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## Biography, Media Consumption, And Identity Formation

### **Abstract**

This paper proposes that the biographical or narrative interview is an important method in exploring the relationship of media consumption to identity formation. The paper takes issue with those theorists who place media consumption at the centre of identity formation processes. Rather, in line with the work of British social theorist John Tomlinson, the paper argues the need to see the relationship between media and culture, in the process of identity formation, as an interplay of mediations between culture-as-lived-experienced and culture-as-representation. On the one hand we have the media, representing the dominant representational aspect of modern culture while on the other we have the lived experience of culture which includes the discursive interaction of families and friends and the 'material-existential' experiences of routine life. Our media consumption choices and the meanings we take from the media are shaped by these lived cultural experiences while the media we consume also impacts on how we make sense of these experiences. The paper argues that the narrative or biographical interview is a useful way to explore this interplay of mediations in the process of identity formation.

### **Key words**

Media consumption; Identity formation; Biography; Narrative interview;  
South African youth.

*The idea of 'self as story' both overlaps and contrasts with other models of identity. It also extends the idea of 'culture' and 'media' beyond the organisational structures of, say, the culture industries, broadcasting or the published media, into the everyday modes in which we express and construct our lives in personal terms, telling our own stories. It makes the assumption that it is valuable to look not just at the products of professionals and specialists but also at the practices of ordinary people in their everyday lives. (Finnegan 1997: 69)*

## Introduction: Media consumption and identity formation

The centrality of consumption to identity formation in modern societies has been argued by a number of writers. According to Miller (1997: 26), whereas a century ago the identity of individuals was rooted in production – as workers or owners – today it is consumption which confers identity. This is because consumption is the one domain over which individuals feel they still have some power (also see Featherstone 1987: 55-70; Slater 1997: 24; Mackay 1997: 8; Brown et al. 1994: 813-827; Miles et al. 1998: 81-84).

For some writers it is media consumption in particular that lies at the heart of this process. Thompson (1995: 75; 211) writes that in late modern society, many of the traditional sources of identity – religion, the family – have lost their legitimacy, especially for young people. As a result, individuals increasingly fall back on their own resources for identity construction, with ‘mediated symbolic materials’ playing a crucial role in this process. Kellner (1995: 1) has similarly argued that in contemporary industrial society, a ‘media culture’ has emerged which helps “produce the fabric of everyday life...shaping political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities”. He writes:

Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global culture. (Kellner 1995: 1)

Such claims for the centrality of consumption in general and media consumption in particular to identity formation have not gone unchallenged. Warde (1996: 305), for example, has argued that the “production view of the self” underestimates the social context of identity formation – including the variety of kinship and associational practices which create and sustain social relations – while overemphasising the role of cultural products – particularly media products and icons of fashion – in this process. Tomlinson, in his discussion of the role of media consumption in identity formation, argues that overly-strong claims for media power arise as a result of media theorists seeing the media as determining rather than mediating cultural experience:

[W]hat we make of a television programme or novel or a newspaper article is constantly influenced and shaped by whatever else is going on in our lives. But, equally, our lives are lived as *representations to ourselves* in terms of the representations present in our culture: our biographies are, partly ‘intertextual’. (1991: 61)

Tomlinson believes that we should instead view the relationship between media and culture as a subtle “interplay of mediations” (1991: 61), a dialectical relationship

between culture-as-lived-experience (including the discursive interaction of families and friends and the 'material-existential' experience of routine life) and culture-as-representation (primarily via the media, recognised as the dominant representational aspect of modern culture).

### ***The social and the individual***

There is arguably another dialectic we should keep in mind in our discussion of the media's role in identity formation processes: that between the *individual* and the *social*. Silverstone has written of the need for sensitivity towards "...the plurality of the social and the individual, a plurality which in turn involves both a sociology and a psychology, and their interrelationship..." (1990: 175). Grisprud has called for media theorists to develop "more nuanced ideas about how socio-cultural structures and forces on the one hand and individuals and their minds and choices on the other work in relation to each other in the reception of media texts" (1995: 9), while Therborn points out that the forms of human subjectivity "...are constituted by the intersections of the psychic and the social" (1980: 16). Hoijer has argued the need to take into account "the interplay between culture and cognition" (1998: 169) while for Bonfadelli (1993: 232) media use and competency has to be perceived as the result of biographical experience with various media, and that these processes are embedded in the ecological contexts of family, neighbourhood, school and so on.

### ***The narrative interview***

Within media studies, the narrative or biographical interview provides a generally ignored, but potentially fruitful method for exploring both the intertextuality of everyday life and the social/individual dialectic. Hermanns defines this research method:

In the narrative interview, the informant is asked to present the history of an area of interest, in which the interviewee participated, in an extempore narrative...The interviewer's task is to make the informant tell the story of the area of interest in question as a consistent story of all relevant events from its beginning to its end. (quoted in Flick 1998: 99)

At the start of the interview is the 'generative narrative question' which serves not only to stimulate the production of a narrative, but also to focus the discourse or exposition on the topical area and the period of the biography with which the interview is concerned (Flick 1998: 104). The interviewee's account should not be an argument for or against a particular issue but should instead deal with how ones present attitudes came about (Flick 1998: 99). Importantly, research questions pursued from within this approach should contextualise biographical process against the background of concrete and general circumstances (Flick 1998: 105).

