

Preface

The interregnum years in South Africa, together with the rise of Black Consciousness, no doubt represent the point of origin of this book, for that is when it dawned on white students of my generation that we had to immerse ourselves in the literature of the continent of our birth. Thus began a journey into African literatures which is as compelling now as it was when it began for me in the 1970s, even as the years of postcolonialism and globalisation continue to unfold.

More recently there have been other provocations. By the early 1990s the debate over the place of postcolonial studies in South Africa was firmly under way: should we reject this foreign, homogenising, ahistoricising, 'poststructuralist' import, or should we reinvent it on our own terms and thereby re-enter an international conversation in which we could not fully participate during apartheid? I took the latter view, believing that in any event, there is no single position that defines the field and that its very incoherence is enabling. This book is an attempt to give substance to that position by connecting international currents in postcolonial studies with local literature. I do so, in part, by borrowing and adapting the idea of transculturation that comes into postcolonial studies from Cuba where it was developed by Fernando Ortiz. This is not 'high theory', by any means, but perhaps it is sufficient theory – theory sufficient to the purpose of signposting a particular kind of engagement with the cultural archive.

The prominent forms of postcolonial theory have all devolved from particular historical situations: the chemistry between metropolitan French philosophy and the Algerian war of liberation (perhaps most prominently); Australasian and Canadian settler-colonialism; the South Asian response to British imperialism; the Black Atlantic; African cultural nationalism. South Africa and its

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

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