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Against cultural essentialism: media reception among South African youth

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> Can it be that . . . young people today are living in what McLuhan provocatively termed 'The Global Village'? All over the world children seem to be spending their leisure time in front of television and computer screens, wearing similar style jeans, humming similar pop tunes, eating similar fast foods. Are these children indeed living in a shared world culture? Are they part of a global value system captured by the term 'McDonaldization' or are they rooted in local cultures despite the increasing output of transnational media? Are they perhaps rather straddling local, national and global media cultures? (Lemish et al., 1998: 540)

> [W]e need to commit to the recognition that cultural hybridity is the rule rather than the exception in that what we commonly refer to as 'local' and 'global' have been long hybridised. (Kraidy, 1999: 472)

This study is part of a wider research project conducted among students on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University, South Africa, between 1998 and 2001, which examined the way these youth, differentially embedded in the local economic and ideological formation, used globally produced media texts as part of their ongoing attempts to make sense of their lives.[1] This article argues against the cultural essentialism inherent in the media imperialism thesis, pointing to the centuries of cultural mixing that have taken place historically, both in South Africa and elsewhere, between locals from different continents and cultural traditions. Given the deep social divisions in South Africa – both historical and current – along lines of 'race', class, tradition and modernity, this article further argues that it is difficult to identify the national culture and identity supposedly being undermined by global culture. Rather, following Massey (1992: 11–15), the article argues that places should no longer be seen as internally homo-geneous, bounded areas, but rather as 'spaces of interaction'. In such spaces,

local identities are constructed out of material and symbolic resources that may not be local in their origins, but should still be considered 'authentic'. As Miller (1992: 164–5) points out, people make their identities from the symbolic resources at hand (including foreign media products) but which are then subjected to a process of 'indigenization'.

'Authenticity' in local and global cultures

An assumption that runs consistently through the media imperialism thesis is that before the United States-led media/cultural invasion, Third World cultures were largely untouched by outside influences (Hannerz, 1996: 66; Massey, 1992: 9; Thompson, 1995: 169; Tunstall, 1977: 57–9). This bi-polar vision pits a culturally destructive and damaging 'global' against the 'local', with the latter seen as a site of 'pristine cultural authenticity' (Ang, 1996: 153). As Morley observes, the conventional model of cultural imperialism presumes 'the existence of a pure internally homogeneous, authentic, indigenous culture, which then becomes subverted or corrupted by foreign influence' (1994: 151).

However, as Morley reminds us, 'every culture has ingested foreign elements from exogenous sources with the various elements becoming "naturalised" within it' (1994: 151). Similarly, Hannerz (1989: 70), Kraidy (1999: 459) and Thompson (1995: 170) point to the romanticism inherent in this purist position. Cultural encounters – often backed by coercive political and military power – have, after all, been taking place for centuries. Given this, encounters between these societies and globalized forms of electronic media represent only the latest such cultural encounter. In their examination of the creolization of culture in South Africa, Nuttall and Michael point out that in many studies – in the fields of literature, photography, art and so on – the focus has tended to be on separation and stratification, 'obscuring other co-existing configurations' (2000: 2). As the authors explain, 'Such studies broadly echoed the logic of a generalized anti-apartheid movement that strategically emphasized enforced separation over the cultural fusions, intimacies and creolizations of which South Africa also spoke' (2000: 2). Similarly, according to Nuttall and Michael, studies examining workers and working-class life have focused on South Africa's distinctiveness and difference, ignoring the cultural dimensions of continental mixing that have shaped identity (2000: 3). However, as they point out, critics and writers are starting now to appreciate the hybrid history of South Africa.