A sub-genre of the narrative interview is what Flick refers to as the "episodic interview" (1998: 110) in which a single overall narrative is not requested – as in the narrative interview – but rather several delimited narratives are stimulated. The interviewee is asked to present episodes or narratives of situations that seem to be relevant to the question of the study (for example: "If you look back on your life, when did you first start watching television? Could you tell me about your favourite programmes? Why were you drawn to these particular programmes?"). Flick (1998)

believes that episodes as an object of such narratives, and as an approach to the experiences relevant for the subject under study, allow a more concrete approach than does the narrative of the life history. In summary, the episodic interview allows normal everyday phenomena (for example, media consumption) to be analysed primarily through orienting to a series of key questions concerning the situations to be recounted.

Highlighting moments of epiphany as experienced by the subject is a way of further focussing the episodic interview, and is an approach which runs implicitly through my own previous work in this area (Strelitz 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005). As defined by Denzin (1989) in his discussion of Interpretive Research, these moments reflect those experiences “that leave marks on people’s lives” (1989: 14-15) and radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects. The existential thrust of this approach sets it apart from other interpretive approaches that examine the more mundane, taken-for-granted properties and features of everyday life and it is this, I believe, that makes it suitable for investigating areas of focused concern, such as, in this case, media consumption and identity formation. It allows us to “operationalise” Tomlinson’s (1991) insight into the “interplay of mediations” in that it enables the researcher to move back and forth between important biographical moments, demonstrating how these have shaped media consumption preferences and conversely, to examine how the media consumed has impacted on the individuals’ understandings of these moments.

In this paper I will focus primarily on the school experiences of my subject both during and following the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. As will become clear, the schooling system was (and continues to be) a crucial site for the production and reproduction of class and “race” inequalities in this country. It is thus perhaps unsurprising then that during the interview my subject narrated his life through the important markers of his school experiences.

### ***Apartheid South Africa***

The interview discussed in this paper was conducted in 1999 with Luthando, then a student at Rhodes University in South Africa. Luthando was born in 1978 in the black township of Mdantsane near East London in the province of the Eastern Cape. His father was a teacher and his mother a nurse. Until the age of 16, the social and political context of his life was *apartheid* (separateness), the segregationist policies introduced by the National Party on assuming power in 1948.

The apartheid system itself was built on the forms of domination and privilege that arose during the period of European conquest and settlement following the arrival of the Dutch in the Cape in 1652, and the segregationist policies that developed along with the later industrialisation of South Africa following the discovery of diamonds in 1869 and of gold in 1886 (Giliomee and Schlemmer 1989: 1; Wolpe 1988: 63; Davenport 1991: 518; Marks and Trapido 1987: 7). The Nationalist Party built on this segregationist tradition through the introduction of legislation which established distinct biological categories to divide the “racial” groups and keep them, through further legislation, separated at the political, economic and social levels – hence separate residential areas, schooling, amenities and so on (Davenport 1991: 328).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 made marriages between whites and people other than whites illegal, the aim of which was to freeze racial categories for all time (Ross

As Giliomee and Schlemmer (1989: 58) note, South Africa was projected not as a nation-state, but as a region comprised of several national states and national communities. Liberty was defined as national self-determination, and equality as equal full nationhood. It was envisaged that African people would attain political rights in their respective Homelands or, in the case of the coloured people and Indians, in their respective communities. However, in practice there was no semblance of equality. The legal/political system defined a category of white subjects who had the right to vote, economic rights of land and property ownership, monopoly rights to certain kinds of jobs, social rights to education and training, state medical care, and an array of other public amenities (Wolpe, 1988: 63).

Opposition to the apartheid regime went through a number of stages. In 1960 the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned. In 1973 the wide-spread strikes by African workers ushered in a period of intense labour unrest and the growth of black trade unionism. In 1976 the Soweto students' uprising sparked off school closures and student/police battles nationwide, followed by a strengthening of exile and extra-parliamentary political opposition in the 1980s.

Wolpe (1988: 103) notes that while the government used emergency powers to control opposition, it was restrained from adopting the 'Chile option' by external pressures from the United States (which imposed economic sanctions in October 1986), various European and Commonwealth countries, as well as from corporate capital and liberal forces within its own ranks. Within a few years deadlock had been reached between the forces of oppression and those of the people. Within the dominant faction within the ANC it was believed that a negotiated settlement, rather than revolution, was the only way out of the impasse, and this necessitated the recognition of the ANC and other opposition forces. In November 1987, Govan Mbeki, a prominent ANC leader was released from prison, followed by the other Rivonia trial defendants including Walter Sisulu in 1989, and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. In this way the ANC was effectively unbanned, and negotiations could proceed. This process culminated in the first democratic elections in South Africa, held in 1994, which brought the ANC to power.

