dutch and British Imaginations, 1735-1850", in *Transgressing Boundaries: New Directions in the Study of Culture*, ed. B. Cooper and A. Steyn (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996); C. Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996); L. Smith, "Christ as Creole: Hybridity and the Revision of Colonial Imagery in the Works of Bessie Head", *English in Africa*, 26:1 (1999); M.Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (London and New York: Longman, 1996); R. Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[3]. The original: Z. Wicomb, "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa", in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy 1970-*

1995, ed. D. Attridge and R. Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4]. In his recent review essay of trends in African Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom (the two strongest centres of African Studies outside the continent), Colin Bundy (the new director and principal of SOAS, University of London) writes, that the "academic anxieties of Africanists" are, among others, related to the "strictures of post-structuralism, post-modernism and post-colonialism". He continues, "This is not the place to air my strong reservations as to the applicability of some of some of the scholarship to African realities. But there is something unsettling about the prevailing emphasis on discourse and agency when it is not difficult to see that the principal determinants of human action [in Africa] are material and structural" (Bundy, "Continuing A Conversation: Prospects for African Studies in the 21st Century,", *African Affairs*, 101 (2002), p.64).