Martin (1999), writing on the creolization of South African culture in the latter half of the 19th century, points out that during this period in Cape Town, there were no rich blacks, but there were poor whites, and that the

poor of all complexions lived side by side in certain neighbourhoods, forming an integrated proletariat:

> Africans, coloureds, white colonists and foreigners lived together, worked together, frequented taverns, canteens and hotels. During the nineteenth century and until the dawn of the twentieth century, intermarrying was not infrequent. (1999: 66)

Emerging from this milieu were particular forms of local music:

> In the second half of the nineteenth century, Cape Town's music was incredibly composite. An open-minded music lover ready to have a drink in a canteen, dance in a wealthy mansion, go to the theatre, accept an invitation to a *khalifa* or a Muslim wedding and wander the moonlit streets would have found occasions of hearing European dances and songs, bits of opera, military marches, Christian hymns and creole innovations, among which would have featured prominently Muslim chants, cantillations and songs including *djiekers* and *ghoemaliedjies*. These genres were not tightly isolated from each other, performers crossed their boundaries, and listeners even more so. (1999: 74–5)

In her discussion of the postmodern condition, Massey (1992: 9–10) also questions assumptions of local cultural authenticity. She observes that contemporary writings on postmodernity make much of the fact that this period involves a *new* sense of dislocation, and that 'penetrability of boundaries' (1992: 9) is a recent phenomenon. This view, she argues, is a predominantly white/First World one. For the inhabitants of all countries colonized by the West, there is a long history of destabilizing contact with alien cultures. What is new, she observes, is the 'reverse invasion', partly as a result of patterns of immigration, whereby 'the periphery has infiltrated the colonial core' (1992: 10).

The theme of reverse cultural invasion has been taken up by a number of theorists critical of the media/cultural imperialism thesis. These writers believe that besides studying how local cultures shape and re-work the meanings attached to global products, we must also consider the extent to which the peripheries 'talk back' to the centres (Hall, 1991a: 38–9; Hannerz, 1989: 69; Robertson, 1994: 46). For example, Robertson observes that, 'Much of global "mass culture" is in fact impregnated with "Third World" ideas, styles and genres concerning religion, music, art, cooking, and so on' (1994: 46). Popular music reflects this ongoing interchange of images, sounds and discourses between the centre and the periphery with rap, reggae and world music providing recent examples. As Hall points out, 'All the most explosive modern musics are crossovers. The aesthetics of modern popular music is the aesthetic of the hybrid, the aesthetic of the crossover, the aesthetic of the diaspora, the aesthetic of creolisation' (1991a: 38–9). Furthermore, not only is creolization increasingly a cultural reality, but in contrast to the pessimistic claims made by the media and cultural imperialism theorists, Hannerz (1996: 66) believes that this trend is

something to celebrate. For, as Hannerz writes, at the core of the concept of creole culture 'is a combination of diversity, interconnectedness, and innovation, in the context of global centre–periphery relationships' (1996: 67).

There are numerous other examples of the creolization of local cultural expression, a result of the centres talking to the peripheries and vice versa. In their discussion of South African jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), Carr et al. point to his diverse musical influences, from his own African heritage to various strands of American popular music, all strongly evident in his sound:

> He grew up with the hymns, gospel songs and spirituals of the American-influenced African Methodist Episcopal Church; also heard Louis Jordan and the Tympany Five popular hits blaring from the township ice-cream vans; and Duke Ellington's music was so familiar that he was 'not regarded as a foreign musician, but rather as something like a wise old man of our community *in absentia*'. (Carr et al., 1987: 246)

Lucia points to yet further influences in the creation of Ibrahim's distinctive sound:

> Ibrahim used the piano, an instrument central to western classical music for 200 years and central to jazz for 100 years, as a vehicle for expressing a kind of South African music that contained American and South African jazz styles, Islamic chant, Cape Malay drumming, African traditional music, European parlour songs, hymns and gospel music. (1999: 2)

The result of this mix is, according to Swenson, a sound that has had a 'subtle but profound influence on modern music' (1985: 109). Swenson continues: 'His knowledge of and sympathy for Africa makes him a first-hand practitioner of styles and feelings many other musicians have adopted from afar, while his wide-ranging control of rhythmic dynamics and melodic improvisations mark him as a musical modernist' (1985: 109). Thus the periphery talks back to the centre.