### ***Mdantsane township***

As noted above, Luthando grew up in the township of Mdantsane, then part of the Ciskei Homeland. During the early 1960s, under the Group Areas Act, blacks were evicted from East London properties that were in areas designated as "white only" and forced to move into townships on the outskirts of the city. As Nel points out, the creation of townships such as Mdantsane reflected "attempts by the authors of apartheid to organise both urban and rural space in South Africa along lines of race" (Nel, 1990: 305). Townships were not only the reflection of a particular political ideology, but also served an economic function providing cheap labour for adjacent centres of capitalist enterprise, in this case East London (Nel, 1990: 306). From its inception Mdantsane suffered from overcrowding, poverty, unemployment, crime,

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1999: 116). This was followed by the Population Registration Act in 1950, which was designed to assign everyone to a racial group. Also in 1950, an amendment to the Immorality Act of 1927 prohibited sexual intercourse across the colour line (Ross 1999: 116). In addition to the whites and the Africans, the Population Registration Act also recognised, as different "race" groups, coloureds and Indians. Through the Group Areas Act of 1950, the Government proclaimed residential and business areas for specific race groups (Davenport 1991: 328).

malnutrition and under-developed infrastructure. By 2005 little had changed and the township had a population of approximately 175 783 and covered an area of 92 square kilometres, making it the second biggest township in South Africa after Soweto and only slightly smaller than the “white” city of East London with 212 000 residents. The social inequalities that were reflected in black townships under apartheid remain in Mdantsane. Only 23% of residents are employed and most household still earn less than the subsistence level. There remains a lack of access to basic services: 42% of residents are without electricity, 12% without piped water, and 61% are without telephone services (The Department of Provincial and Local Government 2005).

These then are the social and material conditions that shaped Luthando’s youthful world.

### ***Luthando’s schooling***

#### *Primary school*

During the turbulent 1980s in South Africa, when the country witnessed two states-of-emergency, the young Luthando experienced the brutality of the apartheid state:

Mdantsane was very militant. I would see raids and all that. I would see people’s houses being burnt. I can still remember one time I saw a person with a tire round his neck...it was very traumatic for us to watch that, but that was what was around you.

Despite the brutality of his lived conditions of existence, the ‘social logic’ of the apartheid state meant that for a number of reasons, he was slow in developing a critical political consciousness. Firstly, his educational choices and opportunities, like those of all black township youth, were severely curtailed as he had to attend a local township-based Department of Education and Training (DET) school. During the years of apartheid, Bantu Education was administered by the Department of Education and Training (DET). The acronym DET was used to refer to these poorly resourced schools located primarily in African townships and rural areas. Bantu education’s differential syllabus, with an emphasis on practical subjects, was clearly designed to prepare Africans for subordination in the workplace (Davenport, 1991: 535). Thus the ‘hidden curriculum’ of DET schools, such as the one Luthando attended in Mdantsane, was to inculcate a sense of social inferiority and insubordination into the pupils.

Furthermore, during the years of Luthando’s youth, the ever-present possibility of violent state response to political opposition to the status quo – usually through imprisonment – meant that his parents steered away from discussions of politics.

Because my uncle and some of his friends had been arrested, my parents tried to shield me from politics. They never spoke about it at home – my mother was afraid I would go out onto the street and start talking things. If you said anything about the ANC or whatever in Mdantsane in those days you would be detained. So I grew up not knowing much about politics.

Finally, the mass media, in particular the state-controlled radio and television stations, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) helped naturalise the political and social status quo. Thus, one of the functions of the state run television

and radio stations was to mediate, through the local content programmes, a coherent apartheid-based reality which underlined the importance of ethnic values through the promotion of tribal imagery and themes (Tomaselli and Tomaselli 1989). While independent newspapers existed and were often critical of aspects of apartheid, their reporting practices were deeply circumscribed by numerous censorship laws including, in the 1980s, a prohibition on reporting on banned people and organisations. Steven Lukes' comments on the relationship between ideology and power are apposite to many apartheid subjects, black and white:

...the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial. (1974: 24)

The naturalness of white superiority under apartheid was experienced by Luthando.

In Mdantsane if you played football well they'd call you an *mhlungu* meaning 'you play like you're a white person...you can do your stuff'. If you scored a goal they'd say the goal was like *umkhumshile*, which means that 'scoring a goal is the same as speaking English well'. When we covered our school books it was rare to find someone with a black actor on his books. I remember I had Maradona on one of my books...never local black soccer players.<sup>2</sup>

Luthando explains that the images he and his friends appropriated came from "what we'd see on TV". However, these were primarily foreign (American) programmes as the overly-didactic nature of local television (and radio) programmes during the apartheid years, held little appeal:

Local radio was boring for me and I never used to listen. They used to have these stories about ancient times...about cattle and people and how they used to live and all that. I couldn't relate to those things. On television there were Xhosa dramas, but they were boring...very serious...more to do with talking...very little action.

