Review

Corinne Sandwith (2014) *World of Letters: reading communities and cultural debates in early apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

Rachel Matteau Matsha
rachelmatteau@gmail.com

Corinne Sandwith's book is a welcome contribution to the growing body of work in the field of book history in South Africa. Her book, entitled *World of Letters*: *reading communities and cultural debates in early apartheid South Africa*, examines selected South African cultural and intellectual spaces from late 1930s to early 1960s. In eloquent and compelling language, Sandwith provides a critical overview of debates that occurred in literary and cultural journals such as *The South African Opinion*, *Trek*, *Fighting Talk*, *The Voice*, *Spark*, and *Liberation*; organisations such as the Non-European Unity Movement, the Communist Party of South Africa, the Cape Literary and Debating Society, and radical theatre groups; and intellectual traditions such as Stalinism, Africanism, Marxism, Liberalism, Afrikaner nationalism, and Leftism, to name but a few.

Divided into six chapters, the book examines – through case studies, archival and textual analysis – how the printed text became a public space where discourses were articulated and debated, and ultimately influenced the course of South Africa's cultural and political history beyond the printed world. Based on textual and cultural artefacts such as literary journals, newspapers, and magazines, Sandwith discusses the genesis of the construction of contemporary South African English literary canons and aesthetics; the heavily debated role of arts and artists in mid-twentieth century South Africa; and the polarised position of South African artists and cultural practitioners within the broader imperial and colonial contexts. In doing so, Sandwith's argument resonates with contemporary debates in

terms of a redefinition of issues of citizenship, culture, civilisation, and democratic ideals (Sandwith 2014:29), as well as definitions of 'South Africanness' (33). Definitions of South African national cultures and literatures are understood in the light of public debates facilitated by communities revolving around literary and cultural periodicals, and although often exclusionary in nature, these projects – and Sandwith's analysis thereof – provide a fascinating overview of the fluctuating definitions of South African literatures and aesthetics, and the complexity and plurality inherent to South African cultural criticism.

The link between the role of print and national identities is emphasised, with readers activating texts and performing readings aligned to their reality. Sandwith explores the reading strategies aligned to various intellectual strands, for example in chapter four, where she discusses a postcolonial reading of *The Tempest*, illustrating how readings of international literary texts were politicised, which is, as she puts it, 'one indication of the way in which local struggles were elaborated within an internationalist frame' (159).

Sandwith however cautions against homogenising and simplifying South Africa's social history, opting to 'offer a history of divergent and contradictory orientations' (258), which constitutes one of the strengths of her study. She successfully presents a varied portrait of the intellectual formations that shaped South African cultural and literary discourses, offering examples from a wide variety of contexts, disciplines and ideologies. Her argument is robustly built on archival material, enabling a reconstruction of 'what it left of the historical remains' (174), thus regrouping individual and collective endeavours within the web of cultural, political, social, and intellectual networks as articulated in the publications studied. Reproductions of archival material, showing pages of some periodicals discussed in the book and dating as far back as the mid-1930s, add to the argument, offering a visual glimpse of their editorial lines through extra textual elements such as headers, adverts, cartoons, etc.

A valuable aspect of Sandwith's book is her analysis of the various voices interacting in the world of letters, such as editorialists, authors, columnists, and readers from diverse intellectual traditions. Readers' letters, for instance, through which she analyses reading strategies and interpretative protocols, contain a wealth of information on ways in which texts and discourses were adapted, discussed and interpreted by the general public and specialists in the field, and how reading was politicised. Similarly, debates relayed through print media are also studied, shedding light on the

early stances adopted by prominent intellectuals such as Dora Taylor, AC Jordan, and Es'kia Mphahlele, among others.

With the political and the cultural spheres inevitably interlacing in South Africa, Sandwith's book reads as a historiography of some of South Africa's diverse cultural and intellectual spaces from the mid-twentieth century into early apartheid, before apartheid's censorship apparatus brought with it increasing oppression and resistance from within and without the intellectual, political, literary, and cultural worlds. *A World of Letters* will appeal to general public and academic readers alike, whose knowledge of political, historical, literary and cultural affairs will be enhanced by the unique and precise angle chosen by Sandwith, ie the reading communities and cultural debates made public through the selected periodicals and beyond. By bringing forth the intellectual histories that shaped the various strands of ideological and political movements in pre-apartheid South Africa, Sandwith contributes in demonstrating how literary texts became spaces where democratic, cultural and political ideals were articulated and debated from various – and at times conflicting – points of view. The core of Sandwith's argument resonates with contemporary literary and cultural debates, as issues of access, hegemony, identity, and heritage, to name but a few, are still relevant and challenged to this day. Revisiting South African intellectual traditions and cultural histories, as diverse and contradictory as they are, provides a privileged vantage point from which to better understand the current cultural landscape. In this sense, Sandwith's book represents a cornerstone in the recollection of cultural historiographies in South Africa.