Ballentine (1993: 23), writing on the development of an authentic South African jazz, points out that black American culture provided the main source of influence on this music. At the same time, he notes, this development also depended on the use of local styles and elements, the most obvious of these being the various types of traditional music (1993: 23). Ballentine observes that, in addition to their appropriation of dance music from abroad, the mix of local music developing in the slums and ghettoes since at least the First World War and American jazz resulted in a hybrid generically known as *marabi* (1993: 25). Local influences on *marabi* included Sotho music, Zulu music, Xhosa music, African Christian hymns, commercially popular tunes of the day, types of coloured-Afrikaans and white-Afrikaans music known as *tiekie-draai* and *vastrap*, as well as the *ghoemaliedjies* of the Cape Malays (1993: 26–7).

The students I interviewed often showed an appreciation of the 'local' roots of global popular culture. For example, Jabavu, an African male student, said that part of the reason for his enthusiasm for American jazz was because it is essentially an African musical form:

> If you listen to Miles Davis, or if you listen to John Coltrane, or any of those guys who were in the vanguard of revolutionizing jazz . . . [I]t's an historical fact that when blacks were taken to the US without their cultural set-up and background and within that, without their cultural instruments, they wanted to play that music that they used to play back in Africa. It was that attempt to do that, and the fact that you were now using European instruments, and the fact that there was a lot of classical music, that tended to influence a thing that just came into being. So I look at jazz as the purest of African music forms and the fact that it is played by Americans I think for me is incidental. I see it as African music.

Similarly, another African student pointed to what she perceives to be the African roots of the American hip hop culture. Again, this goes some way to explaining her attraction to this particular culture:

> This appeal to all things African can even be seen in the fashion of hip hop, from the Afrocentric dreadlocks and head-wraps, to the African inspired jewellery and dashikis. There is now a certain confidence with which African-American youth are finding inspiration in their distant African heritage fusing such elements with intellectual messages that call for a worldwide African renaissance. This form of hip hop is informed by a philosophy that appeals to me because it recognizes the development of African people who, even though they've been absorbed into a dominant Eurocentric culture, draw on their emotional ties with an African culture.

National cultures and national identity

The threat posed to national cultures by global media

The belief that contemporary forms of global media pose a major threat to 'national cultures' (Tomlinson, 1991: 68) is so widespread that over the years it has profoundly influenced national media policies in a number of countries, including South Africa (for a discussion of the impact such assumptions have had on European media policy, see Schlesinger, 1991, 1993). As Baines (1998: 2) points out, the South African Independent Broadcasting Authority's (IBA) 1994 report on the need for local content quotas in South African media, was premised on the need to preserve South Africa's national cultural identity.

However, as Tomlinson argues, it is difficult to define national cultures and relate these in any unproblematic way to the nation-state because, as he notes, 'within nation-states, and even possibly across national boundaries, there exist patterns of cultural identification which are quite different from,

and often in direct conflict with, the "national culture"' (1991: 68–9). Similarly, for Ang, the concept of national identity is problematic for, as she observes, 'it tends to subordinate other, more specific and differential sources for the construction of cultural identity (for example, those based upon class, locality, gender, generation, ethnicity, religion, politics, etc.) to the hegemonic and seemingly natural one of *nationality*' (Ang, 1990: 252). National identity therefore needs to be viewed as a highly mediated sense of belonging, which coexists with other forms of cultural identity (see also Ferguson, 1992: 80; Hall, 1991b: 41).

This is especially true in South Africa, which remains a deeply divided society. Despite the transition to democracy that followed the elections in 1994, the social effects of apartheid are very much still in evidence. South Africa, with Brazil, tops international tables of Gini coefficients and other measures of inter-household income inequality (Leibrandt et al., 2000: 31; Seeking, 2000: 53). Statistical indicators show the racial dimension of poverty and inequality in South Africa: 95 percent of the very poor are African and 5 percent are coloured. Poverty has a rural dimension, with 75 percent of the poor living in rural areas. Poverty also has an age dimension, with 45 percent of the poor being children below the age of 15 (Jennings et al., 1997: 8). Forty-nine percent of African youth live in households that at some point during 1994–5 were unable to feed their children. This applies to 35 percent of coloured youth, 11 percent of Asians and 6 percent of white youth (Jennings et al., 1997: 23). Similar ratios are apparent in life expectancy rates among the different population groups. For the years 1996 to 2001, the average life expectancy for Africans was 64.5 years, for Asians 70.2 years, for coloureds 64.4 years, and for whites 73.6 years (SAIRR, 1998).