Instead, like many young viewers, he was drawn to the American action series and films broadcast on the English language television service:

I enjoyed *The A-Team*, *Knightrider*, and *McGyver*. I watched a lot of American cartoons. At school we were taught English second language so

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Biko, President of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), rooted in the Black Consciousness movement, was deeply aware of the acute sense of social inferiority, that blacks experienced under apartheid, a result of the ideology of white superiority. In 1970 he wrote: But the type of black man (sic) we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the "inevitable position"...In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out scurrying in response to his master's impatient call...His heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him blame himself for not having been "educated" enough to warrant such luxury...All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave and ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (quoted in Gerhart 1978: 286)

we couldn't speak it well. I didn't understand what the characters were saying but I could watch the pictures. You weren't thinking, you were just seeing some big guys fighting and some action.

Given Luthando's poor English language skills – “my English was poor, I came from Bantu education” – and his rejection of local indigenous language programming, it is unsurprising that he was drawn to the American action programmes. As Gerbner (2000) has noted, the focus on action and violence rather than dialogue is one of the reasons behind the global popularity of Hollywood action television and film. In addition, it was also the relative freedom and affluence of the black film and television characters that attracted Luthando and which gave him the symbolic means to begin to puncture the reality of black subjugation under apartheid.

I realised that America, compared to South Africa, is another country and that started affecting me. Whenever you see America you see beautiful black people, nice cars and all that. I used to think America was all that.

Significantly, it was the tacit recognition by the National Party government that foreign television programmes could undermine the ideology of apartheid that led to the delayed introduction of television into South Africa. The Meyer Commission of Enquiry which was set up to consider “matters relating to television” was very clear about the political imperatives of the new service which was eventually introduced in 1976:

A television service for South Africa...should be founded on such principles as will ensure that the Christian system of values, the national identity and the social structure of its various commitments will be respected, preserved and enriched...(quoted in Strelitz and Steenveld, 1994: 38)

### *Secondary school*

Another important psychic rupture occurred when, after completing his primary schooling, Luthando's parents sent him to a previously all-white Model C high school, Selborne College, located in an affluent white suburb of East London. In 1992 the Nationalist Government issued an Education Review Strategy which established Model C schools which deracialised previously all-white schools. Compared to township schools these were well-resourced and provided a superior education but the relatively high fee structure ensured that they remained primarily white.

It was a difficult transition from the poverty of Mdantsane to the relative affluence of East London. Luthando was the only Black student in his class and was encountering white youth, outside of television representations, for the first time. In addition, the relatively poor education he had received at his township primary school left him ill-prepared for the more demanding scholastic requirements of Selborne College.

When I was in primary school in Mdantsane I used to be the first in class. Then I went to Selborne and for the first time I started to fail subjects. Before I used to be a confident young man but now I was not too sure of myself. I was sort of apologetic when I talked to people. Also, my English was poor – I'd never been taught how to speak the language properly. I used to be clever when I was at primary school and suddenly when I'm up with these guys who are white, I always come bottom half. It was the environment, it didn't accommodate me – I felt foreign.

In 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from prison and political organisations such as the ANC and PAC were unbanned. Alternative political visions were now tolerated and could now be openly discussed and this impacted on Luthando's engagement with the dominant Euro-centric school culture:

I still didn't feel like I belonged at Selborne – we were being tolerated. I remember our history teacher used to speak a lot of propaganda – telling us how bad the ANC was. But then my uncle came back from exile and he had his own propaganda. We would watch films on [Steve] Biko<sup>3</sup> and Malcolm X...he would read me poems that he'd written and all that. He influenced me a lot. By standard 8 [grade 10] my English had improved and I was getting good marks. Some type of confidence came back. I was challenging most of these white guys. Sometimes they would say something and I would raise my hand and object. I was called a trouble-maker by the teachers and students. For example, we read Shakespeare and all of that. I asked, "why can't we read something we can all relate to...something I can be accommodated to?" The teacher just told me, "that's the syllabus and that's the way it is". They always had this thing about tradition...they didn't want to change because it was tradition. I wanted to prove them wrong.

Growing in confidence, Luthando also objected to the marginalisation of soccer in the schools sports programme.<sup>4</sup>

When it came to sport we told the school that if we [black pupils] play rugby we will again look inferior but if we play soccer we know that we can compete with you guys. We formed a soccer team which was made up of a lot of black pupils. It was successful but Selborne didn't like it because it took away people from rugby. It wasn't funded by the school...if we needed transport no-one would be willing to take us.

The need to re-assert their marginalised identity led a number of black pupils to form a Xhosa society "for people who were interested in our culture". His growing social and political awareness was also reflected in his media consumption choices.

At this time I started listening to a lot of reggae. I met Rastafarians who had a lot of influence. One of them gave me a Bob Marley tape and I listened to what he was saying and it was really true. He had a lot of Black Consciousness messages about being proud of yourself. He also sang about those things that I could relate to like poverty, people not being educated, the brutality of the police...things that were happening in Kingston Jamaica had also happened here in South Africa...I experienced them growing up in the township.

Luthando inserted the meanings of reggae music into his experience of Mdantsane and his experience of Mdantsane into the meanings of reggae music – each was influenced by and validated the other. Reggae, although a foreign music form, "authenticated" Luthando's local experience of racial subordination (for a discussion of the processes through which local identities are constructed out of

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Biko was a well-known South African Black Consciousness student leader and writer who was murdered by the South African police in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> The racial divide in South Africa is reflected in its sporting codes with whites and blacks dominating the playing of rugby and soccer respectively

material and symbolic resources which may not be local in their origins, but should still be considered “authentic” see Massey 1992: 11-15; Miller 1992: 164-165).

At the same time, mass mediated black American popular culture became increasingly important to Luthando with actors and sports-stars providing important role models.

I remember writing an essay at high school saying that I wish that South Africa could be like America where there's racial harmony and all that. You would see black Americans, the way they dress, they're big...their ladies have long stringy hair, the kinds of cars they drive. You never see any ghettos, you see all these posh places...I wanted to be like them. I became influenced by hip hop music. The musicians rap about their money, their women, the gold rings, the food they eat. I liked that. I even said to one guy who was arguing with me at school...he said, 'no you can't play cricket, you can't play this, you can't play that'. I said, 'no, look at Michael Jordan. A black person given a chance will succeed'. I used to look at Michael Jackson and would say, 'he was given a chance and he succeeded. Even us, give us a proper chance and we can succeed'. By 1994, 1995, I was quite comfortable being black.

Mediated black American culture thus provided Luthando with the symbolic means to distance himself from the South African reality of white domination and black subordination providing an example of what Thompson (1995) has referred to as 'symbolic distancing'. In his critique of the media imperialism thesis, Thompson points out that 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). The appropriation of these materials, he further notes, enables individuals "...to take some distance from the conditions of their day-to-day lives – not literally but symbolically, imaginatively, vicariously" (1995: 175). Through this process, he writes, "...[I]ndividuals are able to gain some conception, however partial, of ways of life and life conditions which differ significantly from their own" (1995: 175). Thus, global media images can provide a resource for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions (1995: 175) (also see Davis and Davis 1995; Appadurai 1990; Deswaan 1989; Morely 1992; Strelitz 2002).

Besides what he had experienced through black American popular culture, the desire for material accumulation was also a result of what Luthando's everyday experiences at Selborne and in the Mdantsane township.

I wanted money. People that went to Selborne were rich...there were lawyers and accountants driving around in their big cars...[Mercedes] Benzes, BMWs and all that. My mother would come and pick me up in her little car and you'd see all these other large cars. Also, in the township you need money to feel important, that you are actually somebody. The township is very materialistic. If you saw a guy you would say, 'ah, he's the man', because he drove around in a BMW...even if he stole it or whatever...he's got a big house, all the women come to him. As a township boy you would aspire to be like him. All the professionals that have made it, they don't stay in the townships anymore. The role models are few. Unfortunately the role models are these guys. Besides rap, there was this craze for black American movies. They started coming out in about 1993...they talked about having money, drinking champagne, caviar and all that.

Here we see the double articulation of the role that global media can play in local cultures. Besides providing the means to transcend perceived local oppressions, they also help disseminate the acquisitive culture of capitalism (see Schiller 1991).

Luthando's attraction to black American popular culture also needs to be seen within the context of the changing social relations in South Africa following the demise of apartheid. The need to transform apartheid-based social relations and de-racialise the economy has meant that the post-apartheid state has been a liberal and modernising one, perhaps best symbolised by the South African constitution which enshrines individual equality before the law (Bond 2000; Mangcu 2001; Marais 2001). For, as Nielsen (1993: 2) writes, that the essence of cultural modernisation is to be sought in the process of "individualization", the expanding degree of separation of the individual from his or her traditional ties and restrictions (in this case, not only pre-modern social relations, but social relations structured by the apartheid state).

A number of writers have argued for the central role played by American popular culture in this transition to modernity. Schou (1992) describes how American popular culture became a guide to "mental transformation" as Denmark underwent the process of modernisation after the second world war:

In Denmark, daily existence was changing for many as we left our agrarian past and approached a new status as an industrial nation. A new self-awareness was sought in order to come to terms with this changing world, new and more sophisticated ways of looking at life, new ways to communicate. The inspiration had to come from the most industrial nation in the world. American popular culture became a guide during this mental transformation...One could say that it was instrumental in bringing about the 'mental' modernisation of Denmark. (1992: 157)

Similarly, both Tomlinson (1991: 140) and Drotner (1992: 44) believe that the attraction of Western media has to be seen in the context of the attraction and subsequent spread of liberal capitalist modernity (also see Berger 1973).

Arguably, black American popular culture, as a "carrier of modernity", provided Luthando with the symbolic means to re-imagine himself as a modern subject (shaped in part through his consumptive practices), no longer tied to the "place" of social subjugation to which he had been assigned by the apartheid state.