However, the inequalities in South Africa correspond largely but not exclusively to racial divisions and among Africans huge disparities have opened up. Marais (2001: 106) points out that the mean income of the lowest-earning 40 percent of African households declined by almost 40 percent between 1975 and 1991, while that of the richest 20 percent of African households rose by 40 percent. African professionals, skilled workers and entrepreneurs benefited from the collapse of apartheid, making them the most upwardly mobile 'race' group. As a result, South Africa is currently witnessing the emergence of a differentiated class structure among the African population, which includes a strong middle class and professional stratum, and a tiny economic elite. In other words, the country's income maldistribution is increasingly shifting from being 'race' to class-based (Marais, 2001: 106). Samir Amin has recently characterized the social divisions thus:

> There is the overwhelmingly white section of the population whose popular culture and standard of living seem to belong to the 'first' (advanced capitalist) world. . . . Much of the urban black population belongs to the modern,

industrialising 'third' world, while rural Africans do not differ much from their counterparts in 'fourth' world Africa. ('Foreword' to Marais, 2001: vii)

Van Zyl Slabbert et al. (1994: 57–8) distinguish between poor rural and urban middle-class Africans, and when it comes to the subjects of my research, youth in South Africa, they feel that they live in a different world compared to white youth. It is a world of unemployment, poverty, high population growth rate, inadequate schooling and largely unavailable basic social amenities (1994: 57–8). Coloured and Indian youth in South Africa appear to be positioned between African and white youth. Population growth and urban/rural ratios among the coloured and Indian communities are similar to those of the white community (Van Zyl Slabbert et al., 1994: 57–8).

Is there a South African national identity?

Given the deep social divisions in South Africa – both historical and current – along lines of 'race', class, tradition and modernity, it is not surprising to find that a unified national identity does not exist. One reason is the lack of a sense of common descent, culture and language necessary for the creation of a communal/national culture (Degenaar, 1994: 23). Another is the primordial view of ethnic identity promoted by segregation- ist and apartheid ideologies and social policies, which created a divided society (Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998: 610). The discourse of 'nation- building', much in evidence after the first democratically held elections in 1994, reflected the desire among politicians and social theorists to create a national identity. Such an identity, it was felt, would help South Africa transcend its deep social divisions and the ongoing internal conflict.

An example of the attempt at nation-building was the decision by the then newly elected Mandela government to use the 1995 Rugby World Cup tournament, held in South Africa, to promote a vision of South Africanism which transcended cultural and ethnic differences. Uniting all of South Africa behind the rugby team, it was felt, would provide the impetus for the creation of a common South African identity, or, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a 'rainbow nation' (Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998: 610). As President Mandela said at the official banquet concluding the tournament, '[W]hen the final whistle blew . . . the foundations for reconciliation and nation-building had been truly strengthened' (*Eastern Province Herald*, 17 August 1995). Less than a year later, the *Mail and Guardian* reported that:

In the first two years of majority government, non-racism, equality, integration and the rainbow nation have been proclaimed from every political pulpit by the African National Congress. But, ironically, the ANC is finding it more difficult than it had imagined to convert all South Africans to true non-racialism and it

has been forced to accept that ethnic identities – coloured, Zulu, Shangaan, Afrikaner – are part of the current South African reality, part of its troubling inheritance. (24–30 May 1996)

In 1999, the issue of South African national identity played itself out in the South African media. Max du Preez, former editor of *Vrye Weekblad* and producer of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's *Special Assignment*, an investigative documentary programme, took issue in a newspaper article with the term 'African' being applied 'to mean exclusively black, as both Mr Nelson Mandela and Mr Thabo Mbeki did during their election campaigns'. He pointed to their reference to 'whites, coloureds, Indians and Africans', which in his view 'implies absolutely that whites, coloureds and Indians can't be Africans' (*Daily News*, 17 June 1999). Du Preez's article drew many responses, including one from Thobeka Mda's professor at the University of South Africa (Unisa) and convenor of the Education and Culture Commission of the African Renaissance Working Group. She asserted that white South Africans were 'Europeans' and that 'they are not insisting on being African to claim closeness or nationality with us. They are saying so to claim a piece (huge pieces in fact) of land in this country, and therefore, this continent' (*Daily News*, 28 June 1999). Again, the conflict over who is an 'African' reflected the deep historical divisions in South Africa and, in this case, was presented in 'race'-essentialist terms.

That these social divisions are 'lived' by youth in South Africa was confirmed by a random sample survey conducted, as part of my research, on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University. Seventy-two students agreed with the statement that 'On Rhodes campus black and white students lead separate lives' (Strelitz and Coetzee, 1998).

It is these existing social divisions, together with the historical reality of cultural hybridity in South Africa, which give credence to Massey's (1992: 11–15) claim that places should no longer be seen as internally homogeneous, bounded areas. She writes that we should see places as 'spaces of interaction' where local identities are constructed out of material and symbolic resources which may not be local in their origins, but should still be considered 'authentic' (1992: 11–15). Similarly, Miller (1992: 164–5) writes that it is unproductive to think about cultural imperialism as a process in which a set of external or corrupting forces impinge on the pure sphere of the local, which must then be protected from their destructive influences. Rather, he believes, we should understand the ways in which people construct their identities from the symbolic resources at hand (including foreign media products), which are then subjected to a process of 'indigenization'. It is more useful, he argues, to assess these cultural resources in terms of their *consequences*, not their *origins* (1992: 164–5).

Take the case of Nicholas, a gay student. In an interview, he pointed out that male musicians who are 'handsome and well dressed' – such as Nsync,

Boyzone and Backstreet Boys – have become icons and topics of conversation among the students in the gay community. Others, such as the Village People, Queen, George Michael and Elton John, are also popular among the gay community because they sing about hardships faced by this community and, as such, 'their problems are readily identifiable'. Thus, when it comes to music consumption, Nicholas's identity as a gay male, which connects him to the international gay community, is stronger than his 'local' national identity. Foreign gay artists make music which is 'authentic' to Nicholas's gay identity.

Another student interviewee, Mandela, grew up in the black urban township of Soweto during the 1980s, at the height of the armed resistance to the apartheid regime. His parents were members of the then-banned African National Congress (ANC). In his interview extract, he discusses the resonance and authenticity that American rap music had for him during these turbulent times:

> There used to be a lady living in our street who was an MK [Umkonto weSizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress] cadre. In fact, there used to be quite a lot [of MK operatives] because they used to come to our home and ask if they could sleep over for two days. I used to see these guys and my mom used to say, 'That guy can fire an AK' [the Russian-made rifle most often used by members of Umkonto weSizwe and synonymous with liberation struggles around the world] and I used to say like 'damn!' The thing is that Ice Cube [a rap artist] and those guys from America wrote about AK-47s. And here was a guy in my house with a trenchcoat and he's sleeping under the table, or some woman and she can fire an AK-47.

Thus Mandela inserted the meanings of rap music into his experience of Soweto and his experience of Soweto into the meanings of rap music – each was influenced by and validated the other.

Similarly, Bongani, an African middle-class student from Motherwell township in Port Elizabeth, grew up watching African-American films and television programmes. The pleasure he derived from these programmes came from the way they reflected his 'local' reality. They were 'authentic' to that 'reality':

> Even though me and my friends were into black American movies and whatever . . . at the same time we were still Xhosa. While we could relate to black American culture, America is America and South Africa is South Africa. But there are some things that are just common to every African person, like family life. We as Xhosa people have a strong connection to our families and that was one thing I got to find out about black American families, they have strong relations to their families whereby you'd get second cousins living in the same house, and grandfathers and grandmothers living in the same house.
>
> And also the image I got about black American people from the outside is that in their neighbourhoods people knew each other. There was a sense of community. You get a neighbour like coming in and asking for sugar, something I could relate to in my own culture as well. So there was like

similarities between the cultures. Even before I got exposed to American sitcoms, there was always something like in the township where someone would come up to you and say: 'Let's just "dis" [insult] each other.' Then he'd come up with a 'dis' and then you'd have to come up with a 'dis' as well . . . 'Your mother does this and this and this.' Surprising enough that happened even before I could understand English. Later on I found that in black American humour they liked 'dissing' as well.