#### *Luthando attends Rhodes University*

Despite South Africa's 1994 transition to a non-racial democracy, it remains a deeply divided society. Samir Amin characterises the divisions thus:

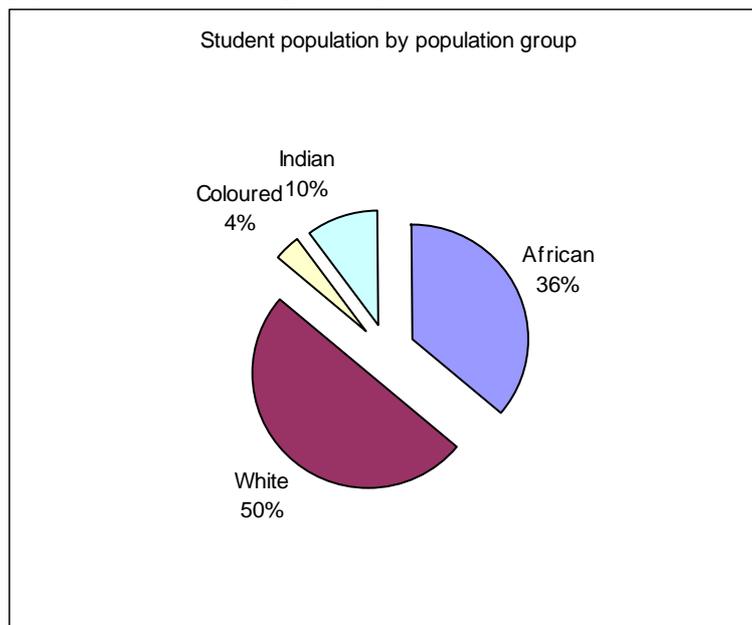
There is the overwhelmingly white section of the population whose popular culture and standard of living seem to belong to the 'first' (advanced capitalist) world...Much of the urban black population belongs to the modern, industrialising 'third' world, while rural Africans do not differ much from their counterparts in 'fourth' world Africa. ("Foreward" to Marais 2001: vii)

These inequalities are reflected in the lives of young people. Writing on the social and educational inequalities that exist amongst South African youth, Van Zyl Slabbert et al. (1994: 56-60) have noted that the country's social dynamics have placed white South African youth in areas where housing is readily available. Almost

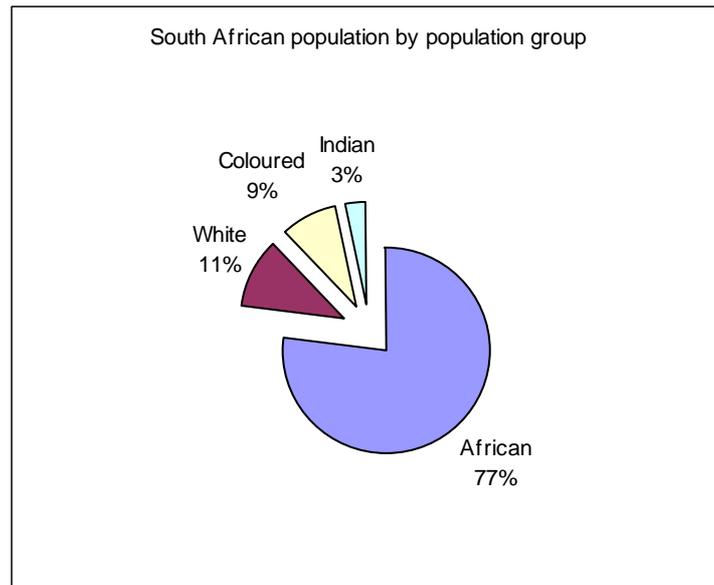
all whites have electricity, water and water-borne sewerage in their homes, refuse removal, tarred roads and street lighting. White income levels are relatively high and poverty is minimal. Whites have access to adequate schooling with high enrolments. Retention levels at school level are good and white youth dominate tertiary education institutions. The white population growth is low. White people as a group are largely urbanised and relatively unaffected by unemployment (Van Zyl Slabbert et al. 1994: 56).

While Van Zyl Slabbert et al. (1994: 57-58) distinguish between poor rural and urban middle class Africans, they argue that on the whole, African youth 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: 57-58). 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: 57-58).

In 1999, when this interview was conducted, these social and educational inequalities that existed under apartheid were in evidence at Rhodes University. The campus had 4 411 registered students: Indian (10%), African (36%), Coloured (4%), and White (50%) (Rhodes University 2000).



This is despite the fact that African students comprised 83% of the total South African school population. Furthermore, the campus demographics did not reflect the demographics of the country as a whole which, according to the census figures, gave the percentages of the population in South Africa by "population group" as African (77%), White (11%), Indian (3%), and Coloured (9%) (Central Statistics 1997).