Bongani was attracted to black American hip hop culture. Again, he could relate this 'foreign' culture to his experience of growing up in a 'local' African township.

At first I was listening to this very violent hip hop and everything. The township is also violent, you know, so you can identify. . . . I think it's with many followers of hip hop from the township . . . you'll find many of the times you can find things you can identify with. But especially nowadays, I think the townships have just got worse . . . there's even a lot more you can identify with that violence in rap music.

For many white students, on the other hand, their identification with Western/European culture (in South Africa the term 'European' is often applied to whites as a way of denoting their historical roots in Europe rather than Africa) means that it is foreign, rather than local productions, that have a 'local' relevance. In 2000 I taught a second-year media studies course. The course assignment asked students to reflect on their consumption of global media. Loren, who comes from a white, middle-class family, wrote that her favourite television programme was the American series *Ally McBeal*:

Monday nights in the Olive Schreiner [female residence] common room are always full when *Ally McBeal* is on, and one has to arrive early to get a seat. It is a programme I watch religiously because it gives me an hour in which to laugh at familiar characters, and essentially, at myself. Also, much of the appeal lies in the opportunity to interact socially with peers of the same outlook, backgrounds and spheres of reference. The next day the plot, the court cases, Nelle's latest outfit and the romantic mishaps of the characters are analysed and debated around the lunch table, each girl contributing her own opinion on the episode.

The characters in *Ally McBeal* enjoy a First World lifestyle in a capitalist, consumer-driven society in which male and female colleagues enjoy the same legal status. Although not applicable to all South Africans by virtue of their vastly differing cultural and socio-economic status, I, as a white, educated and middle-class female, identify with the context of the show, and can draw many similarities with the programme and my present environment. I dress similarly, aspire to be similarly successful in my career, use the same products and seek out the same forms of social entertainment. The group of heterosexual colleagues and friends working closely together for a common objective and sharing in each other's daily life experiences relates particularly to my university experience wherein females and males mix together comfortably in classes, social situations and residence.

> As in *Ally McBeal*, there is a degree of sexual tension between me and friends as many of us are engaging in our first relationships with members of the opposite sex. There is jealousy and rivalry among competing individuals, both in my sphere of reality and in the show. Similarly, there are the same miscommunications that arise between the sexes which are, more often than not, humorously addressed in the show. It can be said that this factor is a strong motivation for the popular viewership among my colleagues. It is a frame of reference by which we construct meaning for ourselves in our daily environment.

As Loren indicates, there is a degree of 'fit' between the realities in *Ally McBeal* and the realities of being a modern white, middle-class, heterosexual subject in South Africa. As Tomlinson (1991: 61) reminds us, and as Loren's experience and the experiences of other students quoted indicate, media messages are mediated by other modes of cultural experience. Tomlinson (1991: 61) argues that we view the relationship between 'media' and 'culture' as a 'subtle interplay of mediations'. On the one hand we have the media as the dominant representational aspect of modern culture, while on the other we have the 'lived experience' of culture that may include the discursive interaction of families, friends, peers and so on. As Tomlinson (1991: 61) notes, the relationship implied in this is the constant mediation of one aspect of cultural experience by another: what we make of a media text is influenced and shaped by what else is going on in our lives. Equally, he continues, our lives are lived as representations to ourselves in terms of the representations present in our culture. In other words, our biographies are, partly, 'intertextual'. This is clearly apparent in the final interview with Robert, a 21-year-old coloured student from East London in the Eastern Cape and as such is a further illustration of the theme of the contingency of textual meaning-making which I have explored in this article.

Robert: the interplay of macro-social and individual-biographical factors in identity formation

Robert's grandfather, on his father's side, was Irish, while his mother had a French-Filipino father and Malaysian mother. His parents never discussed this coloured family background with him. Instead, as we will see, Robert's identity was shaped by his feeling of difference from those with whom he lived in a designated working-class coloured residential area in East London.

As members of the petit-bourgeoisie – his father was a factory foreman and his mother a schoolteacher – his parents wished to shield him from the working-class culture of the neighbourhood. One way of signifying their difference was through their refusal to speak Afrikaans, the language spoken by most of the people in his neighbourhood.

Robert's grandmother had been a schoolteacher at a local coloured school, and the respect she was afforded by other community members fed

into Robert's sense of social superiority and difference. Their social difference from the rest of the community was materially evident:

> We had a bigger house and we had cars. Other people didn't, they had to catch taxis. You would drive through the community; you wouldn't walk. Most people would walk.

Another way the family marked their social difference from the rest of the community was through the identification with the hegemonic European culture. For example, from an early age Robert took classical piano lessons. It was significant that his teacher was white and he would take part in white music competitions. This was part of his family's desire to emulate white South Africans.

> You'd always want to be like them, you'd always like to speak like them. You wouldn't want to speak . . . like generally coloureds have a heavy Afrikaans drone (laughs). We'd always try and speak better than they did. Elocution was very important . . . you would speak properly.

Robert's parents sent him to Selborne College, a Model C high school, which accentuated his sense of difference from the rest of the coloured community.[2] It was an overwhelmingly white school and Robert was one of only two 'non-white' students in his year. He recalls: 'I was in awe because of the facilities, just looking at the buildings . . . they were so much better than where I came from.' This contributed to his belief that he and his family were somehow special and different from the rest of the community:

> What it did is elevate that perception of my family a little more . . . having gone to Selborne. You were better than them. Most children in that community went to the coloured high school marred by indiscipline, teachers going on strike. . . . Our teacher never went on strike. . . . That pushed down my perception of the people in my community. . . . I thought less of them . . . the fact that they were so undisciplined.

As a result, Robert identified increasingly with whites: 'All my friends were white.' It also pushed him to prove himself, which he did mainly through his academic work 'until they started counting me as one of them'.

Robert's close identification with whites resulted in a degree of ostracism from the local coloured community. He learnt to put up with their 'snide remarks'. He realized that they were just jealous and to respond would be to 'lower yourself'. He remains critical of the people who just 'lurk' and 'sit around aimlessly' at the corner café: 'They do nothing at all, they just watch the cars drive by or something like that. And I just don't relate to that at all . . . it's never been part of me.'

Robert's desire to escape the confines of East London's coloured working-class community was given further impetus by his parents'

decision to subscribe to M-Net, South Africa's pay television channel. The channel is primarily a conduit for American films and sitcoms. He longed for the 'fancy cars' and 'beautiful houses' he saw in these programmes and which he'd never experienced in his own community. As a result of these representations, he grew up 'seeing the American society as better than our own', something he still believes.

Robert's desire to be different came not only from his relationship with the coloured community and his identification with whites, but also from his need to differentiate himself from his elder brother, the 'black sheep' of the family. Robert's parents hated the contemporary pop music listened to by his brother. So did Robert:

> Because they hated his music and because he was the black sheep of the family, I wouldn't like to be like him. So I would step back and not do that. It was a part of him so it couldn't be a part of me. We were on different planes completely.

So, much to the approval of his parents, instead of listening to global pop music, Robert gravitated primarily to Western classical music.

After completing school, Robert came to Rhodes University, where coloured students comprise only 4 percent of the Grahamstown campus population. However, given his class aspirations, Robert took easily to his new environment.

> It was fine. I had a lot of my white friends from Selborne [his high school] and because they fitted in perfectly, I fitted in as well. But there were people here who didn't know me so I had to build it up again. I had an horrific first year in residence perhaps because there were coloured people in residence who hated me . . . certain people could see that I was a cut above the rest and didn't like it.

Even at Rhodes, Robert felt the need to keep himself apart from the youth culture that surrounded him. He felt that he was 'different from the others . . . better than the rest' and that this needed to be signified through the clothing he wore and his rejection of Western pop music.