These anomalies could, however, be explained by the history of the Apartheid education system in South Africa discussed earlier, which sought to entrench and ‘normalise’ the Apartheid ideology through the differentiated system of education. Given this history, the demographics at Rhodes University was not surprising, nor the fact that in 1996 only 12% of African students had grade 12 compared to 30% of Indians, 12% of Coloureds, and 41% of Whites (SAIRR 1999).

At the time of the interview, the staff complement at Rhodes University reflected these disparities. According to the university’s Digest of Statistics for the year 2000, 89% of the academic staff were White, 2% Indian, 2% Coloured, and 7% African. When it came to senior administrative staff, 68% were White, 2% Indian, 13% Coloured, and 17% African. On the other hand, the service staff were largely African – 100% in academic departments and 96% in the residences (Rhodes University, 2000). All of this contributed to the perception amongst many black students that there was a pervasive ‘white culture’ at the university which was insensitive to the needs of black students (for further discussion see Strelitz 2002; 2005).

As a result of his township and school experiences, as well as his exposure to black American popular culture, Luthando was clear about what he wanted to do on graduating from school:

I wanted to have money and the only way to have money is through education and getting the right degree. That’s why I decided to do a Bachelor of Commerce degree at Rhodes University.

Luthando’s Model C school experience led him to believe that he “knew how to handle white guys”. However, his entry into Rhodes University presented a new set of challenges and reflected his school experience of being an outsider.

Even at Botha House [his male residence] when we have a ‘braai’ [barbecue], it’s a problem because we [black students] can’t relate to the rock and roll that the white guys play. Most black guys don’t drink punch. We drink beer but the residences only provide punch. If we don’t go to these functions, then it seems as if we don’t want to be part of the house...but they don’t cater for us. When I first came here I asked, ‘why can’t we have the kind of food that we eat. Even at home I don’t eat

lasagne and those types of things...it's not nice'. You'll never get an African meal here and when you complain they'll just tell you you're a minority. We are always critical of Rhodes...it's too liberal, it's too white.

His political awareness and emerging belief in the need for black unity and a strong black identity was entrenched by his contact with other black students at the university with whom he starting mixing exclusively.

We have to be united against this hostility that we experience. If there's a problem in my residence and it's basically black guys versus white guys then you normally have a caucus and you say, 'this is the problem'. I've been influenced a lot by guys studying postgraduate social sciences. Whenever there's a beauty contest it's a white or an Indian person who comes up 'Miss whatever'. So the one comrade told me you have to question the official criteria for the way they choose...so it's questioning everything. At mealtimes we sit around the table and discuss what Thabo Mbeki [the President of South Africa] said...so if you were not reading the papers you'd get left behind and they'd ridicule you for that. So you read books, you read things, you start watching the news regularly...it's nice because you get these ideas and you sit and debate.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these new friends had only attended DET schools (thus reflecting their working class status) and were sometimes critical of his Model C school background.

Sometimes there would be jokes like, 'hey, you come from a Model C school...you're just like them' and you'd have to prove your blackness to them. It was quite enlightening.

As had occurred earlier in his life, changed social circumstances were reflected in changed media preferences.

Now I watch *Generations* [a locally produced soap opera containing mainly black characters] and the local talk shows. But I don't watch *Felicia*. It's boring because she's always talking about when she was in America. Her ideas are always Westernised and pro-America.<sup>6</sup> So I just watch mostly South African programmes. I also still watch American movies because that's all the movie houses have. But I'm now more critical of these movies. I was watching *Airforce One*...you just laugh at it...it's like American propaganda the way they glorify the country. So you just sit there and have fun. It's not influencing you anymore.

When this interview was conducted, Luthando was part of a group of African male Rhodes University students, primarily the friends he referred to earlier in the interview, who gathered every night in a viewing room they had named the Homeland, attached to one of the male residences, to watch primarily South African produced television programmes. As already discussed, apartheid was premised on

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<sup>5</sup> The desire to read newspapers and watch television news expressed by Luthando was supported in interviews with other African students on the Rhodes campus (Strelitz 2005) and contradicts the findings of Katz (1992: 33) and Buckingham (1997: 348) that young people are no longer interested in conventional news media.

<sup>6</sup> For 10 years, from 1994 to 2004, Dr Felicia Mabuza-Suttle, an American-educated Black South African, hosted and produced a weekly television talk show on local television.

the classification of people into different “race” groups and their segregation into different residential areas, educational systems and public amenities. Under this policy, the reserves, known as Bantustans or the Homelands, saw land, which had been set aside in 1913 and 1936 (by the 1913 Land Act and the 1936 Native Land and Trust Act) consolidated into ten ethnic geo-physical units. These “national states” were the only places where Africans were allowed to exercise political and economic “rights” (Stadler 1987: 34). Disenfranchised from the South African state, it was here that Africans were supposed to express their political, economic and cultural aspirations – no longer as South Africans but as citizens of these independent states. However, since the first national democratic elections in 1994, the African National Congress-led government has promoted the idea of a unified South African national identity (Steenveld and Strelitz 1998). The voluntary return to a symbolic ‘homeland’ by these students, and their rejection of foreign television, was, as I have elsewhere argued (Strelitz 2002; 2005) a result of their desire to separate themselves physically and symbolically from what they perceived to be the white modern culture of Rhodes University.

I have discussed the Homeland more extensively elsewhere (Strelitz 2002; 2005), but in summary, what emerged from focus group and individual interviews was that like Luthando, many students had grown up watching foreign television programmes. I argued that one needed to understand their early attraction for Western (primarily American) films and television programmes as part of the attraction and subsequent spread of capitalist modernity discussed earlier in this paper. Importantly, their rejection of these programmes coincided with their coming to Rhodes University. Given that many of these students came from working class township backgrounds, the values they now associated with American culture, I argued, were those they experienced as the middle class culture on campus and from which they felt estranged. This estrangement was largely due to their feelings of social inferiority, a result of their often poor grasp of English (the medium of instruction at Rhodes University), their relative material impoverishment when compared to the majority of black and white middle class students, and their sense of educational inferiority as a result of their DET schooling. As a result, they felt the need to consolidate and signify their difference and assert a strong local (and sometimes essentialist pre-modern) black identity. The nightly ritual of exclusively local black television consumption in the Homeland was one of the means of achieving this. And while Luthando came from a slightly more affluent background, and was educationally and socially more prepared than many of his Homeland peers for dominant Rhodes University student culture, it would seem that his alienation was rooted, ironically, in his historical school experiences of white middle class culture.

In line with my argument, Thompson (1995: 205) has written that contact between different traditions, in this case, modern contacting traditional, can give rise to intensified forms of boundary-defining (identity-as-difference) activity. He notes that attempts may be made to protect the integrity of traditions, and to reassert forms of collective identity which are linked to traditions, by excluding others in one’s midst. He adds:

These boundary-defining activities can both be symbolic and territorial – symbolic in the sense that the primary concern may be to protect traditions from the incursion of extraneous symbolic content, territorial in the sense that the protection of traditions may be combined with the attempt to re-moor these traditions to particular regions or locales in a way that forcibly excludes others. A region becomes a ‘homeland’ which is seen by some as

bearing a privileged relation to a group of people whose collective identity is shaped in part by an enduring set of traditions. (1995: 205)

During interviews I conducted with students who attended the Homeland, Luthando justified this need for a separate viewing space for (primarily Xhosa-speaking) black students, differentiating their viewing preferences from those of white students.

I think it's because we have different interests from the students who, for example, like watching *Ally Macbeal* and all those American programmes. They like to watch M-Net [a local pay-per-view channel that carries primarily American series and films] and things like that. We like to watch local productions like *Generations* and *Isidingo*. They like to watch rugby and we like to watch soccer.

He also spoke of the Homeland being a space in which he felt at ease.

There's mutual respect amongst the guys who come to the Homeland. When you're watching something there you know you won't get offended. Because these other white guys, like in Botha House, you sometimes get offended by the jokes they make about particular races and things like that. In the Homeland you don't get that. It's comforting to be in the Homeland.

In contrast to many white students, whose preference for foreign television is because of its greater dramatic realism – better acting, staging, scripting and so on – Luthando, like the other Homeland students, found greater realism in local productions.

Unlike other programmes, *Isidingo* is real. The people there, the blacks and whites...you can see the division and they get treated in a way that's real. It's not like other programmes that try to show people in harmony. You also see how rural people live. It's not artificial stuff like you see on other foreign tv programmes.

As noted earlier, keeping up-to-date with the current political developments was important for Luthando and this was reflected in his regular viewing of television news.

I like being informed. I feel comfortable that way. A friend of mine said something interesting. He said white students here at Rhodes think they're from England or somewhere else and for them to watch the news would be to force them to face the reality that they're in South Africa. To be ignorant about the news is much better for them. Also, at the Homeland, there are lots of debates, and you are ridiculed if you didn't know current issues. So it is important to know what is going on in the news.

Interestingly, Luthando's desire for upward mobility remained but now he found his aspirations reflected in *Generations*, a local soap opera which dealt with the lives of African advertising executives.

I also like watching *Generations*. I aspire to be in those positions. Even though *Generations* is not real, I think everyone wants to buy a Benz and stuff like that. So when you see black people being successful it's nice because in most of the programmes black people are slaves and servants

and things like that. So it's nice because you can see that black people are in charge. You watch it and you aspire to that.

## Conclusion

This narrative interview allows one to track some of the significant moments in Luthatando's biography and to show the relationship between these moments, structured by his changing socio-political context and his media consumption patterns. I have argued that the narrative interview is an appropriate method to capture what Tomlinson (1991) refers to as the "interplay of mediations" between lived and mass mediated culture. Such an approach provides a corrective to those theories which overemphasise the role of media consumption in identity formation and importantly, helps us move beyond the debate within audience studies between those approaches stressing the determining power of the media, and those that highlight the interpretive freedom of audiences. A close reading of media preferences at different moments in the life of an individual allows us to appreciate 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.

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