What is clear is that Robert's identity was shaped by the interplay between macro-social and individual-biographical factors – his structural 'placement', as a coloured youth in an apartheid society, with upwardly mobile aspirations. His place in the family was as the 'favoured' son. While racist ideology portrayed coloureds as a 'mixed race', their 'European blood' made them hierarchically superior to the Africans (Marks and Trapido, 1987: 29). Prior to 1948, coloureds were exempted from many of the restrictions placed on Africans such as the carrying of passes, influx control and urban segregation (Marks and Trapido, 1987: 29). However, according to Goldin (1987: 169), the need by the National Party government to retain the 'racial' purity of the white *volk* resulted in the introduction of legislation designed to prevent both whites from becoming

part of coloured society and coloureds from becoming part of white society. For someone as personally ambitious as Robert, to become 'white' thus represented a step up the racially defined social hierarchy in South Africa. This was partly reflected in his media consumption choices, especially of 'respectable' white middle-class musicians such as Frank Sinatra.

The interview illustrates that, as Bausinger (1984: 349) observes, media behaviour cannot be reduced to the correlation between content and effect, or to usage inside a clearly defined field. For, as Bausinger notes, media consumption decisions 'are constantly crossed through and influenced by non-media conditions and decisions' (1984: 349). Similarly, Robert's experience of the media supports Ang's claim that we need to understand the media's meanings for its audiences within 'multidimensional inter-subjective' networks in which the object is inserted and given meaning in 'concrete contextual settings' (1996: 70). The interview also demonstrates how identity construction is rooted in 'difference': in the case of Robert, his difference from the rest of the coloured community and from his older brother.

Finally, the interview points to the role played by global media – in this case primarily American films and television programmes – in the process of 'symbolic distancing'. As Thompson points out, part of the attraction of global media for local audiences is that their consumption often provides meanings which enable 'the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the spatial-temporal contexts of everyday life' (1995: 175). For Robert, American 'excellence', as witnessed in these media, helped him to distance himself from the social 'place' designated to him by the apartheid state. Foreign media, particularly television, were more adequate to this task than were local media. Overall, Robert's class identity assumed an importance that outweighed both his 'racial' identity and his national identity.

Conclusion

In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with students on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University, South Africa, I have argued against the essentialism inherent to the media and cultural imperialism thesis. In doing so I have emphasized the hybridity of world cultures, a result of decades of interpenetration. Against the claim that global media pose a threat to 'national cultures', I have argued that the decline and instability of the nation-state and the self-sufficiency of national economies has led to a fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity. With Massey (1992: 11–15), I have argued that places should no longer be seen as internally homogeneous, bounded areas, but should rather be seen as 'spaces of interaction'. In such spaces local identities are constructed out of material and symbolic resources that may not be local in their origins, but

should still be considered 'authentic'. People make their identities from the symbolic resources at hand (including foreign media products) but which are then subjected to a process of 'indigenization' (Miller, 1992: 164–5). This takes place because media texts are polysemic. They do not only communicate denotative meanings, but also connotative meanings – meaning by association. Finally, with Tomlinson (1991), Bausinger (1984) and Ang (1996) I have argued that both our media consumption decisions and the meanings we take from texts, are influenced by the contextual setting of consumption and other sources of cultural experience.

Notes

1. In 1998 (the start of this study) the majority of students on campus were white (55 percent), although there were also significant numbers of students from other 'race' groups. However, as a result of the availability of study loans to financially needy students from the Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa (TEFSA), the campus was home to students who came from a range of class backgrounds. I thus had access, in one space, to a cross-section of South African youth.

2. Prior to 1994, all coloured and Indian education was administered by the provincial governments. The Coloured Affairs Department (CAD) was established by the Nationalist Party government after 1948 to serve the special social and welfare interests of the coloured people. In 1964 the CAD assumed control of coloured education. According to the De Vos Malan Commission 'their education had to make them conscious of their separate existence and prepare them for work'. Indian education followed a similar route. After 1948, the government promoted Christian National Education for white schools. White education was comparatively generously funded in terms of the provision of buildings, amenities, teachers and so on to meet the requirements of the Compulsory Schooling Act. In 1992 the national government issued an Education Renewal Strategy, which established Model C schools. This enabled previously all-white schools to admit students from different 'racial' groups. After 1994, all schools became non-racial but fee structures ensured that Model C schools remained mainly white.

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